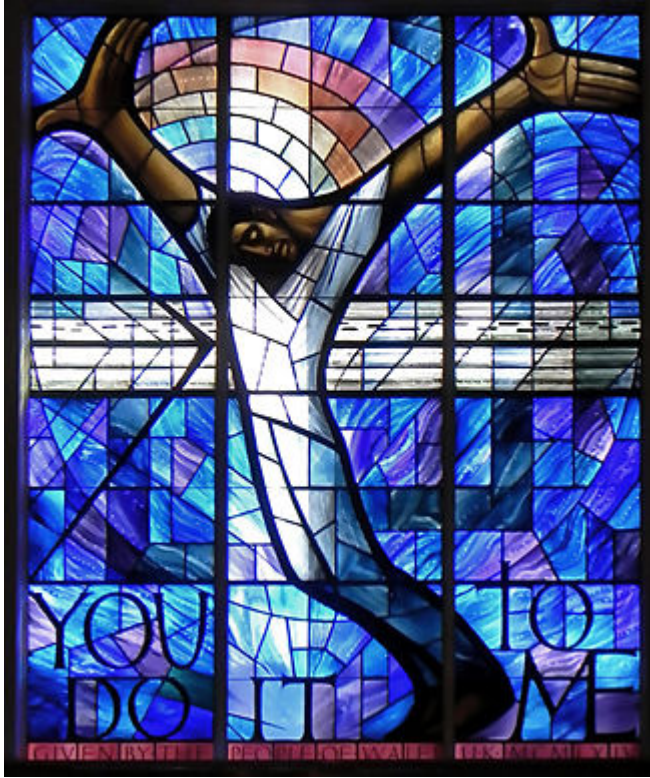


# “Uncomfortable Truths” by Erica Lloyd



**February 25, 2024**

Let's pray: God of peace and justice, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Ever since I was a pre-teen, one of my favorite bible verses has been John 8:32: "You shall know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Something about it – I have a mental image of a cage opening and bird flying out into freedom. It's beautiful. And frankly, much easier to appreciate in its simplicity than if Jesus had given the longer version that I've come to experience as an adult, which is something like: You shall know the truth, and it shall probably make you PROFOUNDLY uncomfortable, maybe even angry, it will haunt you for a while, and then hopefully if you have the courage to really wrestle with it, it will start to make some sense, and

if you keep working at it, *then* the truth shall set you free.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus starts sharing some truths that make Peter deeply uncomfortable. And probably the rest of the disciples, too, though Peter is the one who we love for being brave/dumb enough to say these things out loud. But they were probably all thinking the same thing, which might be why Jesus “turned and looked at his disciples,” as he called out Peter.

The point is, though, Jesus is talking *not* about the glorious restoration of power and majesty that his disciples had longed for, but suffering and rejection, and they didn’t like it one bit. And you know what? Two thousand years later, not much has changed. Most of us don’t like talking about this even though Jesus is clear that walking the way of the cross is central to following him.

So this morning I want to begin to consider what it means for us in the pursuit of racial and ethnic justice, individually, in the life of this congregation, and in the wider community. What are the uncomfortable truths that we might try to wrestle with not only during this season of Lent as we focus on dismantling white supremacy, but also going forward as we continue to work for change? There are 5 lessons that I got from this scripture that I want to share with you.

#1: Sometimes the way to resurrection feels really long. You know, I imagine Peter and the other disciples had probably been thinking that everything they had been going through over the last three years – leaving family and loved ones, living on road, facing these terrifying moments in a boat, encountering crowds that were by turns angry and pleading – that all of this was leading up to something, it was coming to a head soon, Jesus was going to take over and make things

right. That's what the disciples want to talk about, and instead here's Jesus telling them, after three long years, what they have to look forward to is *carrying a cross*. Not exactly what they had been hoping for, and I imagine the temptation for the disciples to flee at that moment was not insignificant.

Look I certainly hope that these 6 weeks of Lent aren't going to feel like crucifixion. But there's an invitation to something that, in all likelihood, is going to feel hard at times. Let's be honest: for many of us who are white, six weeks of focusing exclusively on racial and ethnic justice might feel like a long time, because most of the time we aren't used to – we aren't *required* to – engage with racism in a sustained way. As Jeanne alluded to last week, white people generally have the luxury of being oblivious to racial dynamics in much of our daily lives, and this season may exercise some muscles that don't always have to work that hard. So for the white folks in our community, if you get tired of hearing about the scourge of white supremacy over the next month, if you get exhausted by conversations about ways this church may need to change, I encourage you to remember that your ability to tune this subject out is a privilege, and I invite you to stick with it when it gets hard.

For the people of color in our congregation, this season might feel hard for the opposite reason – you already have to think about the impacts of racism too much. I don't know what that is like and I'm not interested in burdening you further, so I invite you, too, to trust in God to guide your participation during this season, whatever that may look like – speaking up to comment and question, praying for our collective insight or action, or something else that the spirit brings to you. Listen to your gut.

I do hope all of us can stay in this together. The road to resurrection might be long but we can trust that we have each other and the Holy Spirit alongside us on that journey.

The second thing that this passage reminded me is that we are going to make mistakes along the way. Peter, rock of the church, is just *epically* wrong here. He's got the audacity to try to savior-splain things to Jesus. (As a side note, I love that one of the disciples just made sure that all of these stories where Peter looks terrible kept getting repeated and passed down over time, like someone made it their mission to make sure that he stayed humble.) Anyway, the point is that no matter how closely we try to follow Jesus, it is human nature to screw up sometimes. Whether you are trying to do the work of justice within our little congregation or out in the wider community, you have to expect that it's not always going to go smoothly, despite everyone's best intentions. And as the Racial and Ethnic Justice Ministry Team tries to engage our church community in conversation and action, our mistakes are going to feel especially fraught, because, if you haven't noticed, everyone on this team, everyone you're going to see up here as preacher and liturgist during this season, is white. On the one hand, our team believes the work of undoing the harm of the white supremacy is a burden that belongs on white people. On the other hand, yeah, it's problematic, there is risk when you are a group of all white people talking about racism. I will say, it is not a risk we take lightly: we discussed inviting different people of color both from within and outside this community to preach in this series, but in the end, it felt tokenizing.

Was it the right decision? Like all the decisions we made in putting together this season, in all of the ongoing work our team will try to do to disentangle the roots of white supremacy from this community, we try to make the choice that seems right from our *perspective*, but... that's an entirely *white* perspective. What seems right to us – like Peter in this gospel reading – might totally be missing the point. While I trust our errors, like Peter's, will always be from ignorance and not malice, that doesn't make them harmless.

Which brings me to point 3: When we are wrong, when any of us in this community make mistakes, they need to be addressed, as awkward or painful as that might be. We have to actually acknowledge harm or error when we see it. As a progressive church we tend to think we're doing a pretty good job on the whole racism thing. But white supremacy is insidious and makes its way in and through institutions of all kinds, especially predominantly white ones. And I know that there have been times when I personally have failed – I'm thinking about the racist graffiti that defaced our property last year. I was among the first to see it, and I was sure that someone would take care of it, maybe someone in the Time and Space mission group or someone else who helps with the care of our building. It didn't occur to me to think about how it would feel for a black member of our congregation to come across that graffiti before it was removed. It never occurred to me to consider that Larry would take it upon himself to remove it. When I found out that was what happened, I realized I was party to the harm, and I was glad that Lucy suggested addressing the failure to act with the community because I lacked the courage to initiate that reckoning myself. I want to say now publicly, that my failure to act did harm, and I'm sorry. This is what community is for. We must be able to speak the truth in love to each other when we are perpetuating the wrongs of white supremacy, even unwittingly. And when we are on the receiving end of someone speaking the uncomfortable truth, we have to find the spiritual strength within us to be able to tolerate that discomfort...

...Because, point 4, we can not allow our mistakes to shame us into abandoning the work. Peter gets absolutely BLASTED by Jesus in this passage. Jesus *literally* calls him Satan. If I were in Peter's shoes, I probably would have crept away to nurse my wounded ego and never shown my face again. But remarkably, Jesus and Peter are able to move through this, to reconcile. And the very next thing that happens after this interaction is that Jesus takes Peter with him up on to the

mountaintop to witness the transfiguration. They share this amazing moment – the vision of Moses and Elijah, the voice of God, the transformation of Jesus – and they wouldn't have experienced any of those things together had Jesus not been able to forgive Peter, and had Peter not had the courage to keep showing up despite his very public mistake.

If we long for a church, a community, a world transformed for racial and ethnic justice, we have to, on the one hand, practice forgiveness when someone gets it wrong, and on the other, to accept and atone for and learn from our errors. This work is too important to be abandoned at the first sign of a problem. We all need to be prepared to recognize when we or others are stuck on human things, not divine things, address it, and find a way forward.

Which brings me to the last point: about those human things we get stuck on. Ultimately, we have to be ready to let go of what we most hold dear – even when letting go feels like death itself – if we want to experience resurrection. Peter couldn't imagine how new life could come out of *crucifixion*. Some of the things you hear this season or in subsequent conversations with the ministry team might feel equally inconceivable. Each one of us comes to any discussion of power and privilege shaped by our own lived experience; it can be hard to imagine a different way of doing or being.

We have to keep asking ourselves, are we thinking of divine things or human things? Are we thinking about love, creativity, justice, recognizing the innate dignity in one another? Or are we thinking about control, fear, loss, self-protection? The hard thing is, once you start to ask those questions, you tend to realize more and more work needs to be done. As the author of *This Here Flesh*, Cole Arthur Riley, writes, "As we heal, the need for more healing becomes apparent to us. It is painful, but healing makes us better perceivers of what is still hurting" (p 145).

This is why our ministry team wanted to do this season: to invite the entire congregation into conversation about what is still hurting, what might still need repair. Some of these conversations might press on things that we hold very dear, and to think about change could be really uncomfortable. All of us are going to have to examine our own reactions, and white folks, we need to know that if there is one thing most of us have internalized from the ideology of white supremacy, it's the need for self-preservation and control. That is what we will have to face, over and over again. Jesus warns we will find life only when we are ready to pick up the cross, but we can't do so if our hands are busy grasping onto the things we are afraid to lose. As Greg Thompson and Duke Kwon wrote in their book *Reparations: The Christian Call for Repentance and Repair*, this is one reason the church must be involved in the work of racial justice, because we need the support of our spiritual community in, quote "the sustained exploration of our emotions and of the inner places we go when our sense of control is threatened."

I know I've made all of this work sound scary and hard but Jesus also promises it's how we'll find new life. Nature itself reminds us this is true: after letting the old things die, there is resurrection. If we are brave enough to embrace the uncomfortable truths, we might just be set free.

May it be so.