

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*Creating Peace through Spiritual Nourishment and Service in the World*

The Third Sunday of Easter/ April 19, 2015

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The Great Resurrection changed everything, and the disciples are incredulous. God's power of love proved stronger than death. Jesus raised from the dead appears to his disciples. Like anyone they doubt their own eyes. They can't believe what they are seeing. So the risen Jesus asks for a piece of broiled fish and eats it in their presence. This is no apparition. Now here is where the great change comes in. It is more than life after death. It is what life after death means to the living. Jesus commissions his disciples to proclaim repentance and forgiveness of sins.

One can go back to the earliest preaching and see this change at work. Peter who had denied Jesus on the cross knew something of this repentance and forgiveness first hand. Here in his second great sermon Peter is directing his words to the authorities who authorized Jesus' death. The resurrection puts those who oppose us directly within our circle of concern. And so to the crucifiers Peter declares repentance and forgiveness.

This week we remembered Abraham Lincoln who died 150 years ago by an assassin's bullet on April 15. General Lee had surrendered his army of Northern Virginia six days before. On the night of that surrender the rector of Saint Paul's was awakened with the news, and ran over to ring the church bell that remains atop our parish house. This week I reread two letters from April 16 and 23, 1865 that have been passed down in our family. My great, great grandfather was 25 years old and an ensign stationed at the Navy Department in Washington, D.C. He is writing to his fiancée, Frances, whom he called Fanny. The day after Lincoln's death he writes: "You cannot imagine what a state of mind I have been in over our serious loss – I do indeed feel it deeply; I am afraid I cannot express my feelings in writing over this terrible calamity."

He added, “Mr. Lincoln had by his kindness of manner and goodness of heart gained the love and respect of the people; this is fully shown in his leniency towards Gen’l Lee and the Rebel army; even they had learned to respect him – he has indeed acted nobly – his worst enemies had just began to find out how good and wise he was; and now feel and mourn his loss as deep as we.” The letter goes on to contrast Lincoln with his successor Andrew Johnson.

“Washington was full of excitement and rumors all day yesterday (that’s the day Lincoln died), Mr. Johnson was Inaugurated President at 11 o’clock at his Hotel, the people are very anxious to see how he will act – they not having much confidence on account of his previous actions... there is one thing certain the Rebels have not gained a friend; for he is in favor of hanging Traitors.”

I quote this letter because it illustrates Jesus’ commission and Peter’s sermon. Lincoln’s faith is a subject of debate but without question he imbibed Jesus’ spirit of repentance and forgiveness in a way that his successor, at least according to this letter, did not. Rebels, Traitors, deniers, crucifiers – all are subject to forgiveness. The Great Resurrection has changed everything.

Forgiveness is available to all. The risen Jesus opens the minds of his disciples to understand this in the scriptures. He would have had in mind passages such as this one from the Prophet Joel: “I will pour out my spirit on all flesh.” All nations, all people, are to receive the spirit of repentance and forgiveness of sins. Peter observes Jesus’ commission to forgive, teaching those who encouraged Jesus’ death that sins may be wiped out. Such wiping out is a reference to writing on papyrus. The ink in Peter’s day had no acid that would cause it to bite into the papyrus as modern ink would. To erase the writing a wet sponge would simply remove the ink. In the same way God removes sin. He simply wipes it away. The Great Resurrection changes everything.

How do we proclaim this repentance and forgiveness that is available to all? The first epistle of John says we do it by being children of God, by being loved by our heavenly Father. The risen Jesus was revealed to take away sins. No one who abides in Jesus sins, the epistle says. We proclaim forgiveness by moving within the light of God, by walking in Jesus’ ways (as we say in the confession), and by obeying the new commandment of love.

The next question follows quickly – how can any of us do that? Whenever I try, and I really do – I quickly become aware of my limitations. Being a child of God is not inherent in human nature. We more easily move to my great, great grandfather’s assessment of Andrew Johnson who would hang the traitors. It is easy for us to be triggered and react aggressively. To bring it down to the mundane, inconsiderate drivers and gridlocked traffic is often a trigger. People who think only about themselves may trigger our anger. Incessant demands can be a trigger. It doesn’t put us in a forgiving state of mind.

The important thing to notice about Jesus’ commission to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins is that it is done in Jesus’ Name, not in the poor power of our own forgiving nature. Peter preaches that healing and forgiveness occur by faith in Jesus’ Name, that is, through God’s love made known in the great resurrection that changes everything. We don’t do it, but Christ in us does. It is only when we get into our heart, where we are centered, where Christ is, that we can resist the things that otherwise trigger us, and can act in the spirit of repentance and forgiveness. We are channels of God’s love and forgiveness. We are children of God walking in Jesus’ ways only by pure grace. It doesn’t come naturally to us. The resurrected Christ is the power for change bringing about repentance and forgiveness.

Our destiny is so much more than we can achieve on our own. It includes a vision of God as God truly is. We see God as all light, all goodness. It is in that light and goodness that we have tried to move. It is the way my great, great grandfather described Abraham Lincoln, a person with “goodness of heart... how good and wise he was.” We are good because we believe that our destiny is goodness. We purify ourselves through repentance because our hope is in God who is pure. “Beloved,” the 1<sup>st</sup> Epistle to John says, “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.” Our destiny is to be Christ-like. We can have confidence in this because it is all a matter of grace, and incredulous as it may seem, God’s grace is sufficient for us. It has proved stronger than death. The Great Resurrection has changed everything. *Amen.*