

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER | APRIL 21, 2024

ACTS 4:5-12 | PSALM 23 | 1 JOHN 3:16-24 | JOHN 10:11-18

We're spending some time this Easter season asking the same question of all our readings. What does Easter change? What's different after Easter? And what does it make possible that wasn't possible before?

And the way I want to get into it this week is by thinking about a sort of social interaction that many of us have periodically. Imagine that you're meeting someone new at a party, and you discover that you both have a mutual friend. Let's say the mutual friend is named Corey. At first, you're surprised to discover that you both know them. *Wow, what a small world.* And as the conversation goes on, you're surprised to discover that Corey has a lot of hobbies and family members you didn't know about. And eventually a little lightbulb goes off in your head and you realize, *Oh, we're actually talking about different Coreys.*

One way that you might try to figure out exactly who you're talking about is by describing what the person does. *My Corey lives on Elm Street. They have two dogs. They like going to the beach.* When we want to communicate exactly who we're talking about, we don't just say their name louder. We describe some action or activity that makes the person unique.

When the authors of the Hebrew Bible talk about God, they do something similar. They live in a world in which there are many gods. So when they talk about God, sometimes they'll add on a little description to make sure you really know who they're talking about. For example, in the famous call story of Moses at the burning bush, God identifies not just as God but as "the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Not just any god, but the God that the patriarchs prayer to. And when the Ten Commandments are given at Sinai, God identifies as "the Lord your God, who brought you... out of the house of slavery." This isn't some new god but the same God who was with them in Egypt. So actions and identity go together. Knowing what someone does helps us understand who they are.

There's something similar happening in today's reading from the book of Acts. Peter and John have just spent the night in prison after healing a paralytic man and preaching about the resurrection of Jesus. And in today's reading, they get called before the religious leaders, and this is what Peter says. He says, "Let it be known to all of you, and to all the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead."

We want to focus on the part right at the end. When Peter talks about God, he wants us to understand who he's talking about. And so he clarifies that when he's talking about God, he's talking about the God who raised Jesus from the dead.

This seems obvious. *Well, duh. Of course God raised Jesus from the dead.* But we rarely say this part out loud. Think of our Easter proclamation: *Alleluia! Christ is risen!* Or the hymns we sing in this season like "Christ is Alive! Let Christians Sing," "Christ is Risen! Alleluia!," or "Christ the Lord is Risen Today." They can make it sound like Jesus raised himself from the dead. But Peter wants us to remember that Jesus didn't resurrect himself from death. God did.

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And that's an incredibly important claim that Peter makes. Because as far as the crowd in today's story is concerned, the ministry of Jesus ended in failure. Jesus offered us an alternative way of living. One that is based on trust and generosity, simplicity and service, inclusion and forgiveness. And how do people respond? As Peter says in his speech, we reject that way of life. We push it away. We crucify it. We say No to it.

But in the resurrection, God says Yes to the life of Jesus. God says Yes to that way of trust and generosity, simplicity and service, inclusion and forgiveness. So Easter vindicates the life and ministry of Jesus. It affirms that Jesus's way of love is what leads us to the heart of God.

And so if you were to ask Peter who God is he would say that God is the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. And God is the one who led the Israelites into freedom. And, he would add, God is the one who raised Jesus from death. Who commends the love of Christ to us even when we reject it. In the resurrection of Jesus, God and Jesus are bound inextricably together. After the resurrection, we can no longer talk about God without talking about Jesus.¹

So what does Easter change? Well, it changes the starting point for how we think about God. Some of us start thinking about God with ideas that we've picked up from popular culture.² God is all-knowing. God is all-powerful. God is incapable of suffering. God is unchanging. Others of us—especially those of us who grew up in more conservative and legalistic traditions—start thinking about God in terms of rules. What rule are you supposed to follow so God doesn't punish you? In any event, we start with our preconceived ideas of God and then try to fit Jesus into them somehow.

Easter changes that. It flips it on its head. And suggests that whenever we think about our relationship with God, our life in community, our sense of personal identity, we always begin with the resurrection of Jesus. That's the central event that norms everything else. So if I want to know what God is like, don't think about God in general. Look at the ministry of Jesus in particular.

What is God like? Think of the stories of Jesus's ministry from the gospels. God is like a banquet where the outcasts are welcomed with joy. God is like a friend who cries with you when you're grieving. God is like the calm breeze after the stormy gales. God is like a shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

That's the God that Peter is talking about. And it's the God that we not only worship but proclaim through our witness and service in the world. Jesus is—to borrow a phrase—the “face of God.”³ Bringing the infinite love of God into our finite lives.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

¹ Rowan Williams, *The Sign and the Sacrifice*, 2016, 66.

² Most of these have their roots in Greek through or in scholastic theology.

³ For example, Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (OUP Oxford, 2009), 107.