

# So Do Something

The Third Sunday or Easter, 5 May 2019. Acts 9:1-6; Psalm 30, Revelation 5:11-14, John 21:1-19.

Let's put ourselves in Peter's shoes for a moment. He had done an awful thing. He boasted he would follow Jesus anywhere, even lay down his life for him. But when Judas came with soldiers, Peter could not protect him. He drew his sword and managed to cut off the ear of the servant of the high priest, but still Jesus was taken away.

Peter followed the soldiers to the home of Annas, father-in-law of the high priest. He tried to maintain his distance and keep some cover, but a woman recognized him. She accused him of being a disciple of Jesus. He denied it. That was the first time.

Annas then sent Jesus to his son-in-law Caiaphas, the high priest. Peter stood outside the house, warming his hands by a fire. The people there asked, "You are not one of his disciples, are you?" Peter said no – the second denial. Then a servant of the high priest, a relative of the man whose ear had been cut off, said, "Didn't I see you at the garden with him?" The third denial. Then the cock crowed.

And from that moment on, Peter appears to have fled. He is not mentioned again in John's gospel until Easter morning. Peter was not there when Jesus was questioned by Pontius Pilate. He was not with the women at the cross. He was not present when Jesus died. He was not among those who buried him. He abandoned Jesus when Jesus needed him most.

Yet, Peter became a key leader in the early Church. The symbol of apostolic succession begins with him. When a bishop lays hands on us at confirmation and prays for us, we are spiritually linked to Jesus through Peter. And the turning point is here – this moment of forgiveness and healing and power.

A similar moment of reconciliation happens in the lesson from Acts. Earlier Acts tells us, "Saul was ravaging the church by entering house after house; dragging off both men and women, he committed them to prison (Acts 8:3)." Then on the road to Damascus, a light blinded Saul and a voice spoke from heaven, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." Jesus felt the pain of what was happening. So, Jesus met Saul on the road and invited him to go a different way.

These gospel moments between a person who was harmed and a person who did the harming stand out powerfully to me today in light of my visit to Ghana last week. I went with a team from the Diocese of Atlanta to meet with our partners in the Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast. Bishop Victor Atta-Baffoe and his wife Dorcas were gracious hosts. A young priest in the Diocese named Theophilus was our guide. We visited churches and ministries. We talked about evangelism and church planting and youth ministry and women's ministry and development. In many ways we are very different as people, but I was overwhelmed by how much we share as Christians, especially as Anglicans and Episcopalians.

But one of the reasons the Diocese of Atlanta developed this particular partnership was for purposes of racial healing. As you know, Georgia was a slave state. Most enslaved people were brought to the US through Cape Coast. We were told there were once over 1000 slave castles in Africa. Over 500 of those were in Ghana. We visited two of the three still standing.

The slave trade was an ugly business, as you know. Europeans came to West Africa initially to trade in gold and materials and, they said, to spread Christianity. Elmina Castle was built by the Portuguese in 1482 for this purpose. Ten years later in 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue. Soon Europeans colonized the Caribbean Islands and Central and North America. Native people here died by the millions from diseases brought by the Europeans. A priest, Bartholomew de las Casas, suggested that Africans might be a stronger and healthier labor force. We were told the thinking of the time was that there were three classes of people – humans, infidels, and savages. Europeans were humans. Muslims were infidels. Africans and indigenous people were savages, not humans.

At first, Europeans captured Africans themselves. Then they realized African tribes were willing to work against one another. One tribe would agree to capture people from another tribe in exchange for protection and trinkets like cloth or guns. It is not clear that Africans understood what would happen across the Atlantic. Slavery did exist in their culture, but it was more like indentured service, not the brutal system here. Still, African cooperation clearly helped the slave trade grow. One guide said 60 to 70% of the entire slave population was due to intertribal wars.

And the Church was complicit in all of this. The first church built in West Africa was a chapel in the center of the Elmina courtyard. Cape Coast Castle was originally built by the Dutch. When the British took over, the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel built an Anglican chapel above the entrance to the male dungeon. People who knelt to pray in that space were directly above people who were being tortured.

It is hard to know what to do with this history, especially since it is still with us in many ways. None of us participated in slavery directly, but we are all still affected by it. The attitudes that led to the horrors of slavery are still with us. Whole groups of people are still deemed less important or deserving. A wealth gap between people of European descent and people of African descent still exists. Bryan Stephenson, founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, says slavery didn't go away. It just changed. And the African continent, so rich in raw materials and in people, still struggles to rebuild from its colonial past.

What do we do about all of this? What do we do when anyone has been wronged? For, like Peter and Saul, we have all harmed others somehow. And many of us, like Jesus, have been harmed by others. What do we do to heal a world that is so badly broken?

We see in today's gospel lesson a way forward, a way of reconciliation and healing given by Jesus after one of the most horrendous crimes in history, the crucifixion of the Son of God.

It begins with this question: "Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?"

In asking this question, Jesus reminded Peter of who he hoped to be. Peter fancied himself an overachiever. He had promised to be the best disciple – to follow Jesus anywhere, to die for him if necessary. But he had not been the disciple or person or friend he intended to be. So Jesus reminded him. "Do you love me more than these?" Yes, Lord, you know I do.

The first step in healing is to remember who we intend to be. The harm we do to others does reflect who we are at the moment, and we need to acknowledge what we have done with honesty. But it is not who we want to be. The first step in change is recalling our ideals. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was powerful because it reminded our nation that we intend to be a place where all people are created equal. Remember who you intend to be.

Then Jesus gave Peter a way to undo some of the wrong he had done. Peter had denied Jesus three times. So Jesus asked three times, “Do you love me?” Jesus reversed the wrong.

The Risen Jesus does not stand before us in person as he did with Peter. We may not hear his voice as plainly as Saul did on the road, but still he speaks in the voices of victims. I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Those who have been harmed often have ideas about how to reverse the wrongs. They deserve to be heard, just as Peter listened to Jesus and answered his question three times. So the next step in healing is to listen.

And third, Jesus invited Peter to do something redemptive. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Care for the vulnerable. Shepherd my people. Do something good.

One of the most powerful moments on our pilgrimage was a visit to a place called Assin Manso. This was the site of a camp and slave market. Enslaved people were brought to this place by their captors. They were given a last bath in the river and sold at auction. Then they were branded and marched 35 miles to one of the castles on the coast.

This place of torture has become a place of healing. In African culture, it is very important to be buried with your ancestors on your ancestral land. That privilege was denied to the millions who were taken away. So, in 1998, the bodies of two formerly enslaved people, a woman from Jamaica and a man from the US, were brought back to Ghana. Their coffins were carried through the Door of No Return at Cape Coast Castle, reversing the journey of slavery. They were brought to Assin Manso and buried as one small step in undoing the wrongs of the past.

The theme of the Anglican Diocese of Cape Coast for the next five years is this: You can’t do everything. So do something. Peter could not undo the fact that he had denied and abandoned Jesus when Jesus needed him most. Saul could not undo arresting Christians and sending them to prison. They could not do everything. But they could each do something.

We cannot undo all the harm that has been done in the past, much as we would like to. But we can do something. We can remember who we intend to be. We can listen to those who were wronged and try to do what they say. And we can do something redemptive. Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep. Feed my sheep. Amen.

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Grace Burton-Edwards  
St. Thomas Episcopal Church  
Columbus, GA 31906  
StThomasColumbus.org