

Sermon Draft

Text: Acts 10:34–43

Sermon: Easter 2020

He Is Risen! He Is Risen Indeed!

A 1914 Robert Frost poem describes a wall separating two neighbors' properties. The neighbors talk as they walk along the stone fence-line. It's the spring of the year, and, as they do every spring, together they mend the various places where frost, hunters, and other things have broken the wall. In some places, not one stone is left on another. As they go about their work, one neighbor wonders to the other if the wall really is of any value. One neighbor grows pine trees; the other has an apple orchard. Neither has any livestock that needs to be kept in, nor have they any great need to keep intruders out. Yet year after year, they rebuild the wall because, as many people have observed, a wall between properties keeps just the right peace and harmony between neighbors. Or so people assume.

So it is in this world. Fences and walls are almost everywhere. From the Great Wall of China to the little picket fence surrounding a vegetable garden, walls are ubiquitous. Our First Reading this Easter Sunday is a reading about a fence that existed for a very long time the wall separating the people of Israel from the people of all the other nations on the earth. While this was not a physical wall, it was nonetheless very real. Like a lot of walls, it was first built with a good purpose. God wanted his people to be a nation separate from all the other nations. They were not to worship the gods of the nations, not to follow their ways, not even to marry outside the people of Israel.

The apostle Peter was a man who knew that wall very well. He knew what side of the wall he was to be on, and like one of the neighbors in the poem, Peter probably would have thought that the wall kept everyone's relationship at just the right distance. But one day he learned the wall had outlived its usefulness.

One day Peter received a perplexing vision. On a white sheet lowered from the heavens he saw all kinds of animals and birds. These were animals and birds he was not to eat, animals and birds from the other side of the fence, so to speak. Gentiles might eat these animals and birds, but no self-respecting Jew would even want to touch most of them. Then three times he was told, “Rise, kill and eat.” Three times he protested, “By no means!” No way would he mingle with things on the other side of the fence; they were unclean! But three times he heard, “What God has made clean, do not call common” (Acts 10:15).

As Peter contemplated what this vision might mean, there came a knock at the door. There were some Gentile visitors at the door with a request. Would Peter go with them to meet a whole gathering of Gentiles? The Holy Spirit instructed him to go without hesitation. And with that, Peter found himself on his way to the home of a Roman centurion in Caesarea, a man named Cornelius, a Roman, a Gentile, a man from the other side of the wall!

When Peter arrived at this Gentile home, the puzzle began to be solved! He opened his mouth and said, ***“Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. . . . He is Lord of all”*** (vs 34–36). It turns out God loves the people on both sides of the wall. It turns out that while God had created the wall between Jews and Gentiles, God did not love the wall. And so, more than frost or hunters or anything else, God once and for all shook things up to break down that wall.

The shake’em up that broke down the fence between Jew and Gentile began on a Sunday morning at a tomb on the outskirts of Jerusalem. Mary Magdalene and another woman named Mary went to the tomb where Jesus of Nazareth had been laid to rest following his crucifixion three days before. As they arrived, behold, there was a great earthquake, an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and the heavy stone that walled off the tomb from the rest of the world was rolled away.

Peter's reflection on those three days is short and to the point! ***“They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear”*** (vs 39–40).

Moses taught, ***“A hanged man is cursed by God”*** (Deuteronomy 21:23). But Jesus deserved no curse. Instead, as Peter proclaimed a bit earlier in his sermon, ***“He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him”*** (v 38). Yet despite all the good Jesus had done, there were many who were threatened by Jesus. He often acted as if there was no wall between Jews and Gentiles, between sinners and holy people, between insiders and outsiders. This was dangerous. The leaders of the people feared that if he had too many followers, it might provoke the Romans to come to Jerusalem and tear down the city walls and destroy all who were inside. So, they put Jesus to death, by hanging him on a tree.

They put him under their curse, but their curse wasn't all that important. The real curse that was upon him as he hung on the tree of the cross was the curse upon all humanity, a curse going back to the day when our first parents were expelled from the Garden of Eden for their sin and a cherubim with a flaming sword prevented them or any of their descendants from returning to the tree of life in the midst of the garden. God put in place that living, angelic wall as a sign of his justice. But the wall was never meant to be permanent. God put the wall there, but God did not love the wall. So, God put all the curse of that wall on his Son, hanging him on a tree outside Jerusalem on a bleak and dark Friday. For a time, the Son of God would even be walled off from the Father, forsaken so that the gates of hell might never prevail against God's people.

Today on Easter, beginning with the earthquake in the garden, the walls start coming down! ***“They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day”*** (vs 39–40). God raised the Son he had cursed, and with that the wall of the grave crumbled.

Death no longer has the last word; the grave is no longer permanent. God raised Jesus, and now all who live and believe in him will rise, for he is the resurrection and the life. In our Baptism, we crossed over from death to life. Our sins were drowned in that water, and we rose to new life as a child of God. We went from death to life.

The aftershocks of that first Easter earthquake continue to topple walls. The wall between God and people symbolized by the angel with the fiery sword outside the Garden of Eden has begun to fall. To be sure, we are not yet in paradise and able to eat freely of the tree of life, but already, like Peter and the other disciples, we are able to eat and drink with the risen Christ. Not only does he share our food as he did on that first Easter evening when he took broiled fish and ate it to show he was no ghost, but also we recognize him in the breaking of the bread. We are invited to his table to feast upon his body and his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sin. We share the feast of victory over sin, death, and Satan as a foretaste of that day when we will eat again from the tree of life in the midst of paradise.

And this isn't just for a select few, a people walled off from the rest of the world. No, as Peter proclaims about Jesus, ***“To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name”*** (v 43). Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins in his name. Everyone. There is no wall so strong, so high, so impenetrable that survives.

The most sacred wall in all of Judaism was the wall in the temple that sealed off the Most Holy Place. The wall was of thick fabric. No one could pass through that wall, except the high priest, and he could only pass through once a year on the Day of Atonement. But on Good Friday, as Jesus breathed his last, that temple curtain wall was torn in two. Christ made the greatest sacrifice, with his own blood, and with that, everything changed. No longer does a priest offer the atoning sacrifice for our sin. The blood of Christ covers our sin, and God freely forgives you, me, and everyone who believes in Christ.

Someone knew better than to think there had to be a wall, and that someone is our God, who shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and who does what is right is acceptable to him! And the earthquake that broke open the tomb that first Easter morning is still breaking down walls. Walls of guilt, walls of addiction, walls of illness, walls of death, walls of culture and class, walls that hem us in, and walls that would keep us out! Everyone who believes in Jesus receives forgiveness of sins through His name! Everyone!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Amen