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Turning the Page

John 10:10b

The surprising news of the death of Osama bin Laden drew an exuberant crowd to the White House last Sunday night. It was a spontaneous gathering of people who believed what had happened that day would make it possible to turn the page to a new era. One of the people in that crowd was a man from Dallas, Texas named Ram Rodriguez. One reporter described his encounter with him in these words:

Rodriguez and a group of co-workers at Southwest Airlines happened to be in the Baltimore area on business. They had just finished dining at a restaurant in Annapolis on the Chesapeake Bay, when they heard the first radio reports that the President was about to speak to the nation and that bin Laden had been killed. So instead of going back to their hotel they piled into their rental car and sped to the White House “to be part of history.” Rodriguez said “This is the beginning of peace – that’s what I’m hoping for. The last ten years were one chapter, and now that’s over. I’m here to celebrate the beginning of a new era (Eugene Robinson, Washington Post, May 4, 2011).

It may be some years before we know whether the events of the past week will truly mark the beginning of a new era. But the desire to turn the page on the painful decade that followed 9/11 is something we all understand.

We can see a similar dynamic unfolding in the second chapter of the Book of Acts. There we are given a vivid description of a group of people who have come together to turn the page to a new era. It began with a sermon by the apostle Peter before a large gathering in the city of Jerusalem. In the carnival atmosphere that followed thousands joined the new faith community. They participate together in the sharing of resources, breaking bread together, and praising God in prayer and song.

What brought these people together in Jerusalem was an earth shattering event that no one could have planned or expected. A Jewish prophet named Jesus had been raised from death. It is an event which transforms everyone who experiences it. When the resurrected Jesus makes appearances it is to the same losers who betrayed and disappointed him in the first place. It is the people who ran away when Jesus was arrested who receive the forgiveness and loving acceptance of the resurrected Christ. The page is turned as they are transformed into a community which is based on the love and forgiveness of God. When the people on the streets of Jerusalem see what this community is all about there are many who want to be part of the new era.

But turning the page is not always so easy. Sometimes we find ourselves so enmeshed with the old era that we cannot bring ourselves to give it up. Anne LaMotte is a writer who struggled long and hard with her destructive embrace of the old era. Her promising writing career was on the rocks because of her addiction to alcohol and drugs. She has described what happened to her on one particular night when she was drunk and feeling miserable. She writes:

I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner ... The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure there was no one

there – of course there wasn't. But after a while in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus. I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this. And I was appalled – I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends. I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen. I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die (quoted by Mark Ramsey, Journal for Preachers, Easter 2011 page 14)."

The presence Ann LaMotte experienced that night would not go away. She responded by seeking treatment for her addiction. Then she started attending a tiny Presbyterian church and there the page slowly turned.

In the 10th chapter of John Jesus is described as the gate by which the sheep find their way into the safety of the sheepfold. John tells us that Jesus makes it possible for those who are most vulnerable to the destructive forces of our world to live in security and peace. Jesus takes us to the place where the page has already been turned by the miracle of forgiving love. Jesus said "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly (John 10:10b)."