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Episcopal Church of the Incarnation, Santa Rosa, CA

May 1, 2022

3 Easter, Year C, Revised Common Lectionary

[Acts 9:1-6, \(7-20\)](#)

[Revelation 5:11-14](#)

[John 21:1-19](#)

[Psalm 30](#)

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“Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, and hath redeemed us to God by his blood, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. Blessing and honor, glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, forever and ever: Amen!”

If you have eighth notes dancing through your head right now, you might be a choral singer. It’s the last movement of Handel’s *Messiah*. Just after I finished college I was part of a choir of a dozen voices that did a historically informed, unabridged performance of *Messiah* with a baroque orchestra. The sound was terrific: nimble, dancelike, with quick tempos and the kind of clarity of tone you only get from a small ensemble.

Now that was one of the best concerts I’ve ever sung in. And I love the trend that’s happened in the last fifty years toward doing baroque music with smaller ensembles and the kind of instruments Handel would have known. It makes the music crackle and come alive. But for that last movement I wonder if there’s

something to be said for the old *Messiah* performances of the 1950s where people like Leonard Bernstein lined up hundreds of singers for a massive, wiggly, absolutely un-Baroque, wall of sound. It might not be as elegant but it was huge. And that's what I imagine in the scene from today's reading from the book of Revelation where those words come from. "Myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands of angels" around God's throne start, and then "every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea, and all that is in them" joins in. Everyone and everything in all creation. Absolute abundance, like a miraculous overflowing catch of fish straining the nets, all God's people, all God's creatures gathered in praise.

They're praising the Lamb that was slain. A few verses before the start of today's reading that Lamb was introduced. It's Jesus, of course. The author writes "I saw a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain," which is one of the strangest sentences ever written. But this slain lamb isn't stretched out on the ground dead but alive and triumphant even as its wounds remain. That triumphant lamb is a symbol of Easter—it's right here on this set of vestments. And it's a symbol of Passover, which after all is simply what Easter is, the Passover as it was kept by those first generations of Jewish followers of Jesus whose experience of Passover kept all its old meaning and took on new ones in light of the resurrection of their Lord and teacher. In light of that resurrection they could look on his death not as just a gruesome act of slaughter but as somehow an act of sacrifice, reminiscent of how the Hebrew children had been spared so long ago through the blood of the Passover sacrifice, the innocent one giving himself up on behalf of others so that others might live.

There is nothing good about a tragic death. But there are deaths that end all hope. And there is hope that burns bright in every circumstance, even in tragedy, even in death. Those first followers of Jesus discovered that hope through the risen Jesus and they discovered that it could sustain them even through persecution, trials, and even their own deaths. We read today of two of those followers, Saul and Peter, both of whom would end up following their Savior on the path of martyrdom. As Ananias prays, Jesus tells him that Saul will have to suffer for the sake of his name. As Peter professes his love, undoing his triple betrayal on the night of Jesus' trial, Jesus tells him that Peter will one day be bound and led where he doesn't want to go. So today we have not just the praise of the Lamb in heaven but the discipleship of his friends on earth. Peter and Saul, or as he was known by his Roman name Paul, would go on to glorify God in their own deaths, not because there was anything glorious about having to undergo those deaths, but because of the courage and obedience and steadfast faith that carried them through. And in the centuries since then there have been many martyrs showing that same courage, that same obedience, that same faith.

But not only martyrs. Our scripture stories today also have characters in them who were called to walk a different path. Ananias, that faithful yet not particularly famous disciple, who played his part in bringing Saul to Jesus. And in Peter's story, the other ten disciples, especially that mysterious figure the gospel just calls "the disciple Jesus loved." Traditionally that figure is identified as the apostle John, who is said to have lived to a very old age before dying in the peace of Christ. Sometimes he's said to have had a "bloodless martyrdom": the willingness to follow Jesus, to give up whatever is necessary to follow in his path, but without having actually come to a violent death.

Most of us will be called to walk a path more like Ananias or the Beloved Disciple, not coming to one dramatic moment of climax where we give up everything to take a stand for Jesus, but walking a long path of faith where we're faced along the way with countless smaller decision points, to grow closer to God or farther away, to love our neighbors or to use them.

Still today we have those who are called to martyrdom and those who are called to the long slow life of faithfulness. Back in 1965 a group of white and black activists were protesting the white-only stores in Lowndes County, Alabama when they were arrested and thrown in jail for six days, then released with no transportation. As they waited by the jail for a ride, four of them walked over to a store to buy a soft drink. But at the door of the store, a white county deputy named Tom Coleman started yelling threats at them. He pointed his shotgun at Ruby Sales, who was a young black woman, seventeen years old. At that moment another member of the group, Jonathan Daniels, pushed Ruby Sales out of the way just as Tom Coleman fired. Jonathan Daniels was twenty-six years old, a white Episcopal seminarian. He died almost instantly. Jonathan Daniels is recognized as a martyr and celebrated with a feast day on the Episcopal Church's calendar. In one dramatic moment he was called on to glorify God by following the path of the Lamb who was slain.

Ruby Sales lived on that day. For seven months she almost lost the ability to speak, but she was determined to testify at Tom Coleman's murder trial. He was acquitted by an all-white jury. And she continued to live her life. She went to graduate school and became a historian, then an educator and a nonprofit director. She's been in charge of organizations doing activism to support women and black women. In the 1990s she went back to school again, this time to the Episcopal Divinity School in Massachusetts, the same place where Jonathan Daniels had

been studying, and she became a theologian. In 2000 she launched SpiritHouse, an Atlanta nonprofit that brings people together for racial and social justice through art, spirituality, and education. She was involved in the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement. There's a remarkable interview with her online from 2016 with Krista Tippett of National Public Radio that you can listen to.¹ She's asked about the role of anger in activism. And I want to read you a part of her reply. She says: "Love is not antithetical to being outraged. Love is not antithetical to anger. There's redemptive anger, and there's non-redemptive anger. I became involved in the Southern freedom movement not merely because I was angry about injustice, but because I love the idea of justice. I think that we have to begin to have a conversation that incorporates a vision of love with a vision of outrage. You can't talk about injustice without talking about suffering. But the reason why I want to have justice is because I love everybody in my heart. And if I didn't have that feeling, that sense, then there would be no struggle."

Ruby Sales was called to the struggle. Not to the martyrdom of blood but to the long slow path of faithfulness. So will most of us be. May we make the choices, empowered by the Holy Spirit, that help us to be friends of the Lamb. May the Lamb who was slain keep us forever on that path, as we hear his words to us too: "Follow me."

¹ Ruby Sales, "Where Does It Hurt?" *On Being* with Krista Tippett (September 15, 2016), <https://onbeing.org/programs/ruby-sales-where-does-it-hurt/>. I've abridged the quotation.