

Laying Down your Life

Hespeler, 25 April 2021 © Scott McAndless

Acts 4:5-12, Psalm 23, 1 John 3:16-24, John 10:11-18

For the world around us, Easter is just a day or maybe a long weekend. And I certainly love the way that our society celebrates Easter. I like a good chocolate egg as much as the next guy. I think the flowers are beautiful and I certainly appreciate the time off and, in an ordinary year, the opportunity to gather with family. But Easter is not a *day* for the Christian church, it is an entire season. For Christians this entire period of time from Easter Sunday to Pentecost Sunday is supposed to be all Easter all the time.

And, I know you'll be disappointed by this, but that doesn't mean that we're supposed to eat chocolate for fifty days. So, if that's not it, what is the reason that it lasts so long? It is an acknowledgment of the importance and impact of a singular event. The resurrection of Jesus is not something that we can come to terms with in just a day's reflection. It is something that changes everything – everything about what our priorities are, how the world works for us and how we think about it.

As a result, one of the things that the church has traditionally done during this season is that, for this period of time, we stop reading from the Old Testament (apart from the Book of Psalms). Instead, we read from the Book of Acts which helps us to understand what difference the events of Easter actually made for the early church.

The Difference that Easter Makes

So, one of my jobs during this season as a leader of the church is to help us all reflect on what difference it actually makes for us that Jesus died on the cross and that he rose three days later. And I've been trying to do that this year.

A couple of weeks ago, for example, I tried to show us how the resurrection of Jesus makes us think very differently about our wealth and possessions, that instead of seeking security and comfort from these things, it should make us think creatively about how we use these things for the sake of the kingdom of God. And then last week, I spoke about how the story of Jesus' bodily resurrection sets us free from being controlled and manipulated by our guilt, shame and fear.

What 1 John Teaches us

Today I want to focus in on something very extraordinary that the First Letter of John wants to teach us about what the death and resurrection of Jesus means for us. John writes this, **“We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us.”** This is such a simple statement, but it contains so much meaning in it that it almost blows me away. John is simply saying here that one of the key reasons why Jesus went to the cross was in order to teach us what love is.



And I can already hear the objections to this idea. For do we not already know what love is? For each one of us has relationships in our lives that we would understand in terms of love. We have significant others and close friends, we have parents and children and grandchildren and we know exactly how strongly we feel about these people in our lives.

Jesus Teaches us New Depths of Love

And, yes, I know that sometimes we fall short in our best intentions for the people that we love. Sometimes we can get irritable or snippy or resentful and even hurt the people that we love. But, however imperfectly, we know that we love them. We know what love looks like. So what is John saying? He's saying that Jesus on the cross is there to teach us new depths of love.

To understand what he means by that, we may need to go over and look at our Gospel reading for this morning. In it, Jesus is reflecting on the very same topic: what it means to lay one's life down. It is part of a longer reflection about how Jesus is like a good shepherd, which honestly makes all of this talk of laying down his life a little bit weird to me.

Hiring a Shepherd

Put yourself in the position of somebody hiring a shepherd for a moment. I mean, you put an ad in the newspaper and are looking for someone really good who you can trust to take care of your sheep and the first guy who comes into interview goes on and on about how, at the first sign of any trouble, he's going to go out and throw down his life in front of the wolf or lion or bear. I mean is that really what you're looking for in a shepherd? Is laying down your life really part of the job description?

Jesus says, **"The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep."** And that makes good sense to me, you definitely want a shepherd who's not afraid to engage, who's willing to take some risks, but are you really looking for someone who's just going to lay down and die at the first opportunity?

What Jesus Means

Of course, when Jesus speaks of laying down his life, we all know what he's talking about. He's not really speaking of what shepherds *normally* do, he's talking about loving his people and about loving us so much that, when it came to it, he was willing to go all the way, even to the cross, to demonstrate that love.

But he kind of surprisingly phrases that sacrifice in the terms of everyday life – the terms of how a shepherd might love and take care of the sheep. In a way he's saying the same thing that it is saying in our reading from the First Letter of John, that by laying down his life, Jesus taught us what love is and just how transformative it can be in the ordinary situations of life, like when a shepherd is taking care of sheep.

So no, of course we don't expect a shepherd to throw away his life at the first sign of any attack on the sheep, but if he does love them, he is going to take some risks for their sakes, stand up against the wolves and not back down just because the situation is dangerous. And Jesus is saying that that is what love is really about.

Not in Speech, but in Truth and Action

And, for me, all of that adds so much colour to what it is that First John goes on to say in that passage we read this morning. **“Little children,”** he says, **“let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.”** Because I think that is what Jesus teaches us about love more than anything. Yes, Jesus did talk about how much he loved his disciples and about how much he loves us, but his actions are what teach us what love is, not his words. And I think it is often far too easy for us to talk about love without really allowing it to influence our actions or the truths of our lives.

On a Personal Level

I think that can be true in our personal life. The fact of the matter is that there are times when we fail to love the people closest to us in action. We may say we love them, but how many times do we let the stress or anger that we have kept pent up inside us all day long because we don't dare talk about it to strangers, how many times do we let that out against the people we love most because we know that they'll let us get away with it? How many times do we act selfishly because we know we can rely on them to love us anyways? Loving in word and speech is easy; loving in action and truth is harder.

On the Larger Scale

But, in many ways, when we move from the personal to the larger scale, when we move from the individual sheep to the whole flock, this becomes much harder to figure out. It is easy to talk about our love for our fellow human beings. It is easy to talk about how we don't see things like race or colour or creed when we look at other people. It is easy to say that all lives matter. Saying the right thing is something that we have all apparently learned to do.

The problem comes with truth and with action. As we've seen again and again in the past year, the problem comes with treating actual black lives or indigenous lives or other minority lives as if they matter. The problem comes with actually acknowledging that there are minority groups in this country who live in daily fear of violence just because of who they are and actually doing something about that.

I recently saw a list. In one column was a list of all of the things that young men do everyday to make sure that they are not attacked or raped. In the other column, a list of what young women do for that same reason. There was, of course, nothing on the men's side and the list for the women went on and on.

What does it mean that an entire group in our society, approximately half of the population, has to live in constant vigilance because they know they are not safe? In that instance, loving the women of our society has got to be more than saying they're beautiful or that we're fond of them. It has to mean truth and it has to mean action that makes a difference in that unacceptable situation.

Jackson Katz, a social researcher, asked men what they do on a daily basis to avoid being sexually assaulted. Then he asked women.

	"Check the backseat before getting in the car"
	"Always carry a cell phone"
	"Don't go jogging at night"
	"Lock the windows when I sleep even on hot nights"
	"Be careful not to drink too much"
	"Never put my drink down & come back to it"
	"Make sure I see my drink being poured"
	"Own a big dog"
	"Carry mace/pepper spray"
	"Have an unlisted number"
	"Have a male voice on my answering machine"
	"Park in well-lit areas"
	"Never use parking garages"
	"Don't get on elevators with a lone man/group of men"
	"Vary my route home from work"
	"Watch what I wear"
	"Don't use highway rest areas"
	"Have & use a home alarm system"
	"Don't wear headphones when jogging"
	"Avoid wooded areas, even in the daytime"
	"Never rent first floor apartments"
	"Only go out in groups"
	"Own a firearm"
	"Always meet men for first dates in public places"
	"Make sure to have cab fare"
	"Never make eye contact with men on the street"
	"Make assertive eye contact with men on the street"
	"Make sure my family knows my itinerary"
	"Have extra locks on my doors & windows"
	"Make sure my garage door is closed all the way before I drive away"

What does it Look Like Today?

We say that we are the people of the resurrected Christ. And according to what it says in First John, that should mean that we are people who have learned from the example of Christ and know what love means in truth and in action, that it means being willing to lay our lives down for the sake of the sheep. The question is what does that look like in our modern world?

I think there are many ways in which we do that. One simple way, for example in our present crisis, is to go out and get vaccinated as soon as you are able to do so, and do it with the first available vaccine.

I've got to say that the phenomenon we've seen of people shopping for the vaccine they think is best for them personally, rejecting some for apparent lower efficiency or minuscule higher levels of risks, has been extremely disheartening. Choosing to do what is best for the whole community in this circumstance is hardly difficult. Under normal circumstances I would hardly describe it as laying down your life, but apparently enough people find it hard enough to do that we need to remind people that that's what love looks like in this present situation.

Who is Being Valued?

But there are also far more difficult opportunities to lay your life down and follow the example of Christ in loving today. In our present context, it would include speaking up, as uncomfortable as it might be, and calling out all of the ways in which people are not being valued.

For example, in this pandemic we have seen all of the ways in which certain groups have generally been able to do all right while others have not. We've seen how those who are relatively wealthy and have the ability to work from home or to take time off while they're sick have come through this thing relatively unscathed. Many of them have also found it easier to get vaccinated, so much so that they are being choosy about their vaccines.

Meanwhile there's this other group of people who are younger, who often belong to racial minorities and who work with the public or work in closely packed factories or warehouses. They generally have little power and no ability to stay home and the evidence seems to indicate that this pandemic has been spreading like wildfire among them. But yet, they've not even been prioritized for vaccination in most places.

What does Love Look Like?

This is a situation that endangers the public health of all of us and is being fueled by the inequities that have been in our society for a very long time. What does love look like when that is the situation? What does it look like to lay your life down for the sake of the sheep in that situation? It's got to be more than word or speech, it's got to be about action and truth.

Many of us would like to live our lives of Christian faith quietly, not causing any fuss or friction. We would like our love to be in word and in speech, but not to really have it mess with our comfortable routine. But clearly, the reality of the death and resurrection of Jesus is there to push us towards a love that speaks the truth and makes us act, that means a willingness to lay down our lives. That is the difference that the Easter story makes.