

**Sermon: A Case for Confession**  
**Scripture: John 20**  
**Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans**  
**Date: April 11, 2010**

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We often frame Easter and the resurrection as being about the transcendence of life over death, that Jesus rose from the dead opening the way to heaven for those of us who believe. Or if we shy away from traditional Christian theology, we make the analogy of Easter to Spring, that after the tomb of cold and lifeless winter, the resurrection of Spring occurs to remind us that life continues. But we lose much of the potency of the resurrection event by sending it into the ether on one side or by binding it to the earth merely as a rite of Spring.

As nice as that imagery is of flowers blooming and bunnies hopping and Spring arising, there is a much deeper and specifically human reality that we are approaching and giving voice to when we step into the aura of Easter. While we certainly have in common with the natural world the organic processes of birth, life, and death, it's really only we humans who have this uncanny capacity to be destructive beyond our true needs. While bunnies might eat the head off of a living flower and a bob cat eat a living bunny, neither of those creatures have the consciousness to blame their prey for whatever trouble they find themselves in and exact retribution upon them as we humans do. And as grim as that sounds such human capacity for blame and destructiveness must be consciously held within the happy celebration of the resurrection event.

In fact there would be no Easter, no need for Easter, had there not first been the reality of the human being's great capacity to hurt one another and not only to hurt one another but to feel utterly justified and righteous in doing so. Before Jesus is the resurrected Lord, he is the innocent victim of the fears and lovelessness of the humans around him. And just so we are clear that it wasn't simply the Romans or the Jews or the authorities in general whose depravity was revealed in the crucifixion, the story makes it clear that most all of Jesus' closest friends and disciples, except for a couple of women, abandoned him as well and so were faced with their own guilt.

The Gospels and then Paul later seem to want to have a particular effect on the reader. They don't want the readers to shake their heads in judgment of "those terrible people who did that to Jesus", **but they wanted the reader to feel somehow implicated**

**in the terrible deed about which they are reading.** They want the story to be universalized such that Jesus Christ becomes identified with every innocent victim across the ages and across the world and so that the crucifiers and those who abandoned Jesus are universalized to all victimizers. And therefore, you and I as the readers of the story can not only know Christ with us in the ways that we suffer and struggle, but, you might say even more importantly, we can acknowledge ourselves also as the crucifiers and those who turn and walk away, at times, from those in need. In other words, this story does not reveal to us who are the good guys we should side with and who are the bad guys we should fight. That reading of the text has been terribly abused at the expense of Jews seen as the bad guys who rejected Jesus, often in Christian history. And this is an important thing to acknowledge on this Holocaust Remembrance Day. Instead, this story intends to reveal to us that the good guys and the bad guys are both within us and that maybe even the greater tendency for many of us is to identify ourselves with the good guys – whether that’s the good Americans in the bad Middle East or the faithful citizens oppressed by a corrupt government or the victim spouse in relationship with the guilty spouse. I don’t know if it’s true of you, but in my conception of the world and my matrix of relationships, I have to say that often I find myself on the good guy’s side, whether its in an argument with my wife or with Fox News or whether we should move forward with fundraising for the church steeple and it is like pulling teeth when it is revealed in a given instance or another that I have some bad guy in me as well! “no, moi?!”

And so this is the critical half of the resurrection event that we can’t lose, that before Jesus rose from the dead, he was killed dead by people who were convinced that they were doing right. And so for ever more, we might say, all our actions and even our righteous do-gooding, is made at least suspicious. And there are large amounts of Christian history that tragically illustrate just how suspicious of our “good” activities we should maybe be.

BUT the good news is that we are not left there alone with our guilt, our human propensity for sin, praise the Lord! We are made aware of it in order to also receive the gift of love that flows towards us despite the fact. Jesus doesn’t just transcend death. If that were the central point of Easter then it wouldn’t really matter what he did when he returned to life, whether he exacted vengeance upon his crucifiers and betrayers or ignored and avoided them. But we do say it matters and, I would submit, it is the

ultimate thing that matters – what Jesus does when he is resurrected. Our over-emphasis upon some other-worldly heaven that Jesus opens for us, I think might just be a defensive move of Christians to avoid the true heart and point of the story which is beyond difficult to conceive. And that is that when Jesus is resurrected he returns to forgive his crucifiers and betrayers and he places his trust in the betrayers, who received his forgiveness, to go forth and share that forgiveness and love with others. WOW! In the face of hate, Jesus returns love. In the face of violence to the point of death, Jesus returns love to the point of including his betrayers into his family. It's unbelievable, unimaginable!

Forgiveness. It's such a tricky thing. It's tricky because seldom in life is there a cut and dry situation where someone has done something terrible to us and we have to decide whether to forgive them or not. More often in life are situations where we feel hurt and the other feels hurt and there's little consensus on who needs to forgive who, right? Sometimes after a good row, Tracy and I will come back together to talk through things by one of us saying to the other – “OK, OK, I forgive you.” And then the other will say – “No, no, I forgive you. It's alright.” And then we eventually each work to own our own part of the conflict and we each work to see where the other is coming from. And that I would say, if you don't mind my bragging on our relationship for a moment, is why we have such a solid relationship. It's not because we don't fight. We have our moments but always at some point afterward we both enter into the - at times unpleasant – work of owning our own parts in the issue and trying to better see where the other is coming from. I think it would be accurate to say that just about never has there been a fight of ours in which the final analysis revealed that one of us was all right and the other all wrong. Seldom is it as simple as one forgiving the other, but rather some forgiveness offering here and some forgiveness asking there. Now what a couple does when one partner refuses to believe that they in any way hold any culpability in a given conflict, I don't know, because they are then operating under illusion and dishonesty which quickly dis-eases the relationship.

But this was the key to the unfolding of the resurrection event: Jesus' commissioning of the disciples to go forth and spread love and forgiveness was preceded by the disciples' undeniable awareness of their own guilt and their own need of forgiveness in the face of that. Only then could they be commissioned to go forth and offer forgiveness to others in the name of Christ. It never would have worked had the

disciples believed they were commissioned to go out and forgive because of their superior righteousness, that they were somehow chosen to be the spreaders of the word because they deserved it or earned it. Instead they were chosen to spread forgiveness because they were so crystal clear after the events of Holy Week that they needed forgiveness themselves and that when they received it, it was a total unmerited gift to them. Do you see what was their single most important qualification to carry forth the gospel? As strange as it sounds, it was a knowledge of their own guilt and a willingness to receive love and forgiveness. And so it also follows from there, that the only people who are thus undeserving of forgiveness could only be those who believe that they do not need it. They will not be forgiven because they will not open their hands and receive the free gift of forgiveness offered. Christian history, I imagine, is littered with examples of people abusing others in Christ's name and forsaking the presence of Christ in the other specifically for *this* reason: because the abuser did not take seriously his own guilt and therefore was not a recipient of that remarkable free gift of grace that is forgiveness.

So this is why the Christian tradition from the very beginning has always had confession as a part of worship. It is critical if we are going to be commissioned to carry forth a gospel of forgiveness and love that we are very very clear that we have need for it ourselves first. Thus, we don't come at others from on high to teach them the truth, but from below to share with them our own experience of unmerited love and grace.

We here in this church over my tenure at least have vacillated on this issue. Sometimes we've had confession in worship and sometimes not. We've rightly, I'd say, wanted to be careful about hitting heavily on the original sin theology that we are all guilty and in need of saving and instead wanted to emphasize, as Philip Newell and Celtic Christian spirituality has emphasized, "original blessing". But we should be clear at least about why for 2000 years the Christian tradition has held confession as critical to its spiritual practice; and that's because confession positions us in relationship to our brothers and sisters first and foremost not as the privileged owners and bestowers of truth but rather as first and foremost fellow receivers of grace.

So what do you think? That's some of the theological root behind the practice of confession. In this church we decide for ourselves what our worship looks like. We can have confession or not. We have chosen not to for the most part. Do you think we

should keep it that way or no? I'd ask you to think about it and let me and the deacons know....

Benediction:

"May the blessing of God,  
the eternal goodwill of God,  
the shalom of God,  
the wildness and warmth of God,  
be among us and between us,  
now and always."