

An Easter Church
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John 20.19-31 (NRSV)

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe."

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe."

Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

Introduction

I want to focus on just the first paragraph of my text today because it gives us a good description of the gifts given by the resurrected Christ to his church, enabling the church to always be an Easter church. As disciples and as a church we must be shaped by the resurrected Christ and if we are not, then we have no business calling ourselves Christians.

In that locked room long ago, Jesus gave three gifts to his disciples. He gave the Holy Spirit. This corresponds to the *Upward* dimension of our congregation's three-part purpose. Jesus also gave to the disciples a mission, what we call the *Outward* dimension of our church's life. And finally he gave the ministry of forgiveness which is one way of describing what we call the *Onward* aspect of our church's life. Jesus gives disciples the Spirit — *Upward*. He gives us a mission — *Outward*. And he gives forgiveness — *Onward*. Let's talk about these one at a time.

ONE: Holy Spirit — UPWARD

The gift of the resurrected Christ to disciples is the Holy Spirit. "He breathed on them and said to them, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" To be an Easter church and an Easter people means there is a spiritual, an upward dimension to everything we do.

In the ancient languages of the Bible — Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic — the words for *wind*,

breath, and *spirit* are all the same word. Jesus breathed and that breath was the Spirit. His breath of life was the wind of God's Spirit. This intentionally recalls the creation stories when God breathed into the human creation formed from the clay of the earth and that breath was the animating Spirit of life. Jesus breathed on them and said, "receive Holy Spirit." In that moment they were recreated. There was life in them again where there had only been death and fear.

I think my all-time favorite television show is "E.R." which has been on NBC on Thursday nights since September 1994. The recent writer's strike truncated its 14th season but the rumor is that new shows will return in April and there may be a 15th season. But I've also been in real ERs a few times with parishioners. It is quite impressive to watch the nurses and doctors work not just quickly and efficiently but with real purpose and direction. They know what they want to accomplish and they do everything they can to meet the danger facing the patient.

Jesus' first disciples were in danger that Sunday evening long ago. They were barricaded in a locked room and, while it was no hospital, it was an emergency room. They needed healing or they would be consumed by their own fear. They had locked themselves in thinking this would keep them safe. But what they really needed was the emergency action of Jesus Christ. So he comes to them behind their locked doors of despair and defeat and with efficiency and purpose meets the danger. "Peace be with you!" he announces and he breathes on them and gives them the Holy Spirit. That is the medicine they most needed. The breath of life came into them again. No longer would they suffocate on their own fears. "Peace be with you."

Walter Brueggemann, one of the very best Bible scholars around, said once to a conference of preachers: "Remember when you awoke in the middle of the night as a child and were certain that the shadows outside your window were some kind of terrible monster, and the creaking of the stairs assured you that something awful was about to happen, and you cried out, and your father or mother appeared in your room and took you in his or her arms and said the most important words in the world, 'Don't be afraid. It's all right!'" That, Professor Brueggemann said, is what Christian faith is all about. It can be summarized in two words: "Fear not."¹

So too with us. We can know peace and be unafraid because the Spirit is with us, which is to say, Christ is with us, which is to say, God is with us. Upward.

TWO: Mission — OUTWARD

The resurrected Christ also gives us a mission: we are sent out in Christ's name. "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." That means that Jesus Christ needs the Church. He would not bless us with his peace and enlist us into his service if it were not important. He needs our hands to do his work, our feet to walk his journeys, and our mouths to speak his word. He needs us.

What is our mission? It is to be a community that always strives to care more for others than we do for ourselves. That's easy to say and very hard to do.

I'm glad when you tell me that you've enjoyed a sermon or really got something out of a worship service or some other activity of our church. I'm glad when you tell me that. But ... I always want to add that the point is not really what we get out of it. The point of an Easter church is what we give to it. This room where we gather every week and at other times too is not a theater

¹ Told by John M. Buchanan, "Do Not Be Afraid," online, <http://www.fourthchurch.org/>, Internet, 4 Apr. 1999.

where we come for our own enjoyment. In fact, if I'm really preaching faithfully, some Sundays you won't enjoy it because it will be a hard message. This sacred space is the altar upon which we offer our lives to God, whether we get anything out of it or not. As worshipers, the end product is not what we receive. We are not consumers of religious entertainment or teaching. The end of what we do here is what we give to God.

We don't hear much anymore about Malcolm Muggeridge (1903-1990), who was one of the leading British journalists and writers of the last century. Muggeridge came to faith in Christ late in life and one of the things that won him to God was the example of Mother Theresa and her Sisters of Mercy in Calcutta (since 2001 called Kolkata).

We now know a bit more than Muggeridge knew about Mother Theresa and her deep struggles of faith. But when he went to India for the BBC to do a documentary about her, Muggeridge saw poverty unlike anything he had ever experienced. The sick and dying simply lay where they were on corners and in gutters, begging for food and waiting for death. Mother Theresa's Sisters got up every day, said their prayers, and then went into the streets to minister to the dying, and, as space allowed, carry them back to the convent to be bathed, fed, and given a clean bed in which to die, as she used to say, "in view of a loving face." It could have been unimaginably grim and morbid.

What captivated Muggeridge, what lured him towards a simple but unshakable trust in Jesus Christ, was the remarkable reality that Mother Theresa and the Sisters of Mercy weren't grim or morbid at all. They were happy — radiantly happy, not because they set out each day to be happy, but because they gave each day to Jesus, to be faithfully follow and obey him.

We are called to that too. The circumstances will be different but the ministry is the same. Our mission — Christ's gift to us — is to care more for others than we do for ourselves. Outward.

THREE: Forgiveness — ONWARD

Perhaps the most difficult of his gifts, Christ also gives disciples the ministry of forgiveness: "if you forgive or retain the sins of any, they are forgiven or retained." Oceans of ink have been spilt on what it means that the church has been given the ministry of forgiving and retaining sins.² Catholics

² Ewald M. Plass, ed., *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959) 5. "Here the power of absolution is given to all Christians, although some, like the pope, bishops, priests, and monks, have appropriated it to themselves alone. They say publicly and shamelessly that this power is given to them alone and not to the laymen as well. But Christ is speaking here neither of priests nor monks. On the contrary, He says: "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." This power is given to him who has the Holy Ghost, that is, to him who is a Christian. But who is a Christian? He who believes. He who believes has the Holy Ghost. Therefore every Christian has the power . . . to retain or to remit sins.

"Now perhaps I shall hear the question: I may, then, hear confession, baptize, preach, administer the Sacrament of the Altar? No, St. Paul says: "Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14:40). If everybody wanted to hear confession, to baptize, to administer the Sacrament, how unseemly that would be! Again, if everybody desired to preach, who would listen? If we were all to preach at the same time, what a confused chattering that would be, such as you now hear among the frogs!

"Therefore it should be thus: the congregation chooses a suitable person, who administers the Sacrament, preaches, hears confession, and baptizes. To be sure, all of us possess this power; but no one except him who is chosen by the congregation to do so should presume to practice it publicly. In private I certainly may use this power. If, for instance, my neighbor comes and says: My friend, I am burdened in conscience; speak a word of absolution to me, then I am at liberty to do so. But in *private*, I say, this must be done. If I wanted to sit in the church, another man too, and we all wanted to hear confession, what rhyme or reason would there be in such conduct? Take an illustration. When a nobleman has many heirs,

see it one way and Protestants in a variety of other ways.³

I don't think there needs to be a big mystery here. We forgive or retain sins all the time without thinking that's what we're doing. Anchor yourself in a mall somewhere where you can watch the sea of humanity flow by you, and you won't have to wait too long before some parent or stepparent will berate, sometimes hit, a child for something the child has done. The criticism is explicitly or implicitly this: "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times ..." That's retaining sins and we've all experienced it and we all do it and that's one of the reasons forgiveness is so hard.

We get held to our sins and we hold others to theirs.⁴ This is the deeply poignant and painful truth that in many ways sin is hereditary. We now know that if someone is an abuser, then likely one or both parents were abusers. If parents are always angry, that rubs off on children. My father had a horrible temper. I suspect that his father did too. I have a nasty temper as well, though most of you have never seen it, and I pray that you never will. But an abiding sadness is that my father's anger too much lives in me and my daughter and son and wife and others are hurt by it.

Friends, the only way to cut through all this is to embrace our Lord's gift of being a forgiving

one is chosen, with the consent of all the others, who alone has the rule on behalf of the others. For what would happen if everybody wanted to rule over a country and its people?" (Works, 10 I, 2, 239f)

"If absolution is to be right and effective, it must flow from the command of Christ and must say this: I absolve you from your sins, not in my name or in the name of some saint or for the sake of any human merit but in the name of Christ and by virtue of His command. He has commanded me to tell you that your sins are forgiven. Therefore not I but He Himself (through my mouth) forgives you your sin. And you are in duty bound to accept this absolution and firmly to believe it not as the word of man but as if you had heard it out of the very mouth of the Lord Christ Himself. Therefore although the power to forgive sin belongs to God alone, we should at the same time know that He exercises and administers this power through the external office to which Christ calls His apostles and commands them to proclaim the forgiveness of sins in His name to all who desire it." (W 21, 296) Plass, 8-9.

³ John Calvin, *The Gospel according to John 11-21 and the First Epistle of John*, trans. T. H. L. Parker (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1959) 207. "We now see why Christ so magnificently commends and adorns that ministry which He enjoins on the apostles. He does so that believers may be fully convinced that what they hear about the forgiveness of sins is ratified, and may not think less of the reconciliation offered by men's voices than if God Himself had stretched out His hand from heaven. The Church daily receives the rich fruit of this teaching when she realizes that her pastors are divinely ordained to be sureties (*sponsors*) of eternal salvation and that the forgiveness of sins which is committed to them is not to be sought afar off. Nor should we think the less highly of this incomparable treasure because it is exhibited in earthen vessels. We have cause to thank God who has conferred on men such an honor as to represent His person (*personam sustineant*) and His Son's in declaring the forgiveness of sins."

⁴ The sins of the mothers and fathers are visited unto the children unto the third and fourth generation. These texts are quite fascinating and suggest further study because most of them are statements of amazing grace, coupled to strong statements of punishment and judgment. I don't think these texts are theological axioms describing how God continues to blame everyone. But they do suggest that grace and obedience are closely related. "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me ..." (Exodus 20.5) "The LORD passed before him, and proclaimed, 'The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'" (Exodus. 34.6-7) "The LORD is slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but by no means clearing the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation." (Num. 14.18) "You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me ..." (Deut. 5.9)

community. Forgiveness is hard because it means we have to change even if the person we forgive does not. Forgiveness is hard because it means we stop trying to control others and start controlling our own heart. Hard though it may be, to be a church and a people that move onward, we must grow in the Lord's gift of forgiveness.

St. Vincent de Paul ran an orphanage in Paris in the 17th-century. One winter day he found an abandoned infant lying in the snow. He brought the baby into the warmth of the room where he was meeting with a number of wealthy benefactors. He asked them what he should do with the frail, tiny creature. One of the women suggested that perhaps God intended the baby to die, as a punishment of the sins of the mother. Appalled at this attitude, St. Vincent retorted, "When God wants dying done for sin, he sends his own Son to do it!"⁵ We have the gift of forgiveness to offer to others because Christ died to forgive us. To live and give forgiveness is the Onward challenge of being an Easter church.

Conclusion

Well, we're out of time and there is so much more in this text. But I hope I have communicated a bit of what it means to be an Easter church which is the only kind of church we can be if we want to follow Jesus Christ. The risen Christ comes into our locked, fearful lives and gives us the Holy Spirit. *Upward*. The risen Christ gives us a mission to obediently and joyfully serve others before ourselves. *Outward*. And our Lord gives us a ministry of forgiveness. *Onward*. The more these gifts live in us, the more we will always be an Easter church.

⁵ Stephen J. Cornils, "Doubt," The Sermon Mall, April 1999, webedit@theology.org