



Out of the Box

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Joseph G. Schaller
The Third Sunday of Easter~April 15, 2018*

Acts 3:12-19

Peter addressed the people, "You Israelites, why do you wonder at this, or why do you stare at us, as though by our own power or piety we had made this man walk? The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our ancestors has glorified his servant Jesus, whom you handed over and rejected in the presence of Pilate, though he had decided to release him. But you rejected the Holy and Righteous One and asked to have a murderer given to you, and you killed the Author of life, whom God raised from the dead. To this we are witnesses. And by faith in his name, his name itself has made this man strong, whom you see and know; and the faith that is through Jesus has given him this perfect health in the presence of all of you. And now, friends, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers. In this way God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, that his Messiah would suffer. Repent therefore, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

Psalm 4

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| 1 | Answer me when I call, O God, defender of my cause; *
you set me free when I am hard-pressed;
have mercy on me and hear my prayer. | 5 | Offer the appointed sacrifices *
and put your trust in the Most High. |
| 2 | "You mortals, how long will you dishonor my glory; *
how long will you worship dumb idols
and run after false gods?" | 6 | Many are saying,
"Oh, that we might see better times!" *
Lift up the light of your countenance upon us, O God. |
| 3 | Know that God does wonders for the faithful; *
when I call, God will hear me. | 7 | You have put gladness in my heart, *
more than when grain and wine and oil increase. |
| 4 | Tremble, then, and do not sin; *
speak to your heart in silence upon your bed. | 8 | I lie down in peace; at once I fall asleep; *
for only you, God, make me dwell in safety. |

I John 3:1-7

See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.

Luke 24:36b-48

Jesus stood among the disciples and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be

proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.”

As many of you know, I grew up as a Roman Catholic, as did many members of this congregation. And if you were a Catholic of a certain age you will remember the practice of “going to confession.” This involved a ritual of going into a box in church to anonymously (we hoped it was anonymous!) confessing your sins to a priest. The confessional “box” was and is a very interesting piece of architecture. A small unit which allowed for the priest to sit in the middle, with places on either side for the penitent to enter and kneel. There was an opaque grate which prevented the priest from seeing who you were, and a sliding door which could be opened or closed when the priest was ready to hear your confession. After listing your various sins, you were usually given a prayer of absolution from the priest as well as a form of “penance,” which usually consisted of a few short prayers to be said in church afterward.

“Going to confession” as you called it, was not my favorite activity as a kid. The problem was that I was a rather scrupulously “good” child who dutifully went to confession on a regular basis, but would often have trouble coming up with things to confess. I remember developing certain stock sins which seemed to do the job, for example, “I disrespected my mother three times.” This seemed close enough to the truth...there’s no sense lying in confession...yet did not damn me as a terrible person. The nuns who taught us at St. Thomas the Apostle school assured us that all good Catholics should go to confession, no matter how good they felt they were. Even the Pope went to confession on a daily basis, we were told. Even at a young age, this piece of information struck me as suspect. It was hard to imagine how the Pope could even find opportunity to sin on a daily basis. And if so, what was really going on at the Vatican!

I’ve come to liken my childhood experience of going to confession as similar to my adult routine of having my teeth cleaned twice a year. You know you’re supposed to do it. You’re not particularly happy in anticipating the appointment, which, at best, is moderately uncomfortable. But, boy, do you feel great when it’s over! Liberated! Released! Clean!

This pattern of Confession changed a great deal over my life. Today, this ritual is much less regular, even in the Roman Catholic Church. In its day, it was certainly part of shaping the consciousness of countless people who believed that they were constantly in danger of “falling into sin” and needed to be sure they got their souls “cleansed” before coming upon any unfortunate event such as death which would send them straight to hell.

All of this leads me to thinking about an aspect of the resurrection stories that we hear during these weeks of Easter. For example, in today’s gospel, after again appearing to his disciples, and assuring them that he is not a ghost by inviting them to touch his wounds and eating some fish, Jesus commissions them to go forth to preach “repentance and the forgiveness of sins.” But why does “sin” keep popping up, even in the light of the resurrection which is supposed to be such a joyful event? The focus on sin and the imperative of repentance forms the final trope of all three readings today. It might make you wonder if the message is that in order to feel the impact of the resurrection, you must first repent. In other words, you have to feel bad before you can feel good.

In all of these stories which describe this mysterious time between the feasts of Easter and Pentecost, as we mark them today, it’s interesting to note that Jesus never offers any “new” teaching. His primary goal seems to be to reassure his closest followers that he is still with them, although in a different manner. But one element that is distinctive is the empowerment by the Holy Spirit and the mandate to not only preach the good news, but to, in particular, preach on repentance and the forgiveness of sins.

One of the privileges I have as a priest is the “authority” to forgive someone’s sins, though I rarely exercise that authority directly. But I remember the experience as a young priest being part of retreats for college students in which we’d go off to a retreat house with lots of pillows and candles and stay up until all hours with students sharing deeply personal stories of their experience of God along with the struggles in their lives. When it was time for confession...no longer done in a box...they would come to me and the other priests and unburden their hearts. They rarely gave lists of “stock” sins, but rather spoke of family conflicts, their own disappointments, or their guilt about some aspect of their lives. There was something very moving about being able to assure them of

God's love, and often see unbound from their guilt, shame and distress.

I suspect that most of us do not see ourselves as really big sinners in need of repentance. After all, the people who regularly come to church tend to be a self-selecting population. The truly notorious sinners are probably doing something else on a Sunday morning. Yet it is also probably true that most of us, from time to time in our lives, have really “blown it”—experienced some fault or failing which has sent us into some kind of deep despair or confusion. We might indeed feel painfully conscious of ourselves as “sinners” in these moments, and long for a sense of being washed clean. But even when we don't see ourselves as sinners, we often might feel burdened by worries, fears or hurt.

Early Christianity understood this process of conversion from a life of sin to a life of grace in two different yet complimentary ways. The first has to do with the initial rejection of life without Christ in favor of a full acceptance of the Christ and Christ's message. The second came from the realization that no matter how well our intentions are, we are still human, and therefore need to be continually under the process of conversion and a return to the Lord.

Repentance implies more than a mere contrition for our faults, but actually involves a turn or change in attitude away from what might be considered sinful toward a more gracious form of existence. If “sin” can be described as a form of alienation from God or from our best purposes—even if only in a very subtle way—then repentance means a re-engagement with something that is very important. In the modern history of confession, the focus of the Sacrament has shifted from being merely about “penance” to being primarily about reconciliation—a restoration of right relationship with others, ourselves, and with God.

At the heart of the resurrection stories, Jesus seems most eager to restore relationship with and among his disciples, in continuity with how he preached and lived among the people prior to the Crucifixion. The tradition has often tried to explain these great mysteries as some kind of transaction. The theologies which stress the cross as a form of atonement for example, lead you to think that Jesus needed to make some kind of “deal” to appease God's anger, save us from just punishment, and literally “open the gates of heaven.” Something like repentance can be seen in a similar way. “I need to do something to get something from God.” But God is always giving, whether we realize it or not, desiring relationship, not checking off a list of moral failings. I'm pretty sure Jesus was not interested in imposing some sort of legislative code for his followers but wanted to reorient them—allowing them to be fully receptive to the wonder of God's love. In the Incarnation as well as the dying and rising of Jesus, God is “all in” on the side of creation and humanity. We need only to “turn again” toward God's presence, or perhaps experience a change of heart—a metanoia—which might allow us to once again find our place and renew our relationship with God and with all we love and who love us. In human relationships, there are few things as painful as a broken bond which cannot be reconciled. Yet God is always gathering us together to be reconciled, and to have our burdens lifted. I have often been saddened in realizing how difficult it can be for some to release themselves from a sense of sin, guilt or badness which persists despite all evidence to the contrary. That may be why we all need to be revived in a sense of wonder and gratitude which arises from a sense of being loved—even as sinners—tender human beings which we all are.

I've often been moved by the poem *Wild Geese* by Mary Oliver which describes what it is like to live unburdened in our place in creation:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.

Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain

are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.

Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.

Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.