

Easter 2018
April 1, 2018
Congregational Church of Northridge

This has been an odd year on the liturgical calendar.

It started with Ash Wednesday – that’s the first day of Lent when we confess our sins, consider our mortality ... it’s a day when we face our vulnerability.

Ash Wednesday, falling on Valentine’s Day felt really weird.

But it turns out that real love only comes when we are vulnerable.

If you’re trying to build a relationship by thinking that you are always right, that you are invisible – well good luck.

It won’t last.

And now Easter falls on April Fools’ Day, but you know, in an odd way that makes sense.

The gag of April Fools’ Day is that what you thought was true turns out to be all wrong.

The bible says that for forty days Jesus walked around Jerusalem and Galilee before ascending to Heaven.

500 people saw him, they told their friends and many became followers.

This whole Jesus movement didn’t explode because someone wrote a new book on spirituality or launched a podcast.

No, it started through the power of the Holy Spirit, for sure, and because people saw the resurrected Jesus, still bearing some of the scars from his execution, walking around, talking and teaching.

So, imagine the Roman guards who had nailed Jesus to the cross strolling down the road to get a Starbucks, and there he is teaching a circle of people on the corner.

April Fools!

You thought you’d killed him, but he’s alive!

And by the way, you thought that uniform you so proudly wear represents the most powerful force on earth, but now this resurrected rabbi has launched a movement that will soon dwarf the Roman Empire.

That Sunday of Jesus' resurrection changed everything.

Jesus proved that his power exceeds the might of Caesar and overcame what we all fear most – death itself.

But now what?

That was Sunday, but what about Monday and Tuesday?

Do we just hear the Resurrection message one more time and then go on with life as usual?

No, because if Easter, in fact, changed everything, then it is on Monday when the Good News of Jesus really begins.

A Hollywood production of the Resurrection might end with the empty tomb, singing angels, and Jesus' voice echoing down from the heavens.

And a lot of people leave it right there.

They think, "OK. Jesus died for my sins. Now I've said the prayer, got my pass to Heaven", and then go on with life as usual.

Back to a grind of a job that drains them, back to an empty marriage, back to their secret behaviors as if nothing changed.

But that is not where the gospels end.

Actually, all four gospels instruct the disciples to meet Jesus either in Jerusalem or back in Galilee.

For example, in the Gospel of Mark, early Sunday morning the three women are greeted at the empty tomb by an angel who tells them:

Mark 16:7 "But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"

Think about it.

Galilee was home before they met Jesus.

Galilee is where they had sweated in the sun, calloused their hands tying fishing nets, and worried about whether they were living holy enough lives to be acceptable to God.

Yet Jesus' first command to the disciples after his resurrection was get back to life ... but this time I'll be in it with you.

Let me tell you what that means:

The good news of Easter is not just about admission to Heaven, it is also about the possibility of heaven among us - here and now - for those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

Luke 17:20-21 Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."

That doesn't mean that Jesus is going to make all your problems disappear, but it does promise that you don't have to go it alone because Jesus has gone ahead and is waiting for you in whatever you face.

That means that you don't have to face your parenting challenges alone.

Now you can partner with the wisdom of Jesus.

You don't have to face your health challenges alone.

Now you can partner with the strength of Jesus.

Now you don't have to face your anxieties, your resentments, or regrets alone.

Now you can partner with the healing of Jesus.

No Matter Who You Are ...

Every week we begin our worship service by saying, "No matter who you are or where you've been on your life's journey, you are welcome here."

Did we just dream up that affirmation?

Is that just political correctness?

No.

That affirmation is firmly grounded in what Jesus modeled throughout his ministry.

Jesus was living in a time when it was clearly delineated who was “in” and who was “out”– and you earned your way “in” by strict adherence to social norms and to a set of rules known as the Holiness Code.

Have a skin disease?
You’re out ... cursed by God.

A woman?
Lower status than a slave.

A prostitute? A tax collector?
Forget about it.

But Jesus went out of his way to reach out to those who were rejected.

He sat with prostitutes, talked with women, dined with tax collectors, hobnobbed with sinners, blessed lepers – not as charity, but because they are God’s beloved as much as anyone else.

God’s love is not earned by following a bunch of religious rules, and God’s love cannot be lost by being who you are.

Think about it:
You wouldn’t even be alive except that God wants a life-long, loving relationship with you.

Jesus’ sacrifice is one more proof of God’s love for you ... realizing His love is your first step to loving yourself.

1John 4:19 *We love because He first loved us.*

If God loves you that much, who are you not to love yourself and those around you, too?

No Matter Where You’ve Been ...

We see our shame and short fallings, but God sees our heart.

In our eyes we’re too skinny, too fat.

We see the ways we’ve failed our spouse, fallen short in our career.

We know our secrets, our addictions, and the resentments we carry.

The human impulse is to do better to prove ourselves.

Get a luxury car, work eighty hours a week to get a prestigious job title, suffer through a never-ending series of diets so you can squeeze into the revealing dress.

That's why 3/4 of Americans are not pleased with their looks, and 90% of Americans say that they would like to lose weight.

Losing weight is the number two or number three New Year's resolution.

Someone said on January 1st that he resolved to lose 15 pounds, and by March 1st he had only 25 more to go.

But in God's eyes you are beautiful and loved ... God only wishes that you could see yourself and others with His eyes.

Through Jesus, God walked the human walk and so understands the pain and isolation of feeling on the outside.

Romans 11:34 *In one way or another, God makes sure that we all experience what it means to be outside so that he can personally open the door and welcome us back in.*

Jesus shows God's grace for people who've messed up.

Jesus demonstrated that Grace one day while teaching near the Temple.

In John chapter 8, a group of religious teachers head over to him pushing and shoving a terrified woman with them.

The scripture says that all this was to set a trap for Jesus.

Why were they trying to trap him?

Jesus was confronting the whole religious system of his time – not saying it was wrong, but that the heart was lost from it.

The Mosaic Law was given so that people could love God and their neighbors, but when it was reduced to long list of heartless rules it had lost its purpose.

Someone came to me recently and said that they were moving into a smaller place and needed to throw some stuff away.

Their question was about a bible they had.

They have a bible they read regularly, and this old one was just gathering dust but they weren't sure if they could throw it away.

Is it sacrilege to throw a bible in the trash?

I said no. Toss it.

The Bible is a pointer to God – it is not God.

In the same way, Jesus was saying that the Law of Moses was meant to point people to God, not to be worshiped as god, and not as a way to drive a wedge between people.

Anyway, they drag this poor woman over and say,
John 8:4-6 *“Rabbi, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law, Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?” They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.*

So, what was the trap?

Well, the “go along to get along” answer would be for Jesus to agree – yes, the Holiness code says that if you’re unfaithful then you should be executed by stoning.

But that would undermine his message of grace.

But if he says, no, you shouldn’t kill this woman, then they could haul him before the religious court for blasphemy against the Law of Moses.

So, what does Jesus do?

He sees right through the trap.

Instead of debating, he squats down and starts writing something in the dust.

Now, scripture doesn’t tell us what he was writing, and the classical hypothesis is that he was writing the Ten Commandments.

But I think Jesus was more direct than that, and so I like to think that he was making a list of all the sins those accusers had committed.

Jesus is the Son of God, so he knew all their secrets:

Arrogance.
Dishonest business deals.
Gossiping.
Domestic violence.
Slander.
Lust.

I want you to notice that he did not slam them for their sins.

He didn't publicly shame them and rob them of dignity.

Nor did he shame the woman, either.

Did he know that she had sinned?

Sure, they all did – but he did not take away her dignity.

We've become a highly polarized society where TV commentators shout at each other, and where we flame people on social media.

That's what society is modeling to our kids, and to us, and, if we are not aware, it's easy to take-up the same playbook.

But if you claim to be a follower of Jesus, then you are to treat every person with dignity.

Think for a moment about whom you might not treat with dignity, because we all have a hot button that we have to be aware of so that we don't get carried away in the moment and say something we'll later regret.

Would it be someone who is pro-guns, or someone who is pro-gun control?

Someone who voted for Trump, or who voted for Clinton?

Jesus holds them with dignity, so we are to do the same.

So, this is what Jesus said to the Pharisees:

John 8:7 *"Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."*

And then he stooped back down and continued to doodle in the dirt, and scripture says that one by one the accusers walked away, the oldest to the youngest.

Now let me ask you a question.

Why would the oldest leave first?

Because as we get older we tend to become more aware of all the mess-ups we have had in our lives.

Where have you messed up?

Words you spoke in anger that you'd like to take back?

A harsh judgement of somebody?

Holding on to a resentment?

A bad business practice?

The wrong emotional response to your wife?

Anyway, eventually all the accusers are gone, so then in privacy Jesus turns to the woman.

John 8:10-11 *Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

"No one, sir," she said.

"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

It's like he's saying, "Go on now ... you're better than that."

He didn't condemn her – she kept her dignity.

He didn't condone her – what she did was wrong.

He changed her – Grace changes us.

In that moment, the woman was essentially given a new life.

Before she came to Jesus, she was a dead woman walking, but encountering Jesus she has experienced the grace of forgiveness, the gift of a new life.

Now, is she likely to sin again?

You bet.

Maybe not adultery, but you know as well as I that she's going to mess up again.

So will you.

So will I.

And God will keep on forgiving you because He wants you to grow, not to stay stuck in guilt, regret or shame.

So, with each of those moments of Grace we are changed, if we are willing.

God's grace forgives you and frees you

God *forgives* you so you can let go of the past.

God *frees* you so you can live a healthy life, so you can thrive.

Romans 11:32-36 *Have you ever come on anything quite like this extravagant generosity of God, this deep, deep wisdom? It's way over our heads. We'll never figure it out.*

My invitation to you is that this not just be Easter Sunday, but your Easter Monday and Easter Tuesday as well ... that you make even some small changes to walk with Jesus into your Galilee, your marriage, your job, your school.

Here are two small things you can do that will make big changes in your life.

#1 – Tonight (and every night) right before you go to sleep, pause and think of all things you are grateful for in your life.

Be specific and say them to yourself.

That can be a prayer.

“Lord Jesus, thank you for this home you’ve provided.

“Thank you for that church service today, and help me remember how you love me no matter what.”

#2 – First thing in the morning, before getting up, take five minutes and ask Jesus to be with you.

You might say, “Lord, thank you for the night’s rest. And Jesus, I need your help when I meet with my boss. Give me words to encourage her and also words to express my new idea. Help her to hear what I saying.”

Or whatever.

God showed his love for you by creating you, sacrificing for you, and walking with you through life.

You don’t have to walk alone.