

Second Sunday of Easter: "Beyond Castles and Armies"

ACTS 1:3

CHARLIE BERTHOUD | SERMON FOR SUNDAY, APRIL 11, 2021

Happy Easter! Last Sunday was Easter Sunday and we had three wonderful worship gatherings in our church parking lot.

But Easter is not a one-day event.

Easter isn't "over."

As we see in the book of Acts, the first followers of Jesus needed time to begin to figure out what the resurrection of Jesus was all about, and so do we.

On the church calendar, the season of Easter goes for seven weeks.

Easter is a way of life for Christians. We are Easter people, resurrection people.



So today we launch our Easter season series: **LEARNING AND LIVING RESURRECTION**.

We're going to look at different themes, especially in the book of Acts, to help us understand resurrection and Easter better.

Today's theme is the Kingdom of God—the new reality that Jesus proclaimed throughout the gospels. And we see in the first words of the book of Acts that the Kingdom was the focus of the resurrected Jesus' message.

Listen for God's word:

In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning ² until the day when he was taken up to heaven, after giving instructions through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. ³ After his suffering he presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.

⁶ So when they had come together, they asked Jesus, “Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?” ⁷ He replied, “It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

Thanks be to God for the words of Scripture.

Jesus began his ministry announcing the Kingdom. In Mark 1, we read:

Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, ¹⁵ and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.” (Mk 1.14-15)

And the Kingdom was central to his words and deeds.

- Jesus shared parables about the Kingdom—using imagery like seeds, and nets, and yeast, and treasure. (See Mk 4 and Mt 13)
- Jesus said the kingdom of God is within you, or among you (Lk. 17.21)
- Jesus taught his followers to pray “thy Kingdom come” (Mt. 6.10)
- Jesus exhibited the kingdom by feeding hungry people (Mt 14.19 and 25.35) and by welcoming the outcasts.
- Jesus called his followers to get their priorities straight, saying “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Mt. 6.33)

Now the term kingdom is problematic, with not only patriarchal overtones, but also because of our association of kingdoms with castles

and armies and dragons and such.

We could refer to it as the Realm of God, or the Rule of God, or the Community of God.

Whatever we call it, this Kingdom, this Realm, is central to the life and teaching of Jesus and his followers.

It's a new reality of justice and righteousness,
where hungry people are fed,
where the last are first,
where greed and selfishness are turned upside down,
where sinners are welcomed and invited to change,
where faith and hope and love are lived.

The Kingdom of God is all about new life, and resurrection.
We are invited to be part of this kingdom, this Realm, the new reality of resurrection life.

Ordinarily, this is the time in the sermon when I would make the case for us to work for Kingdom.

Ordinarily now is when I would call for faithful followers of Jesus to fight hunger and racism and loneliness and greed and selfishness.

Now is when I challenge you to put your faith in action, to make a difference, to "live God's love."

I've offered plenty of messages along those lines over the years, doing my best to make an impassioned plea for us to get out there and work for the kingdom.

And you regularly hear similar messages and invitations from Covenant:

- to volunteer at soup kitchens or food banks,
- to write letters to elected leaders,
- to make phone calls or write notes to shut-ins,

- to engage in racial justice issues,
- to plant trees and use less stuff,
- to give generously to support God's work in the world,
- to join boycotts or protests.

Sometimes you even hear Spirit-filled, masterful sermons that invite you to serve on church committees.

I'm not going to invite you or urge you to do any of those things today, important as they are.

I just can't do it today, because I'm exhausted, and I'm guessing many (most? all?) of you are exhausted too.

It has been an exhausting year.

Physically, emotionally, politically, economically, medically, even spiritually. Just about everyone I talk with is worn out.

I know a lot of pastors and church workers who are having a hard time.

But we are far from the only ones.

- Teachers and professors and administrators and students are exhausted.
- Doctors and nurses and hospital staff and researchers are exhausted.
- Nursing home staff and residents are exhausted.
- Super-market and restaurant people are exhausted.
- Retail workers and small business owners are exhausted.
- Parents and grandparents and kids are exhausted.

I got a snapshot of how exhausted we could be a few weeks ago on a Zoom call, when someone shared their screen. I happened to notice the email tab at the top of the screen which showed that this person had over 5,000 unread emails.

Your email inbox might not be that overburdened, but I wouldn't be

surprised if there was an area of your life that is overburdened, stressed, exhausted.

We are exhausted from Covid, from fear of the virus, from the isolation, from changing our daily routines, from renewed concerns about the variants, and from all the other challenges in our world and society right now.

We are just worn down. And we're sick of looking at screens and dealing with email!

So, despite my initial intent with this sermon, I don't think a "We need to work harder for God's kingdom" message would be very effective right now.

And that's not the most important message anyway.

The Bible makes it clear that God raised Jesus from the dead, and that it's God's kingdom, not ours. Resurrection and building up the kingdom are ultimately God's job, not ours.

I was reminded of this on the day before Easter when I saw a wonderful meme from Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber.

Resurrection happens and continues to happen even if we're too exhausted to help. God is at work in the world, in the church, and even in our lives, bringing new life.



Nadia Bolz-Weber ✓
@Sarcasticluther



clergy & church workers, here's our yearly reminder: Jesus will rise from the dead even if you forgot to print out the right hymns, even if the lilies arrive already wilted, even if the whole choir gets food poisoning. Nothing will keep the stone from rolling away. You are loved.

The good news is that God brings resurrection and new life and the Kingdom of God into the world.

We can help and we often do—with our words and our deeds. I know the people of this church do great things. You respond to those sermons about working for the Kingdom.

But when we are exhausted, when we're worn out, it is good to know that God's work continues around the world. We are not alone; we are in this together.

Lately, I've been grateful for glimpses of resurrection that I see. Sometimes I get glimpses in our church community, like last Sunday at our parking lot Easter service.

Sometimes I see glimpses of resurrection in the news, like this week when I read in "The Christian Century" that medical school applications are up 18%, probably in response to Covid and a desire to serve the common good.

And I see glimpses of resurrection and the Kingdom around the world, like in Peru, where Presbyterian mission co-worker Jed Koball is helping to feed hungry people, promoting education of deaf students, and working with local groups to plant trees in a horribly polluted mountain community. Read more about their work

here: <https://www.presbyterianmission.org/story/a-sign-of-life-in-one-of-the-most-contaminated-places-on-the-planet/>.



At Easter, we celebrate the mystery and the majesty of the resurrection of Jesus, the one who proclaimed God's kingdom.

The good news is that God continues resurrecting the world and resurrecting us.