

The Welcome Table of Easter

By Pastor Mandy Barkhaus and Reverend Charlotte Abraham.

I'm going to sit at the welcome table. I'm going to sit at the welcome table one of these days. Hallelujah. I'm going to sit at the welcome table. I'm going to sit at the welcome table one of these day is.

Isn't it strange how life can be both beautiful and broken at the same time?

The world is full of mixed messages like this one. This picture that says do not enter, but also enter only. Or like this picture that says no pets allowed, but also all pets must be on a leash. Or like this next picture that Susan Williams, a member of the Montezuma United Methodist Church from Montezuma, Kansas, posted in our conference devotional a couple weeks ago.

It's a picture she took at a restaurant, and on the door there were two signs hung side by side. One says, be our guest and the other we reserve the right to refuse service to anyone. One door, two messages. One says you belong. And the other says, unless we save you, don't. At her, at horizons, we strive to be a church that lives in two a better message one.

One of our values. That's printed on our atrium, in our lobby, out on the wall says, we have a place for you at the table. And when we say that we want to mean it, we want to be a community where everyone has a place and everyone feels welcome. But we are also a church made up of imperfect people.

Sometimes our actions, our silence, or even our assumptions can speak louder than our printed values. And sometimes we send mixed messages. Well, good morning and Happy Easter. I am Pastor Mandy Barkhouse I'm the lead pastor here at Horizons and I want to welcome you to this space. I want to welcome you to Easter services at Horizons. Today we remember the women who came to Jesus's tomb, only to find it empty.

What began as confusion and disbelief and sadness soon turned into awe and an incredible hope for everyone who encounters the risen Jesus. This is the welcome power of Easter, and here we are celebrating it together. Now the same theme of welcome runs deep. It runs deep. And some of our songs, or some of our stories that we tell, not just in the Easter story.

Alice Walker is a world famous writer and activist, known for her work in the civil rights and feminist movements. She was also known for her novel *The Color Purple*, which was later turned into a movie, and she also wrote a short story titled *The Welcome Table*, and it was inspired by the old African-American spiritual that you heard in the sermon intro video.

And her story paints a heartbreaking yet holy picture. So in Alice Walker's short story, an elderly black woman dressed in her best, weathered by a lifetime of suffering, arrived at a church filled with white faces. And as she moves up the steps of the church, a few people say some unkind words to her. Others look on with pity, and still the rest stay silent.

Eventually, two white men escort her out of the church, telling her that she doesn't belong but the women. The woman doesn't protest. She just keeps on walking and she walks along the highway, seemingly alone at first. But in the end, it's Jesus who walks with her. Her suffering turns to joy as she finds her place at the true welcome table.

Now, later on, the story continues that the people of the church heard that an elderly lady was found dead along that highway on that Sunday, but no one in the church ever talked about it. Here's a couple lines from Alice Walker's story. The reverend of the church stopped her pleasantly as she stepped into the vestibule. Auntie, you know this is not your church.

And then she writes as if one could choose the wrong one, as if one could choose the wrong church. Is this the message of the resurrected Jesus? Many people face that reality in our community today, wondering if they belong. And many of us, if we're honest, recognize that we cannot understand what it's like to be rejected simply because the color of our skin, or because who we love or because of what country we are from.

And yet we know that too often the church has stood silently or worse, participated in as others have been pushed out. Because I cannot understand the depth and the pain of Alice Walker's short story. I decided to reach out to someone who could. So I want to introduce you to a video. And in this video is Reverend Charlotte Abraham. She is a retired United Methodist pastor. Take a look. I'm going to sit at welcome

table one of these days. My name is Charlotte Abraham. I've been officially, preaching and pastoring since 1987. I was called to, preach and ran from my call for several years to finally answer it. Well, Pastor Charlotte. So we're talking kind of a big topic today.

I mean, of course, Easter lies are huge. Yes, yes, but also what it really means for us. So you were born in a time of segregation? Yes. So, can you share a memory, maybe from your childhood where you first realized that you were treated differently because the color of your skin? It was when I was nine years old.

Our family moved from, 20, about 20, in Paul Street in North Omaha, which is really pretty close to downtown in Omaha. If you know that community and we moved to 27th in Ruggles and their 27th Ruggles, we had a great big year. And we would sit in the yard and we would have, picnics, eat our lunch, the kids would and, we would play.

And as we sat there on that beautiful green grass and then the weeping willow tree, you know, the neighborhood kids, Caucasian boys and little white boys would walk through and they call us the N-word, and they tell us to go back to where we belong. When you hear the old spiritual. I'm going to sit at the welcome table one of these days.

One of these days, what comes to what comes to your mind? Well, actually, it's funny. Two things come to my mind. One thing is, a scene from a movie, called places in the heart and so interesting. The opening scene in this movie is a scene of a young African-American, boy, a young man, and he's intoxicated and, he pulls out a gun and accidentally shoots, the beloved sheriff of the town.

And it's a man who? He likes. And, you know, it's an accident. Yeah. And then the following scene is a scene, of some white men going after him. And then a scene of him being pulled. Yeah. And, there's all kinds of friction going on in the movie, but I never forget the closing scene. The closing scene in this movie is a church scene.

And they're having communion and they're passing the plate. And it was, it seems like just a regular comedic. But then they pass the plate and all of a sudden you see the sheriff who is dead, and he passes the plate to the young boy, who was home. And the young boy passes the plate to the man who, you know.

And so when I think about the welcome table, the table that Christ sits for us, that's when I think about the welcome table, that in the end, we're all welcomed by that. I mean, I don't even know if I can really embrace it right, exactly. Spit on here in Omaha, Nebraska, twice I can remember. Oh my gosh. Me and my mom.

I was going to get, my wedding gown and, we were welcomed by a bar. And this one guy came out a heart, and he spit on my back, and I was going back in the bar. I was a little feisty. I don't I can in my mouth grab me, you know? Don't. And there wasn't you at all.

And it was in the midst of it, in the, in the, in the 60s. And it was 70s, 70s, and in the midst of a revolution. And, and I did not stand for the anthem. And so some young, young men behind me spit on me, and I call them, you know, security and couldn't prove who it was.

Yeah, but I spit on my back, never to my face. Right. So, you know, I, I don't know if I'll sit up at the welcome table with them. So those are my images. So now on the flip side, what do you say to those who, who would never think twice about whether or not we belong? How can how can someone like me, right?

Who is in that position really be more aware and show more compassion? Yeah, it really means wanting to somehow be awakened to the need and the desire to step out of the safety zone, the comfort zone. It means even wanting to and I mean even for myself.

Regardless of, you know, we're all in a position of privilege one way or the other in so many ways.

You know, the church I'm at now, this physical building next door to a treatment center in a homeless place, I've never been homeless. Yeah, I've got a rock in their shoes. I've got a want to relate to the. Yeah, I've got a want to have a conversation with them. Yeah. You know, people of color have got to want to have a conversation with those in privilege.

And those in privilege have got to want to have a conversation with those who have never experienced privilege. But they have. You got to want to do that. You've got to lay down your privilege. You got to want to experience life as others have experienced it and not want to put on blinders. Right. So what is your prayer for the church today?

Congregations like Horizons Community Church, who are trying to get this right, but still have some work to do. My prayer is that we'll put some hands and feet on our prayers, and that's what the old folks just said. And that will really begin to. Study. And do you know that we'll take action, that will or will do something, you know, we'll pray, but our prayers will end in, in an actual action.

The song that we do that that we've sung before is, is called You Must Open the Door. And there's always this image of Jesus standing. Behold, I stand at the door and that's. Well, the door knob is on the inside. There's no door knob on the outside. The door knob is on the inside of our hearts. Right. You must open the door.

Jesus is not going to open the door. And it's the same way with us. I can't, you know, it's the same way, you know, homophobia. It's not up to, gay and lesbian and in the TLGTQ to questioning whatever it is I want to do to solve that issue. It's up to those of us who have issues to solve that we got to open the door.

Yeah, the church has got to open the door. And so my hope in prayer for the church is that we begin to know how to open the door on the inside of our heart. We got door knocking and folks are stand on the door today. Yeah, yeah God let it be. You got stuff we got work to do on the inside of our hearts first.

And so that's my prayer, that we'll do that work where we can faithfully open the door. But we got to prepare, you know, we got to prepare our hearts. Yeah. You open that door. There's not a one of us that don't have work to do. Yeah. We all stand in the need of prayer. We all stand in places of privilege, you know?

There's always somebody we can reach out to. Love. Yeah. No matter who we are. Yeah. No matter who we are. That God reached out to us. Yeah. And expects us to do the same. Yeah. You know, and you know the others. Yeah. Yeah. While we were yet separated and far off

that God came and extended love and care to us and expects us to extend that same love, care, grace, mercy and forgiveness to others.

And that's really the welcomed. And yes, it adds Amen to that. One of these day,

I'm so thankful for Pastor Charlotte to sit down and chat with me. 27 minutes of conversation that I wanted to include. And, I couldn't, but I'm glad that you got to hear from her a little bit as well. The true story of the welcome table unfolds with the empty tomb.

But then what do we do with that empty tomb? What do we do when we encounter the risen Jesus? Know. Here is a story from Scripture that that happened to two of Jesus's disciples after they heard about the empty tomb. So this is Luke chapter 24, starting with verses 13 through 16. On that same day, two disciples were traveling to a village called A, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

They were talking to each other about everything that had happened. While they were discussing these things, Jesus himself joined them on their journey. They were prevented from recognizing him. So the Scripture continues on. They're having this conversation with each other, with Jesus, who they think is a stranger. And they're telling, telling, Jesus, this stranger, all about what happened to Jesus, the powerful deeds that he did, the death sentence by the leaders of the church and the other leaders, and about the women who showed up to the grave to find it empty.

And then we continue with verse 28, when they came to amass, he acted as if he was going on ahead. If Jesus acted as if he who was going on ahead. But they urged him, saying, stay with us. It's nearly evening and the day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. After he took his seat at the table with them, he took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them.

Their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. They said to each other, weren't our hearts on fire when he spoke to us along the road? And when he explained the scriptures for us, they got up right then and returned to Jerusalem. They found the 11 and their companions gathered together. They were saying to each other, the Lord really has risen.

He appeared to Simon. Then the two disciples described what had happened along the road and how Jesus was made known to them. As he broke the bread. Those two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Clea passing is his companion, were walking with grief and disappointment and confusion. They had hoped Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel.

They had seen the cross, though they had heard the rumors of the resurrection, but they didn't recognize the risen Christ right in front of them. Not until what? Not until they invited him in.

Not until they opened that door. Not until they sat at the table. Not until they broke bread with Jesus. Then their eyes were opened. Then they saw Jesus for who he truly was. Then the stranger was no longer a stranger. Jesus became their companion and their Savior and their risen Lord. It was the welcome at the table that brought recognition.

It was the breaking of bread that broke open their hearts. It was the hospitality of Jesus, the one who had every reason to walk away, yet chose to stay. That changed everything. This is the welcome table of Easter. It's a table that makes room for the broken hearted. It makes room for the disillusioned or the doubters or the grievers.

It's a table where we go from outside our comfort zone to meet others. It's where the table where the stranger becomes a friend. It's a table that's not guarded by gates or walls, but it's held open by nail scarred hands. So the question for us, both as individuals and as the church is not if will welcome but how we will welcome.

How will we be a church that recognizes Jesus in, in the Stranger, recognizing that all are created in God's image? Or will we be like those two disciples that kept on walking with blinders on until Jesus himself had to say the table is for them to?

The church in Alice Walker's short story *The Welcome Table* failed to embody the resurrection. They upheld exclusion instead of grace. But the Easter message calls for something different. So for those of you who have felt cast out, who have felt that maybe you don't belong, Jesus sees you and his table is set for you. Now, for those who have built up barriers, who have built up, blinders to the rest of the world, Jesus calls you to break those barriers down and invite others in.

May we all walk in that resurrection hope. That's the message of Easter. Knowing that Jesus has prepared a table for us in the welcome table, the woman in the story finds belonging not because the church opened its arms, but because Jesus did.

As Reverend Charlene Abrams said, though we've got the doorknob, it's on our side. And it's time to prepare our hearts. And we open the door just as Jesus has opened the door to welcome us so we can welcome it for others. So the question of Easter is two fold today. Will you come to the welcome table and will you set a place for someone else?

Easter is Jesus's forever invitation. Jesus says, come all who are weary. Come all who have been told that you don't belong, come all who who feel like they're too far gone. Because no

one is too far gone for God's grace. Not the old woman in the story, not the two disciples on the road with blinders on. Not me.

Not you.

I'm going to sit at the welcome table. Oh, Lord, I, I'm going to sit at the welcome table one of these days. Hallelujah. I'm going to see that you're welcome. Table. I'm going to sit at welcome table one of these day. This.

Let us pray. Gracious God, we have failed. To really embody the Easter message. God, you have given us an example of love that is open and welcoming. It's full of grace and life and truth. God, we have, we have, we have come and we have found the. The tomb is empty. The grave is empty. We have discovered that that Jesus is risen.

And we are so thankful. We're thankful for what you have done for. For not just us, but for the world. Help us to to be that message in the world. To live the Easter story, not just today, but for all, for the whole year, right? For for our whole lives. And forgive us when we've messed up. Forgive us.

Forgive us when we've excluded. When we should have included. Forgive us when we've, turned away. When we should have shown grace. Thank you for the cross. Thank you for the empty grave. Thank you for the message of hope, for eternal life. And we say all of this in Jesus's name. Amen.