

From Easter Day to Easter People
Acts 2:14a, 36-41
Second Baptist Church, Memphis
Second Sunday of Easter
March 30, 2008
Dr. Brent Beasley

During this season of Easter, these Sundays after Easter, we are going to look at a series of scriptures from the book of Acts. The scriptures from Acts come from early church sermons and events that describe the people's response to the fresh news of resurrection.

The problem for those early disciples was how to translate all of this power into a way of life that would last. Otherwise Easter would be just a one-time event that involved only a handful of people.

What Peter and the others had to do was try to turn Easter day into Easter people, the resurrection event into a resurrection way of life, the Easter story into the Easter community—a people whose life together would be a sign of Christ's ongoing life in the world.

That's why in the tradition of worship in the church it is right to talk not just about the day of Easter but about the season of Easter. The season of Easter is that time from Easter Sunday to Pentecost. And so for these weeks, that Christ candle that was first lighted on Christmas Eve with the birth of Christ, that

same candle that was carried out of this dark sanctuary on Good Friday, that same candle that was brought back in on Easter Sunday, that Christ candle will remain lit in our sanctuary during this season of Easter.

Because for us this is the time to think about what Easter means for us. What does it mean for the church? What should we do? And so it's good for us to look here at the book of Acts which is the story of how the early Christian church came together after Easter.

The response to the Easter event begins today with Peter preaching this sermon here in Acts 2 about Jesus' life and his death and his resurrection. And when he had finished preaching, we're told in verse 37 that the people who heard this message were cut to the heart. And the people said to Peter and others, *What should we do?*

Have you ever been cut to the heart by something you heard?

You hear something so right and so true that it pierces you and goes straight to your heart. And when that happens, you have to do something about it. And sometimes you don't know what you should do; you just know you've got to do something.

What should we do? the people asked Peter.

And Peter responded, *Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

And here today we've had this wonderfully acted out before us with Garry's and Amanda's baptisms.

What does it mean for us to repent and be baptized in Jesus' name? What does it mean for us to respond to Easter in that way?

The most striking way of describing all of this to me is in the book of Colossians where Paul says, *If you have been raised with Christ* (see, there's that baptism imagery)—*if you have been raised with Christ, you have stripped off the old self with its practices and have clothed yourself with the new self.*

And this whole image of taking off old clothes and putting on new clothes is used. Take off malice and slander strip off all of these old things. And then Paul says, Once you've taken off those old nasty clothes, *as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Put on the forgiveness and love and peace of Christ.*

The way to go from Easter day to becoming Easter people is to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ—to be raised with him. To take off those old clothes and put on

God's bright new clothes. Clothes that shine with the glow of resurrection.

All week I've been trying to figure out how to put this before you in some way that might speak to our hearts. I didn't want to just explain what it means to walk in the new life of Christ. To dissect it and study about it. I wanted us to somehow experience what it means—to experience what it means to put on those new clothes.

There's a story by Walter Wangerin, Jr. called the Ragman. I'm going to tell the story, and I hope you will think about what it means to, again, not just observe the Easter event but find your place in it, become an Easter person. Here's the story.

I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Hush, child. Hush, now, and I will tell it to you.

Even before the dawn one Friday morning I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our City. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear, tenor voice: "Rags!" Ah, the air was foul and the first light filthy to be crossed by such sweet music.

"Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!" he sang.

"Now, this is a wonder," I thought to myself, for the man stood six-feet-four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city?

I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn't disappointed.

Soon the Ragman saw a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing, and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X together. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking.

The Ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and Pampers.

"Give me your rag," he said so gently, "and I'll give you another."

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm a linen cloth so clean and new that it shined. She blinked from the gift to the giver.

Then, as he began to pull his cart again, the Ragman did a strange thing: he put her stained handkerchief to his own face; and then *he* began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet she was left without a tear.

"This is a wonder," I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing Ragman like a child who cannot turn away from a mystery.

"Rags! Rags! New rags for old!" he sang.

In a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the Ragman came upon a girl child whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage. A single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall Ragman looked upon this child with pity, and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart. "Give me your rag," he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, "and I'll give you mine."

The child could only gaze at him while he loosened the bandage, removed it, and tied it to his own head. The bonnet he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw: for with the bandage went the wound! Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood—his own!

"Rags! Rags! I take old rags!" cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent Ragman.

The sun hurt both the sky, now, and my eyes; the Ragman seemed more and more to hurry.

"Are you going to work?" he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his head. The Ragman pressed him: "Do you have a job?"

"Are you crazy?" sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket, flat, the cuff stuffed into the pocket. He had no arm.

"So," said the Ragman. "Give me your jacket, and I'll give you mine."

Such quiet authority in his voice!

The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the Ragman and I trembled at what I saw: for the Ragman's arm stayed in its sleeve, and when the other put it on he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the Ragman had only one.

"Go to work," he said.

After that he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket, an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it round himself, but for the drunk he left new clothes. And now I had to run to keep up with the Ragman.

Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely at the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old, old, and

sick, yet he went with terrible speed. On spider's legs he skittered through the alleys of the City, this mile and the next, until he came to its limits, and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet I needed to see where he was going in such haste, perhaps to know what drove him so. The little old Ragman, he came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits.

And then I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed. He lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped into a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope because I had come to love the Ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him; but he died. I sobbed myself to sleep.

I did not know—how could I know?—that I slept through Friday night and Saturday and its night, too. But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence.

Light—pure, hard, demanding light—slammed against my sour face, and I blinked, and I looked, and I saw the last and the first wonder of all. There was the Ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive! And, besides that,

healthy! There was no sign of sorrow nor of age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

Well, then I lowered my head and, trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the Ragman. I told him my name with shame, for I was a sorry figure next to him. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: "Dress me."

He dressed me. My Lord, he put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The Ragman, the Ragman, the Christ!
["Ragman" from the book RAGMAN AND OTHER CRIES OF FAITH. Copyright ©1984 Walter Wangerin, Jr. Published by HarperSanFrancisco.]

What does it mean to move from being an observer of the Easter event to becoming a participant? The courage to repent, to strip away, to undress, and to put on Christ's new garment.

Ken Medema wrote a song inspired by the story of the Ragman. It goes like this: *There I stood in the morning light; And the tears filled up my eyes. There I stood with not a lick of clothing Feeling strange and so surprised. There stood the Ragman, a smile upon his face. What a wondrous day, what a wondrous thing. What a wondrous holy place! See me now, I am new, I am dressed; I am smiling, I am joyful; oh, how I am blessed See me now, I can weep, I can dance, I can run. I'll follow him anywhere In the light of the morning sun. See me now, I am new, I am dressed, I am bold, see me now, new rags*

for old. See me now, I will leap high, I will dance, I will run; And I will follow him in the morning sun. Oh, run into a brand new day; and now the night's forever gone away. See me now, I will skip, I will dance, I will run; I will follow him in the morning sun.