

April 9, 2023

You Can Be a Christian

Acts 10: 34-43

Hey! You! Yes, You! You can be a Christian!

No, not that other person. You! Yes, you! You can be a Christian!

Maybe you don't want to be, but you can be. There's no reason why not.

You can be a Christian!

The New Testament insists over and over again - in personal testimonies, in campfire stories, and in letters saved for the archives - straining to make the message clear: Despite what you've heard, you can be a Christian!

Sometimes it's presented in the form of an invitation: Come and join us, you can be a Christian. Sometimes it's presented as an argument to overcome doubts and hesitations. Who, me? Jesus would never accept me. I'm too...something or other. You - yes, even you - can be a Christian. And sometimes it's presented as a plea to show more love and charity, or just some maturity, in the midst of conflict and disagreement. Shape up and act right. Come on now, love your neighbor as yourself, give alms to the poor, and pull yourself together so that you can make a contribution here. With an eye roll to the childish or the withholding, you can *be* a Christian.

Of course this label meant absolutely nothing to Jesus and his followers. For Mary Magdalene, for Mary the Mother of Jesus, for Simon Peter, for Thomas - they wasted not one calorie policing the boundaries of identity and inclusion. For the community around Jesus, all that mattered was their grief in the shadow of Good Friday and the mystery revealed to them on Sunday. "They have taken our Lord, and we do not know where they have laid him!" We meet them on Easter morning alarmed with worry and confusion. Jesus appears to them one by one

apparently without any expectation that they would recognize him or accept him as the Risen Christ. He showed himself first to Mary Magdalene, who mistook him for the gardener. He later appeared to Thomas, who so stubbornly denied that Jesus had risen he examined the living body himself. He appeared not to the believing, but to the grieving. He came not for those who already knew, but for those who desired to know. He spoke not to people who had ears to hear, but to those whose hearts were already hardened and closed. They were awakened with the recognition of his living presence. They were overjoyed with the good news of his resurrection. For those who witnessed the resurrection, according to John's account, there was no debate about who this could be for. There was only marvel that it could be true. How would you characterize these people in the community around Jesus on Easter morning and the days to follow? At a loss. Disbelieving. Each, in their own way and in their own time, turning to wonder, gratitude, and praise. Christ has appeared to me.

II

It's ironic that the church became so concerned with who wears the label "Christian" because Jesus was not a Christian. Mary and Martha were not Christians. None of the disciples were Christians. Christian was not a category of identity. There were Jews. There were Gentiles. And there was a great spectrum of people in between who regardless of their identity or tradition somehow witnessed the love of Jesus and came to follow him. Nobody became Christian until Jesus had long left the scene, perhaps not until Saul was struck down on the road to Damascus in a thunderous conversion experience. He who was once Jewish becomes instantly Christian, and everyone who follows has to choose sides. A question of identity that was totally irrelevant to Jesus himself becomes increasingly partisan. Where there was once ambiguity, the church demanded definition. Where there was once pluralism and multiplicity the church presented

binary choices. So what is it? Are you in or are you out? Are you Jewish or are you Christian? Do you believe or do you not?

But how do you think it felt for those people who existed somewhere in between, or who, presented with these options, had no place to belong? The text lifts up these people repeatedly as if to acknowledge that these choices aren't fair and to exclaim: Christ lives for you! There was a certain man named Cornelius, who, as a Roman soldier had served in the government, but he was still about as devout a Jew as you could ever find. He was known for his daily prayers, for his regular attendance at the synagogue, and for his selfless and sacrificial giving of alms. He was revered among his community for his civil service and for his private faith. He was like the Jimmy Carter of ancient Caesarea. If there was a Habitat house, he would pay for it and build it himself. But even though he was as close to the resurrection as one could get without touching the body of Jesus as Thomas had, it was not clear that he could embrace the name of Christ because of his Jewish background and commitment. In other words, Cornelius was considered too religious to be Christian.

Or what about another character we read about in the Acts of the Apostles. We know him only as the Ethiopian Eunuch. He was the opposite of Cornelius in every way. He was a representative of a foreign government; a practitioner of some unknown faith; and he was a eunuch, a male castrated to serve on the royal court of a queen. All those details are important only to demonstrate that he was an extreme example of someone who does not typically fit in. And yet upon hearing the story of Easter he dives into a pond and demands to be baptized. The New Testament overwhelmingly argues that it's not your identity or your expression that matters to God, but your faithfulness. Asked in mixed company what the resurrection of Jesus means to him, Peter will respond, "I truly understand that God shows no partiality."

If these were the fault lines of division in the early church, we have our own means to welcome those who are familiar and comfortable and exclude those who do not fit neatly into our categories. We have heard from those in our own church about how painful it has been to experience the rise in legislation targeting transgender and nonbinary people. Whatever may be the law, or the school dress code, or the policy on athletes in gendered sports - the world may not welcome your gender presentation, but the Gospel certainly does. The resurrection is the sign of God's love for all of humanity, not just for those who fit in to one or the other but to everyone who lives somewhere in between. If God has trespassed between the boundary of life and death, how much more has God trampled down the little fences that we set between each other. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no slave or free, there is no male or female, for all are one in Christ Jesus."

Do not be misled or confused by the politics of identity and belonging. These later debates are not grounded in the story of Easter itself. There are no tests of inclusion in the Christian community except for these moments on the journey. Have you been betrayed by your closest friends or denied by your family? You can be a Christian. Have you been persecuted by your government - detained, convicted, even sentenced to death? Yeah, you can be a Christian. Have you wept at the foot of a cross, or prepared the body of a child for burial, or come to sit and pray in a windswept cemetery. You can be a Christian. Have you fallen short of your highest hopes for yourself, hurt a friend or someone you love, or taken on some debt you can't repay. All that's in the Easter story, too. Yes, even you can be a Christian. If you're in disbelief and moving toward wonder, or struck dumb with awe by the mighty acts of God, or grateful for dry bones that rattled back to life, and you don't know what to say about tombs once sealed that opened by the strangest movements of grace. These are the tests of faith and you have passed because you were present to every moment along the way. You can be a Christian.

III

Even as we accept the assurance that we belong in the story of God's grace, we undertake responsibilities to live with each other in the same love that has been revealed to us. Think about Cornelius, Peter, the Ethiopian Eunuch, Mary, and Martha - what a cast of characters in a great array of different faith, identity, and expression. They are all blessed exactly as they are, but none of them are left unchanged by what they have witnessed. The love of Christ transforms their spirits to match God's own dimensions of impartial and unconditional love. Those who are assured of their own belonging become agents to widen the circle of belonging.

I know that you have probably heard about our Easter Appeal for Weavers Grove, and the generosity of our congregation that has so moved us to set an ambitious goal of \$90,000. We are more than two-thirds of the way there already. Our community in Chapel Hill and Carrboro is so painfully exclusive because low income families, wage workers in our restaurants and major institutions, and often this means immigrant people and people of color, are priced out of our housing. My prayer has been that a gift like this would testify to the love of God that proclaims all may belong here. To participate in such a collective gift is to enact the transformation that begins in Easter. It is to exclaim in mystery and in wonder, Alleluia!

God has opened up the grave, and Christ has appeared to each of us along the way. Of what use could be any of the small distinctions among us in light of God's great act of welcome and of blessing. We have nothing left to fight for, nothing to justify or to defend. Love's redeeming work is done. You don't have to want it. But if you do want it, you can have it.

You can be a Christian!