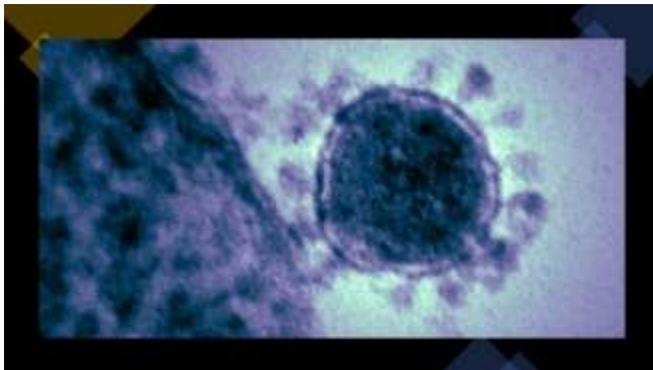


A Place For You at Easter
By Phil Brainerd
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Introduction

Years ago, there was a television comedy called "Cheers". It was about neighborhood bar in Boston. One thing that stood out from that show was the theme song. Let's read the words:

Making your way in the world today
Takes everything you got
Taking a break from all your worries
It sure would help a lot
Wouldn't you like to get away?
Sometimes you want to go
Where everybody knows your name
And they're always glad you came
You want to be where you can see
The troubles are all the same
You want to be where everybody knows your name
("Cheers", by Gary Portnoy, Judy Hart-Angelo)



Making your way in today's world sure takes everything you've got. What can we say? We're in a crisis. Everywhere we turn, there's something else to be afraid of.

What should we fear the most? A terrible disease? Running out of essentials like food and water? Some people think there's something we should be concerned about that doesn't seem to make the headlines.

What is it? Isolation. The average human being likes to be around other human beings. Because of the nature of the disease our world is fighting, our ability to interact with other human beings has been greatly diminished.

One institution that has been most severely it is the neighborhood bar. For years, in fact, centuries, the local tavern has been almost a quiet pillar of civilization. Some folks like to hang out with their coworkers for a drink after a long day. Some go to watch major sporting events with their friends and neighbors. Others gather because it's a chance to get out of the house.

But there's something unique about the neighborhood bar. ***The people who go there feel like they fit in. There's a place for them.*** It's just like the song from 'Cheers', when you go to the neighborhood bar, there's somebody there who knows your name.

Well, that's all gone right now. The neighborhood bar can get crowded. That makes it a good place to catch the virus. So, all the bars, as well as the restaurants and coffee shops are closed. Someday they'll start up again. But in the meantime, it's sad watching how lonely people can get without the place where everybody knows their name.

Now, in churches, we've always liked to think there's a better place for all these people. That's right – it's church! We want our friends to join us when we enjoy God together. However, right now, we're struggling, too. We're struggling because it's Easter. Easter is one of our most important celebrations. It is one of the most joy-filled events on our calendar. And we love to invite our friends so they can celebrate with us. We struggle because the doors of many of our churches are closed, too.



On one level that's not a big problem, because the building isn't who we are. The church is people – people who celebrate God's goodness in their lives. It's people who remember the good things he's done for us. There are a lot of things we can do at church that we can also do at home. But, it's hard to invite our friends. If this were a normal year, we would open our doors wide and tell all our friends that there is a place for them in our church. And that's not just at Easter, but all year round.

But you know something? Maybe this year we can do something even more important. We can do something even more important than inviting people to celebrate Easter in our church building. We can tell our friends: There's something more important than a place for you in our church building at Easter time. ***There is a place for you at Easter.***

For this to be real, you must understand two things:

I. What is Easter?

First, what is Easter? Easter is the day that Jesus Christ beat death. The apostle Paul tells us about it:

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised

on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time... (I Corinthians 15:3-6)

So, Jesus Christ beat death. He walked out of the grave on the first Easter morning almost 2000 years ago. From that day on, he started appearing to his friends. Eventually, some days later, he appeared to more than 500 people at the same time. Now, there's a crowd I would have liked to be in!

Those people had a place at Easter. If you want, there's a place for you at Easter. ***But in order to find that place, you need to find a place somewhere else. You need to find a place at Good Friday.***

To start our journey to that place, let's consider a fascinating painting. It's shown here. It was created in the year 1633 by the master artist Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn (better known today as just "Rembrandt"). The title is something you'd expect: It's called "The Raising of the Cross".

If you go into old churches all over Europe, you see paintings and sculptures and stained glass all portraying events from the Bible. Rembrandt was a respected artist in his day, so you'd expect to see one of his works in a church, portraying a Biblical story.

But there is something special about this painting. It's something more than the work of a master artist.

My sister is an artist. She tells me that she can go into museums like the Metropolitan museum of art in New York City, look at paintings, and enjoy the ***technique*** of the painters as much as the images they portray. She enjoys looking at the brush strokes and the way the paint was mixed to achieve the exact colors the artists saw in their minds.



This painting is the work of a genius, so you'd expect to see the most impressive technique of his day. But, there's something more than merely the work of a great painter here. There's something more than brushstrokes on canvas. Much more. In the image, you see a number of faces that you'd expect in the crucifixion story:

- Roman Solders.
- Other prisoners awaiting execution.
- People in the crowd.

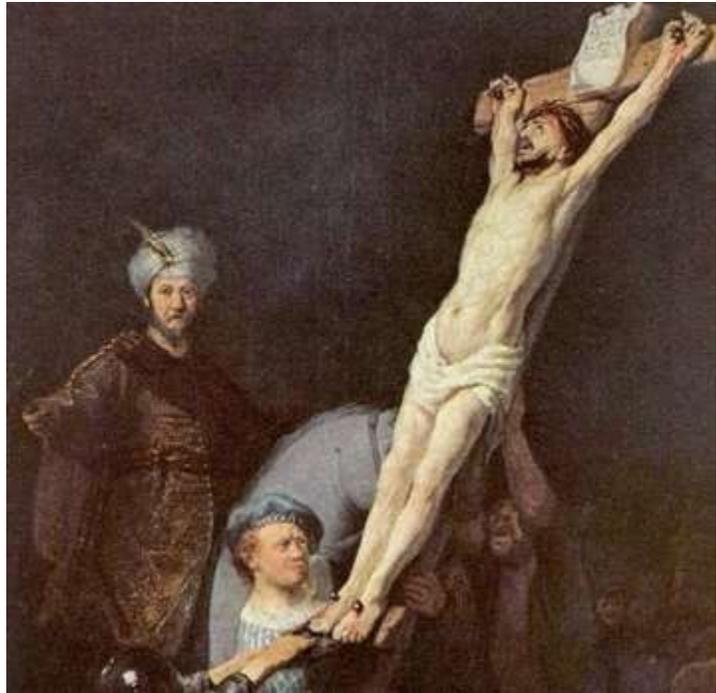
But this painting highlights three people in particular. You can see them in a special light. Everyone else is in shadows.

One of the people, of course, is Jesus. On his face you see the excruciating pain of a man being tortured to death.

Another person is a man in a turban and wearing fine clothes who appears to be overseeing and organizing the whole affair. He doesn't show any emotion. Rembrandt was capable of portraying faces with emotion. Others in the crowd show their feeling - Just not this man.

A third man is with the workers raising the cross into place. He looks to be very intent on his work.

We can understand that Rembrandt would highlight Jesus. But why these two other men? Being a master painter, you'd think he would want to show off his ability to create bright colors. He'd want people to say "ooh" and "ah" when they walked by. If he was commissioned, maybe he should show great detail in every area of the canvas, to make sure people know he's earned his money. But no, only three men are shown in detail. Why?



Let me explain with a personal experience. I grew up in the suburbs of Philadelphia. In high school, I ran into people who invited me to visit their churches. They encouraged me to read the Bible. When I did that, I ran into what seemed like confusing stories.

Take Peter. An important part of his story is recorded in Matthew 26. It's the night that Jesus was taken away to be crucified. Jesus says these words to his disciples:

31 Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written:

"I will strike the shepherd,
and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

32 But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee."

33 Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will."

34 "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." (Matthew 26:31-34)

Here are the closest, and what should be the most faithful followers of Jesus. Yet, Jesus tells them they're all about to fall away. If you read further, you find out that's exactly what happened. Soldiers come during the night and arrest Jesus. All his followers scatter like scared mice. And just as predicted, Peter disowns Jesus. Not once, not twice, but three times.

Now, I read this as a high school student. Do you know what I thought? I thought to myself, "If I had been there, I would have stood up for Jesus."

As you read the stories of the Bible, there are a lot of people who don't do the right thing.

One week, people throw their coats on the ground in front of Jesus. They wave palm branches and cheer as he rides by. We commemorate this day on "Palm Sunday". The next week, they join in a mob and jeer as he's taken away to be crucified.

Jesus is taken into a prison and surrounded by soldiers. I know lots of military people who are good. But, not this group. They're tough guys. They're so tough, they beat a defenseless civilian. They mock him and laugh at him. They're very tough on someone who (they think) can't fight back.

And then, those soldiers take Jesus to be crucified. They nail him to a cross. Onlookers hurl insults.

You know what I thought when I read all that? I thought, "I wouldn't do that - I would have stood up for Jesus."

Well, years passed. I lived through all kinds of situations. You know what I found? ***I found that I wasn't perfect.*** Not only was I not perfect, I wasn't better than anyone else.

Let's read something from Psalm 51. Let me set it up: This was written by the great Hebrew King David. He started as a shepherd in the wilderness. Through an amazing chain of events, he became king. He was a wealthy, powerful, and successful. Sadly, he let his wealth and power and success go to his head. One day while strolling on the wall of his palace, he looked out and saw a beautiful woman bathing down below. He asked around and found that she was the wife of a righteous man: A man who faithfully fought in the armies of Israel when his homeland needed to be defended. Incidentally, was currently involved in combat. He was putting his life on the line to defend his family, his friends, and his nation. David stole the wife of this righteous man and had the man killed. David was the king. If he wanted a wife, he could have had any available woman in his kingdom. One day, he came to his senses and realized what he had done. This is what he wrote:

1 Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
blot out my transgressions.

2 Wash away all my iniquity
and cleanse me from my sin.
3 For I know my transgressions,
and my sin is always before me.
4 Against you, you only, have I sinned
and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
and justified when you judge.
(Psalm 51:1-4)

David might have been tempted to think he was better than others. He did great things. He accomplished a great deal in his life.

But David realized one day that he wasn't better than anyone else. He realized that he was capable of terrible things. He realized his only hope was to ask God to forgive him.

Peter was a man who thought he was better than others. If everyone else ran, he believed he would be faithful. He believed he would stick up for Jesus. He was wrong. When Jesus needed a friend, Peter ran. He realized later that he was no better than anyone else.

That brings us back to the painting. See those two men whose faces are highlighted? If you look closely, they both look similar. In fact, they're the same man. They're Rembrandt. Rembrandt put two self-portraits into this painting.

One was a successful man who saw nothing special in Jesus. He organizes the crucifixion with no display of emotion.

The other man helps! He's on the execution squad. He's helping to lift the cross into place. He might have been the one who drove the nails into the hands of Jesus. This man is wearing an outfit that an artist would have worn at the time Rembrandt lived.



Rembrandt was a great artist. It was no doubt tempting to believe that he was better than others. But one day, he must have come to the realization that he wasn't better. We don't know what made him come to the realization, but he believed that if he had been alive on the day of the crucifixion, he might have been right there participating.

The faces in the crowd are deliberately darkened. ***That's because the whole human race is somewhere there in that crowd.*** King David was there in that crowd. A wife stealer, a

murderer. Peter was in the crowd. Not a murderer, but a coward who ran when Jesus needed a friend.

Do you know who else was there in that crowd? I was. I realized one day that I was no better than others. I realized that I'm not any better than Peter. I'm not any better than the Roman soldiers, or the people in the crowd mocking Jesus.

I'm currently the pastor of a church. I know how to run things. At least, people are under the impression that I do. If I had been alive at the time of the crucifixion, maybe I would have been put in charge!

Do you know how Jesus responded to this crowd?

34 Jesus said, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."
(Luke 23:34)

Jesus endured the last few minutes of his life on a cross, experiencing excruciating pain. He was surrounded by indifference, violence, and cowardice, to name only a few of the sins represented in the crowd. And yet, he asked his Father to forgive them.

Understand who Jesus was: He was God visiting the face of the earth. When he looked out over that crowd, he knew all the people who were there on that day. He saw the people who appeared in the crowd from the past, from the days of the garden of Eden. He saw all the people who would ever live on the earth. And you know what? **He knew all their names.**

King David realized that he was a guilty man, a sinner whose only hope was to ask God to forgive him. He was there in that crowd, and Jesus knew his name.

Rembrandt realized that he was a guilty man, a sinner whose only hope was to ask God to forgive him. He was there in the crowd, and Jesus knew his name.

I realized one day that I am a guilty man, a sinner whose only hope is to ask God to forgive him. I was there in that crowd, and Jesus knows my name.

There is another face in that crowd. **It's your face.** And you know what? Jesus knows your name. You too, are a sinner, a guilty human being whose only hope is to ask God to forgive.

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

We all want to be where everybody knows our name. What's most important though, is to realize that Jesus knows your name. Friends, there's a place for you at Easter. God, who knows your name, is offering it to you right now. To claim your place at Easter, you must realize your place at Good Friday.

Here's what you need to do:

1) Realize that God knows your name, and he loves you.

Jesus beat death. He wants you to be able to beat death, too.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

2) Next, ask God to help you to see your problem of sin.

To say that we have sinned is to say that we have disobeyed God. God wants you to repent (turn away) and confess your sins.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

3) Finally, believe that God had the power to allow Jesus to beat death.

Romans 10:9

If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Many of our listeners today have come to this point. We'll get to them in a second.

If you've never done this before, please pray this prayer used by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association:

Oh God, I know I'm a sinner, and I ask for your forgiveness.
I believe Jesus Christ is Your Son.
I believe that He died for my sin and that you raised Him to life.
I want to trust Him as my Savior and follow Him as Lord,
from this day forward.
Guide my life and help me to do your will.
I pray this in the name of Jesus. Amen."

If you prayed that, would you contact us? We're Trinity Church of Teaneck, NJ. You can find us on the web: www.TrinityTeaneck.org. Let us tell you how you can have a richer and fuller life through Jesus Christ now and for eternity.

And this is very important: You need to find a church. Ours is a good one. If you come, we'll work hard to know your name – and we'll always be glad you came. If you're anywhere near Teaneck NJ, come and visit. Again, you can find details on our site. If you don't live near Teaneck, contact us using the info on our site. We'll help you to find a good place.

Now, like I said, many of our listeners have reached this point. I'm going to ask you to pray about two things:

1) First, you can never say "thank you" too much. Take a moment to thank God for his kindness to you.

2) Maybe you're like I was – you've been in churches – you've read the Bible. But, prior to today, it's never hit you that you're not better than anyone else. Friends, Jesus didn't die for somebody you see on TV, or the person next-door, or for somebody else in the room. ***Jesus died for you.***

Please give some thought to the idea that you may still need to be forgiven. If you ask God to help, you can join the ranks of people like King David, and Peter, and Rembrandt.

For everyone, there's a place for you at Easter. To get there, you must find your place at Good Friday. Jesus knows your name. Talk to him. Join with the millions of people who celebrate on this day what Jesus did. He beat death. He walked out of the grave.

Whoever you are, there's a place for you at Easter.

