

**“EASTER FOR EXILES”**  
**1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
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When I’m not just reading a passage in the Bible casually, but am really trying to savor it, I often use a time-tested method that dates back to the Church’s early centuries. It’s called *lectio divina*, a Latin term which literally means “divine reading.” *Lectio divina* is a four-step process for immersing the reader into the deeper meaning of a text and allowing God to speak through the words of Scripture. The first step in this process simply involves reading the passage through from beginning to end, watching for words or phrases that stand out and invite further exploration. I often use this method when I start preparing a sermon. I do an initial reading of the lectionary texts and look for a suggestive word – like “betrayal” or “forgiveness” or “peace”; or an intriguing phrase – like “pray without ceasing” or “give thanks in everything.” I often latch on to that single word or phrase, and it becomes the inspiration for an entire sermon.

This is exactly what happened when I read today’s lectionary texts at the beginning of this past week. I came across a phrase that stood out to me like a flashing neon sign. The phrase appears in the context of an admonition found in our Epistle lesson from 1 Peter: “If you invoke the Father as one who judges all people impartially according to their deeds, live in reverent fear during the time of your exile” (1 Peter 1:17b). The phrase that jumped off the page right into my mind and heart was that last phrase, “the time of your exile.”

According to the dictionary, exile is “a state or a period of forced absence from one’s home; a prolonged living away from one’s country or community, usually enforced, sometimes self-imposed.” A dramatic example of exile is when persons are barred from coming back to their country because of crimes they have committed. A more mundane example of exile is when misbehaving children are sent to their rooms to be by themselves – what we commonly call “Time Out.” In any case, to be exiled is to be banished from one’s familiar surroundings and relationships, and it is almost always a painful experience.

Well, I think you can easily see why I was struck by that phrase in 1 Peter, “the time of your exile.” You and I are living in such a time; we are in exile. Now, it’s true that none of us has been banished to Siberia or Sing Sing. We’re all tucked in at home during the Coronavirus pandemic. But some of us are “home alone”; most of us feel stuck at home; and “home, sweet home” can come to feel more like a prison than a haven. What makes this a time of exile is that you and I still reside in our primary home; but we are separated from people and places that make up our larger home – our friends and extended family, our schools and workplaces, our favorite stores and restaurants, our beloved places of fellowship and worship. Of course, at one level our exile is voluntary; sheltering at home and social distancing are choices we freely make. But at another level, our exile is imposed upon us by government restrictions and by an unseen enemy that forces us to live isolated lives.

The Scriptures have much to teach us about our current predicament, because the state of exile is a grim reality in the biblical story. The people of Israel live through a time of exile after Babylon conquers their homeland and carts many of them away into captivity. They miss their

familiar landscape, their jobs, their homes, and above all, their temple in Jerusalem. Israel's experience reminds us that exile not only means being trapped in a foreign place; exile is also a state of mind, a condition of the spirit. One of the haunting psalms of the Old Testament, Psalm 137, is a song of lament written during Israel's exile in Babylon. The psalmist asks, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:4). This question suggests that the exiles not only feel separated from their worship life in the temple; they also feel separated from God, even abandoned by God.

Moving to the New Testament, we come to another exile story. Today's Gospel reading is about two disciples walking on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Easter day. Luke doesn't call these disciples "exiles," but they certainly meet the definition of that term. Even though they still live in their homeland, they feel like foreigners. They are closely identified with a man whose kingdom movement has just ended in failure and whose life has just ended on a Roman cross. These two disciples have lost whatever sense of safety or security they once had. They could easily be the next targets of the political and religious authorities. Above all, they are now separated from Jesus, missing Jesus, grieving the loss of Jesus. They are exiles, banished into a place of uncertainty, fear, and loneliness.

Now, fast forward a few decades, and the writer of 1 Peter explicitly identifies his readers as "exiles." His audience is composed of Gentiles, former pagans who are new converts to Christianity. Wherever they happen to reside in the Roman Empire, they feel like foreigners. They are now a part of a new religion whose beliefs, rituals, and moral expectations are unfamiliar to them. Moreover, many of these new Christians are being persecuted, and they know they may not have much time left to live. They see themselves as exiles on earth whose real hometown is in heaven.

It's significant that these texts from Luke and 1 Peter are designated to be read during the Easter season. One of them is set on Easter Day, but at an hour when the disciples are still hung over from Good Friday. The other affirms the Easter hope, but it is written during a time of affliction and despair. The followers of Jesus know what it feels like to try to "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land." And so, what is the message of Easter for exiles?

As the disciples walk on the road to Emmaus, they are displaced and disoriented. They are trying to make sense of what has happened to Jesus, to his kingdom mission, and to them. They are looking for answers from God, for some sign of God's presence and providence. And, lo and behold, this God from whom they feel exiled comes to them in the person of the risen Jesus. He joins them on the road to Emmaus and engages them in conversation. Like Mary Magdalene at the tomb earlier that morning, the disciples don't immediately recognize Jesus. It is only when they listen to his words and ask to hear more, only when they invite him to come to their home and stay with them, only when they break bread together in a curiously familiar way, that their eyes are opened and they see that this mysterious stranger is in fact their friend Jesus, risen from the dead and alive in their midst. All of a sudden, they are no longer exiles in their home country. They are once again close to Jesus and connected to their fellow disciples. And no matter where they go, whether it's by choice or under coercion, they are full citizens in the kingdom of God.

During this pandemic, you and I are feeling just as displaced and disoriented as these two disciples. We feel exiled socially and perhaps even spiritually. Some of you have told me that

you are praying more than usual, and, frankly, so am I. It's not just that you and I have more time to pray; it's that we have more need and motivation to pray. With our health in jeopardy and our ability to be with other people so limited, some of us are seeking God more consistently and earnestly than we ever have before.

Well, the message of Easter during our time of exile is that the One whom we seek has already found us. No matter how desolate and desperate our circumstances, you and I are not left alone, like outcasts in a foreign land. The risen Christ is always walking beside us, always knocking at our door. But here's the catch: you and I have to invite him to come in and stay awhile – to come into our homes and hearts, into our problems and conflicts, into our worries and fears. We have to listen to his words and allow them to transform our lives. We have to accept his companionship and counsel, not just at crunch time but all the time. Only then can we live like Easter people, as those who never lose heart, never despair, never give up.

Peter's Easter message to the early Church is similar to Luke's message, but it has a unique twist. Peter says to his readers, "Live in reverent fear during the time of your exile." He is urging them as new converts to be careful about their conduct, to continue to distance themselves from their old pagan practices and remain committed to a Christian lifestyle. As followers of Christ, they are not supposed to be at home in this world, much less conformed to this world; they are meant to be different, to be set apart – to use one of Peter's favorite words, they are meant to be "holy." As strange as it may seem, they are called to embrace their identity as exiles, not to lament that identity or try to change it.

Twenty-five years ago, a book came out co-authored by two professors at Duke Divinity School, Stanley Hauerwas and Will Willimon. They wrote about the nature of the Church and its relationship to the surrounding culture. They ruffled some feathers when they rejected the idea that America is a Christian nation. They said that instead, Christians should see themselves as "resident aliens" in a foreign land. In fact, this became the title for their book: *Resident Aliens*. The role of Christians, the authors claimed, is not to reform secular culture or try to get everyone to believe or behave as we do. Our role is simply to live lives which reflect the love of Christ, to model a new set of ethics which are grounded in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

Notice how the message of these two authors echoes Peter's message. By definition, Peter says, Christians are exiles, resident aliens. We are different, so we need to act different. For starters, we are to "love one another deeply from the heart" (1:22b), which is a counter-cultural thing to do in our deeply divided world. The Church is a distinctive kind of community, not only in the way we relate to one another, but also in the way we engage the problems of the world.

As I speak, there are people out there who are responding to the pandemic by ignoring calls for social distancing and thereby putting other lives in danger; or by hoarding household items like toilet paper rather than sharing them with their neighbors. As Christians, we are called to be different, to live by a higher set of standards – to love our neighbors as ourselves and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us.

There are also people around us who at this very moment are living in terror and despair. They are in a situation over which they have almost no control, and the only persons they have to place their faith in beyond themselves are their doctors, employers, and investment managers.

But you and I have someone else in whom we can place our faith. We are exiles who live by God's Easter message of hope, the message of Christ's victory over sin, evil and death.

In this week's church newsletter, we began recognizing people in our community whom we have come to call "frontliners." They are the folks who risk their own health by providing essential services to the general public – health care personnel, law enforcement officers, grocery store workers, to name only a few.

One of the frontliners from our own congregation is Rev. Paul Hibbard, who serves as a chaplain at Waterbury Hospital and Griffin Hospital in Derby. I learned this past week that Waterbury Hospital has invited its chaplains to offer a word of encouragement to patients and staff each morning over the public address system. On Wednesday, Paul's message included a quote from Nelson Mandela, the man who helped to liberate blacks in South Africa from the evils of apartheid. Mandela once said to his fellow blacks: "May your choices reflect your hopes, not your fears." What a pertinent and powerful message that was to people who were living in exile in their own country. They were constantly faced with choices – to cower before their oppressors, or to step out in courage to claim their birthright of freedom. Would their choices reflect their fears or their hopes?

Let me ask you: what about the choices we make during our own time of exile? Will they reflect the fear of not having enough, the fear of illness, the fear of death? Or will our choices reflect the hope we have in a faithful, loving God and a risen, living Christ, in the promise that there is One who is always with us in our times of exile, leading us back to the Promised Land? Will our choices reflect love for ourselves only, or will they also reflect our love for God and for our neighbors? God help us to choose wisely and well.