

We Are Easter Christians!

A sermon based on John 20:19-22 – ***“On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!”²⁰ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.***

²¹ Again Jesus said, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.”²² And with that he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

About a year ago, a WELS pastor surveyed 600 WELS high schoolers. And in this survey, these high school students were asked to identify the #1 challenge to their faith and life today. Any guesses what one of the top two answers were?

Where I probably would have answered similarly to you, thinking drugs, sex, smoking as being at the top, they weren't. For today's teens, the top two challenges are: #1 – anxiety, stress, and depression; and #2 – what is my identity. Over 80% of the students surveyed identified emotional/social issues as their number one challenge.

Now hearing those, are either of those surprising to you? Maybe you've made the observation how teens these days are trying to act so much older than they really are. Do you think maybe it's because they're feeling the pressure to, like, “I gotta get into the best college.” “I have to be involved in all of these extra curriculums.” “I have to have my whole life figured out.” They're being faced with some situations today that even we, as adults, haven't had to struggle with (like the increase of teen suicides).

And, to top it off, they're still trying to figure out who they are, where they fit in. Maybe you remember those days – in the midst of going through puberty, the acne, the nerdy glasses, going from “Ew, girls have cooties” to “How do I even ask this cute girl out?” That's when your personality is really starting to develop and shape who you're going to be as an adult. And, while you're struggling to come into your own, you're also extremely self-conscious about what your peers think about you. Does that sound pretty close to the teenager today?

That's a lot. It's awkward. It's stressful. You're going through four years of a borderline identity crisis. One that doesn't necessarily...doesn't completely end once you graduate from high school...or even college, does it? I look in the mirror and see a little chub in my face or notice the waist on my pants getting a little tighter, and I'm stressing over the weight gain. I'm 35, haven't been able to hold down a consistent job for years; I have two kids and a wife at home to take care of, and I have no idea what I'm doing with my life. Or, maybe, you're the person who's extra cautious about what you say to whom because you want to be the kind of person they think you are.

Even in the religious realm, many are trying to find their identity. It's not good enough just to say I'm a Christian, but what religion? What denomination? What specific congregation? Or, do I want to punt and just say I'm spiritual?

Let me ask you, who are you? Do you know who you are?

I would imagine, for every person sitting in that locked room in Jerusalem the night of Jesus' resurrection, they were probably struggling to answer that question. I mean, many were disciples; they were all followers of Jesus. But what did that even mean anymore? Some claimed Jesus was alive, but they hadn't seen him, so at best they were perplexed...confused as to how they should be feeling. What good was it to follow a guy who preached life but, based on what they had seen themselves, he wasn't alive himself.

But I would think their identity issues went deeper than that. Put yourself in their shoes that night. What kind of conflicting thoughts would you have been having? Any of the disciples, "I know some say he's alive, but we wouldn't even be having any of this uncertainty had we stuck by his side, put up a fight, protected him when they came with clubs and swords for him, but we were too chicken." "Jesus told us exactly how this would play out, we thought we knew better; we caved."

Or Peter? Imagine Peter, "How can I even call myself his friend when – three times – I pretended, no, I vehemently denied and swore I had no clue of and no association with this Jesus. How could I have done that?"

For them, if you asked them that night who they were, my guess is they would have all used one word to identify themselves...failure.

Do you think that's maybe why many teenagers today are anxious, stressed, depressed, struggling with their identity? Where again, it seems like so much is being expected of them, maybe we – or they themselves – are putting unfair expectations on them...to excel at everything, and they're looking at everything going on, they're overwhelmed, they can't do it all, they can't handle it all, and they're feeling like failures. Maybe.

Is that maybe what you're feeling when you look at, read, study God's Word?

Because, yeah, the Bible is full of good news for us, but it's also got a lot of hard-hitting truths which have every one of us looking into the mirror and who do we see looking back? Who are you?

Maybe we don't see what the disciples did, their failures to stick up for their friend, their teacher, their Lord.

But maybe we do. Think about the times – the opportunities you've had to stick up for Jesus, to defend your faith in Jesus, or even just to tell someone else about your Jesus...and you've let those opportunities pass by, despite God giving the command, "***Preach the good news to all creation***" (***Mark 16:15***). Who do you see? A failure...a coward.

And it doesn't stop there.

When you think about your craving to hear all about the failures of others and you have the tendency to freely and openly pass those rumors along to other itching ears with no regard for how that might impact this person and their reputation, even though God's Word warns, "***With their mouths the godless destroy their neighbors***" (***Proverbs 11:9***), who are you? A failure...a gossip.

When you have this dependency on the bottle or porn or maybe even drugs or sex and you're stuck in this vicious cycle where you keep running back to it again and again, even though you know God's Word

warns, ***“Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)***, who are you? A failure...an addict.

When you can sit here on a Sunday morning, give the appearance of being pious – a good and faithful Christian – but that kind of attitude goes completely out the window once you step foot out there, even though God’s Word encourages, ***“you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Ephesians 5:8)***, who are you? A failure...a hypocrite.

And there are so many other identities Scripture gives – liar, cheat, adulterer, lazy, greedy, loveless, and so many more. And every one of these...every one of our sins makes us failures, or, as we’re better known, sinners.

Right? Whenever we know exactly what God expects of us and yet we fail to meet that expectation of perfection, what does that make us? Who are we? Sinners. Sinners who have to reach the same conclusion as the apostle Paul did, as he looked at his own life of sin, ***“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Romans 7:24)***.

Is that who you are? Is that your identity? A miserable failure...a wretched sinner – lost and condemned? It should be. But it’s not.

Do you know how the apostle Paul continues? The very next thing he wrote, ***“Thanks be to God, through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 7:25)***.

You know, the disciples, that night, might have been feeling like failures for how they failed Jesus. Did that last?

No, because what happened? Jesus – risen Jesus, appeared before them and said one word that completely changed their lives...***“Peace!” “Peace be with you!”*** Disciples who were likely looking at themselves...hating themselves as the worst of sinners...who were probably expecting a strong rebuke from Jesus...in that moment, they given something completely different to reside in their hearts...peace.

The peace that here is with you today, the peace that is yours as well. Yes, we are sinners. There’s no denying that fact as we look into the mirror of God’s law. But, for a moment, look past that mirror...what do you see? You see the cross. You see Christ. You see peace.

Who are you? We find our identity in Christ.

What does that mean? It’s all confined in his one statement here, ***“Peace be with you.”***

Who’s the one who speaks? Christ, who lived the perfect life, who was up to the task of meeting God’s overwhelming expectations, and who never gave into sin....never failed like the disciples did...like we do. Christ, who died on the cross, because of all of their failures...because of all of our sins. He died for all of our sins, that they would be forgiven...so that what exists between us and God now...is peace. Christ, who rose from the dead on Easter Sunday and appeared to his disciples so they wouldn’t have to face their failures anymore but would see themselves as Jesus saw them, victorious because of his life, death, and resurrection. And he’s shown himself to us in the pages of Scripture – he’s allowed us to see the empty tomb - so we can see ourselves the same way...victorious

How can we be sure? The last thing Jesus said to his disciples here? ***“Receive the Holy Spirit.”*** Jesus was anticipating what would happen 50 days later on the day of Pentecost. On that day, the Holy Spirit would fill the disciples, giving them the assurance they belonged to their resurrected and victorious Savior.

You received that same Holy Spirit, too...at your baptism. On that day, through water and the Word, you went from sinner to God’s own child. On that day, Christ’s identity became yours – not a failure anymore, but instead clean, pure, holy, at peace with God.

Again we find our identity in Christ. Where the world, where Satan, where our own sinful natures scream at us, “You are failures. You’ll never be good enough,” we find our identity in Christ...that though we aren’t good enough, Jesus was in our place. And that brings us peace...a peace of forgiveness that is ours now...a peace with God that will be ours forever in heaven. Jesus’ resurrection proves it.

Which is why we have today. I know, today is not the actual day of Easter. That’s about six months down the road. But is Christ alive today? Is his resurrection victory yours today? Are you needing the encouragement of that resurrection victory today? Are you celebrating that resurrection victory today and every Sunday? Yes...to all of those.

You see, finding our identity in Christ means we are Easter Christians. And, being an Easter Christian means...we are covered in Christ and the victory, the forgiveness of sins he won for us through his life, death, and resurrection. Being an Easter Christian means our faith resides in a Savior who lived and died and now lives again. Being an Easter Christians means we live now in light of God’s peace, which is ours, now and forever. And being an Easter Christian means we are dedicated to sharing Jesus and his resurrection victory with others.

Jesus sends us out into the world just as the Father had sent him, to bring his salvation. Jesus earned it and, in his resurrection, assured it. We now report it and spread his peace...because we are Easter Christians.

That’s our identity. We find our identity in the cross. We find our identity in our risen Christ. We find – we will always find – our identity in Christ. And that gives us peace. Amen.

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