

## HERE, THERE AND EVERYWHERE

Acts 1:6-8 & John 20:1-18  
April 20, 2025 – Easter Sunday  
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### A WORLD DIVIDED

I have a friend who is a member of the National Rifle Association. No, let me qualify that. He is a *rabid* member of the National Rifle Association. He is not just a gun owner; he is a gun lover. His guns are not just possessions or hobbies for him. They are, to a large degree, determiners of both his politics and his theology.

He is sure – absolutely sure – that, if they would have had guns two thousand years ago, Jesus would have carried one -- probably a nine-millimeter, semi-automatic. (He's never explained how that would go with the "turn the other cheek" stuff.)

Now, I have been a gun owner since my father bought me my first .22 rifle when I was sixteen years old. I own a 410-gauge shotgun that was my dad's and a .22 rifle that I bought years ago just because it was a sweet little rifle with a good feel. I enjoy shooting, though I don't get the chance to do it much any more, and I keep my guns at my sister's farm in northern Kentucky. I look forward to shooting and plinking at tin cans when we visit her.

But my friend's attitude about guns is, I think, a little creepy. A little extreme.

He has a concealed carry permit even though you don't need one in Ohio anymore and his work doesn't require him to carry money or valuables of any kind. And he keeps a loaded gun under the driver's seats of both of his cars. There's a gun in the nightstand in his bedroom and a whole collection of guns in locked cases in his den. If he had his way, everyone in the country would be walking around with a gun on their hip and, he says, we would all be a lot safer.

See, he believes that our whole American society is *divided* between the armed and the unarmed. It is also *divided*, he says, between law breakers and law abiders. It's a war. The sides have been drawn up and the law abiders will, if they are smart, arm themselves against the law breakers. The world is divided and he has embraced the division.

- In the Holy Land the *divisions* have, in the past year, become more clearly drawn as Israel has continued to bomb Gaza into the stone age.
- In our own country, we are building a wall of metal and of soldiers along our border with Mexico to clarify and identify those who should be here and those who shouldn't. We know that it won't keep people from sneaking into our country. Most illegal entries are made in cars and trucks at the border crossing stations and the border patrol has found tunnels and ladders and they have videos of people sneaking over. Desperation and hunger are the mothers of invention and ingenuity. But, on the other hand, "good fences make good neighbors," as the character in Frost's poem says.
- Pope Francis is finding himself to be the leader of a church that is, every day, more

*divided*. Revelations of the sexual abuse at virtually all levels of the church threaten his legacy. It is alleged by some that cardinals and bishops knew about the abuses and reacted insufficiently or did not act at all. Denials, responses, explanations, defenses and *pro forma* apologies continue to tear down the Roman Catholic church.

- Screaming, name calling, swearing, and attempts at intimidation have become commonplace on the floors of both houses of congress. Radio and cable television programs feed the anger and hysteria and that childish sense of entitlement that says, “Because I am angry I must get what I want.” And that, in turn, breeds frustration which inevitably leads to acts of vandalism and threats of violence. And all of this is because we disagree about how to address the rising costs of, well, everything. Attempts to find bipartisanship have failed. As a nation, we are as *divided* as we have ever been since the Civil War.

But what can you do? *Division* and estrangement are part of the human condition, right? We might as well get used to it. Give in to the separation. Accept the disconnect; embrace the divide.

“Good fences make good neighbors,” says the neighbor and the poet replies, “Well, maybe, if there are cows. But we have only trees and my apples are unlikely to come over and eat the pine cones from your pines.” But the neighbor is unconvinced. He walks in a darkness not made of by the woods or the shade of trees. “Good fences make good neighbors,” he repeats. It is his mantra, his axiom, his motto. He has embraced as necessary and inevitable the nature of human estrangement.

His is the attitude of the world. Human estrangement, we are told, is as inevitable as, well, death – that great and final act of separation which eventually takes us all.

Theologian Paul Tillich put it this way: “...sin is separation. To be in a state of sin is to be in a state of separation ... This...separation constitutes the state of everything that exists; it is a universal fact; it is the fate of every life...It is our existence itself. Existence is separation! Before sin is an act, it is a state.”<sup>1</sup>

It would be so easy to just cave in and accept that estrangement has won the day.

Except for that pesky Easter thing. Except for that empty tomb. Except for the excited declaration of those who went to the garden that morning and saw the stone rolled away and the soldiers gone and the cowl tossed aside and ran back to tell the others: He is risen! He is alive!

For Christians, Easter repudiates the inevitability and finality of estrangement. If death, that great, dark separator of humans from life and each other, can be overcome, then so can every other form of division and separation.

Easter’s greatest message is one of hope not just for the dead and the dying, but for the living as well.

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<sup>1</sup> “You are Accepted” by Paul Tillich. *The Shaking of the Foundations*. New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1976. P. 154-155.

That which was dead – dead hope, dead dreams, dead relationships – can live again. Separation can be bridged. People really can join hands across their differences and work and live together. Old adversaries can put their animosities aside. People who disagree can still be friends. Old hurts can be forgotten; old wounds can be healed.

Satan and his minions – hate, fear, prejudice, bigotry, codependency, despair, addiction, anger and every other demon you can name – have been chained to a rock.

Failure can be transformed into success. Defeat can arise as victory. Despair can be reborn as hope. Sins can be forgiven and life can be reunited with life. We can choose differently than we have in the past; we can change.

Reunion, reunification, reconciliation, rebirth and regeneration really are possible.

Praise the Lord! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Let us bask for a moment in the glory of that pronouncement, that EASTER pronouncement. Let it warm you. Let it lighten your load. Let it invigorate you and energize you and raise you up. For now, there is work to be done. We must spread the word. We must tell others. We have no right to keep this good news to ourselves. We must, simply must, let the world know.

### **EVEN TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH**

We read our second lesson, this morning, from the opening pages of the book of Acts. These are the last words spoken to the disciples before Jesus ascends bodily into heaven. They are words of both promise and expectation.

The good news, the gospel of God in Jesus Christ is not ours to hoard for our own comfort. It is like bread, meant to be broken and shared so all can be energized. It is like wine, meant to be poured out and shared so all can be refreshed.

Listen to the charge again as Jesus gives it: *“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.”*

First Jesus reassures his disciples – and, by extension, us – that we are not being left to do this job alone or with only our own resources. God’s Holy Spirit will help, will empower us in this evangelistic endeavor. And then Jesus lays out the map of where we are to spread his good news. Think of the map as a series of concentric circles, like a target. The smallest circle at the center is Jerusalem.

#### **First, in Jerusalem.**

Jerusalem is the local area. For us – Blanchester. We are to be his witnesses, to testify for him, to spread his message first in our local area, in Blan. This happens in our deeds – through the work of the food pantry, as we volunteer on behalf of the homeless, and other charitable efforts. It happens as we stand together in solidarity with workers who have lost their jobs and children who have lost their parents.

And it happens in the words we say, as well. We witness for the risen Christ when we invite our friends, family, neighbors and co-workers to our church or our church functions. It happens when we share with others how much our church means to us and how much our faith in God has brought to our lives. It happens when, in even small ways, we act like Jesus.

### **Secondly, in Judea.**

Judea is the region. For us, Clinton County – but beyond that as well.

We are called to take the good news of Jesus Christ outside Blanchester and into the region around Blanchester. Throughout Clinton County and into all of southwestern Ohio.

One significant way we do this is through the support of our district apportionments. But we also obey this commandment of Jesus when we support ministries in Cincinnati and Hamilton, in Clermont county and Warren county, in Wilmington and Hillsboro.

### **Thirdly, in Samaria.**

Samaria is not so much a geographical place as a psychological one.

Samaria is where people live who are “not like us.” Samaria is the despised, the low, and the unclean. Samaria is the last place anyone wants to go.

To be witnesses for Jesus in Samaria is, in our time, to be his witness to those whom others have rejected. These are the people no one else wants and to be a witness for Jesus Christ is to pray, “Lord, send us the ones that no one else wants.” These are the people who may disrupt the service. They smell bad. They don’t have the social graces. They are loud. They are pushy or opinionated or uneducated or tactless. They don’t understand how we do things.

These are the Samaritans, the rejects, the lepers, the sinners and the tax collectors. And they are the ones Jesus calls us to embrace.

And then, Jesus goes all in.

We don’t stop, even in Samaria. We go **to the ends of the earth.**

Brothers and sisters, I have seen the end of the earth. It is in the city dump of Managua, Nicaragua. It is a series of mountains made up of smoldering, rotting, molding, smoking garbage. And there are children playing on those mountains of trash.

And it is there that we are called to go, to take Jesus with us and spread his good news.

Praise the Lord, Christ is risen.

He is risen in Blanchester

He is risen in Ohio.

He is risen at the homeless shelter and the soup kitchen, at the flop house and flea bag, at the prison and at the methadone clinic.

He is risen in Nicaragua and in Mexico and Brazil, in China and Viet Nam, in Israel and in Gaza, in Russia and in Ukraine, in Iraq and in Afghanistan.

He is risen! He is risen!

He is risen, indeed.

**AMEN**