

St. Wilfrid's Church  
The Rev. Harold Clinehens, Jr.

Easter Day  
April 16, 2006

Happy Easter! I love you! Be happy! Many of you know that eleven of us went to Tanzania in February, for a mission trip. "I love you! Be happy" is a frequent greeting in worship; because today you have honored us, by coming here to us...and by virtue of walking through the door you have accepted our extended hand of hospitality.

I realize that there are many other places you could be today and that on major holidays---like Easter, like Christmas---we have lots of other pressing things on our minds. It is not easy to be present to worship when our minds are ricocheting between the roast in the oven and the war in Iraq; the painted eggs on the kitchen counter and the threat of bird flu; the maiden aunt in the nursing home, who needs to be visited today and what to do if her dwindling resources run out before she dies. We all come here today with much on our minds.

*So what is the good news this Easter morning?*

To tell the truth, it is also a challenge to say something fresh about a story you have heard so many times before and that I have preached so many times before. I am not sure it is a requirement since the preacher's job is to come up with a true word, not a new word, but this year, in particular, I am aware of the ways in which I have participated in the domestication of the gospel.

When I look back at my file of old Easter sermons, I notice how often I've tried to convince people that the resurrection actually happened; how often I've preached the Easter story as a call to courage for those who live in fear...fear of death or the deaths of those they love, fear of the new, fear of the unknown; how often I've preached Easter as an opportunity to take responsibility for the better day we say we want.

What all these sermons have in common is that they are aimed chiefly at individuals seeking some reassurance that they are right, or will be right, in the days following their own Good Fridays, whatever shape those crucifixions might take.

There's nothing wrong with this approach---the gospel, after all, *is* personal. It's just that lately, I have been struck by the almost complete absence in my Easter preaching of the communal, the corporate, the political responsibility Christians share one with another. The gospel *is* personal, but it's not private.

Where is the gospel that once threatened the values of the most powerful empire in the world? Where is the gospel that turned Jesus, Peter, and Paul into "persons of interest" for the Roman government, which eventually executed them all? Where is the gospel

that was so compelling that the Book of Acts chronicles how the early disciples spent their lives trying to play-catch-up with the Spirit as the good news spread like wildfire across the Mediterranean world?

The gospel *is* personal, but it's not private. Yet, it is the private gospel, the domesticated gospel, the gospel that would cast Jesus in our own image, that seems to be in the DNA of our culture. This "gospel" of self-improvement tells us that...

God is alive and present in Jesus to benefit *me*....

that Jesus died to benefit *me*....

that I should become a Christian to benefit *me*....

Jesus' pain...my gain.

The gospel that Jesus himself proclaimed had a much different effect on people. The gospel Jesus himself proclaimed was so compelling that over and over again people with families and jobs dropped everything and followed him. In the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, written by the same author as the Gospel according to Luke, we read how those earliest Christians lived together in voluntary communion, sharing all their goods and wealth in common, in a fellowship of equals.

Now, please do not hear what I'm not saying. I'm not suggesting that you sell your house and move in with your neighbors. I'm suggesting that those early Christians understood that they were stronger together than they were as freestanding, self-contained units. I'm suggesting that those earliest Christians understood that the good news Jesus proclaimed was *very personal*, but one thing it was not was *private*.

Or to put it in other words: What difference will all this beautiful celebration we're enjoying today make in your life tomorrow? What difference will our celebrating make in the lives of those around us? ...those who haven't found their way in here....or don't want to find their way in here... or who have simply written the church off?

What about all those people who talk about being "spiritual" but not religious, those people the Gallup Poll counts who believe in God and even love Jesus but don't want anything to do with the institutional church? CS Lewis, that great Christian author of the *Narnia Chronicles* and many other wonderful spiritual volumes, once observed that the "un-churched" people...the outsiders...those who steer clear of church involvement often do so because they see preaching as "mild-mannered people exhorting other mild-mannered people to be even more mild-mannered."

The gospel is personal, not private, but it *is* very personal. Jesus was a great man for freedom, and he proclaimed a God of abundance: "I have come so that you might have life, and have it to the full," he said.

One of the functions of the Christian season of Lent we have just come through is to have a look at the places of our confinement, the nature of it, the strictures and structures of what's holding you back from being the one you were dreamed to be.

Translated into contemporary terms, one way we can talk about the concept of sin is *being stuck*... being less than you are. It's being enslaved.

There are people who are stuck in awful relationships that are quietly toxic and killing them...

There are people who are doing work that is demeaning and alienating and dispiriting....

Then there are people who are stuck in what we could call "mind holes", like depression, resentment, disappointment, and deep woundedness; who would give anything to move beyond their confinement into the grace and renewal and refreshment and spontaneity of true freedom...

And there's not one of us here today---some of us more than others and some of us better at hiding it than others---who isn't caught somewhere in some dimension of their lives, and is a prisoner of something that happened to them or something that never happened to them that they desired to happen.

The Irish poet and former Roman Catholic priest, John O' Donahue, has said that, "...A person who truly believes [the gospel] should be dangerously and beautifully free... Honest to God...If you really believe it, you should be incredibly free and delighted and kinda half intoxicated with a sense of risk and delight and compassion and a great sense of sureness."

The gospel is very personal, and it is especially appropriate on Easter to give thanks for all you are and all you have received.

*But the gospel is not private...* I heard a story recently about an honest man who was being tailgated by a stressed-out woman on a busy street. Suddenly, the light turned yellow, just in front of him.

He did the right thing, stopping at the crosswalk, even though he could have beaten the red light by accelerating through the intersection.

The woman behind him went ballistic---laying on the horn, screaming in frustration as she missed her chance to get through the intersection. As she was still in mid-rant, she heard a tap on her window and looked up into! the face of a very serious police officer, who ordered her to exit the car with her hands up. He took her to the police station where she was searched, fingerprinted, photographed and placed in a holding cell.

After a couple of hours, a policeman approached the cell and opened the door. She was escorted back to the booking desk where the arresting officer was waiting with her personal effects.

He said, "I'm very sorry for this mistake. You see, I pulled up behind your car while you were blowing your horn, flipping the guy off in front of you and cussing a blue streak at him. I noticed the 'WWJD' (What Would Jesus Do?) license plate holder, the "Episcopal Church Welcomes You" bumper sticker, the Rainbow sticker with 'Celebrate Diversity', and the chrome-plated Christian fish symbol on the trunk. Naturally, I assumed the car was stolen."

We all can find ourselves in this story, not really living the New Testament qualities of patience, love, long-suffering, forbearance, kindness and forgiveness. If Christ's life-changing love truly is life-changing then it does come to us *on its way to someone else*.

And the trouble is...we church folks get very internally focussed at times. We get so wrapped up in ourselves and church business that we sometimes forget that the destination is not the church, but the kingdom. In the New Testament, Jesus uses the word, "church" exactly two times. He uses the term "Kingdom of God," or "Kingdom of Heaven" almost 90 times.

In a kingdom view, people are always looking for where God is at work *in the world*, in the street, in their homes, in their neighborhoods, their offices, their rec. clubs, in your local Starbucks and Barnes and Noble. What is God up to in *life*, with people who are all around me, and how do I join with that?

That's what this Galilee business is all about in the gospel this morning. The messenger, whoever that mysterious figure might be, says to the frightened women, "Do not be alarmed.. he is not here....but go and tell his disciples and Peter that *he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him just as he told you.*"

What was so great about Galilee? What sort of important business was going on there? Nothing. It was a dusty, out of the way, ordinary place, but it was the place where Jesus spent about 80% of his time. He did his work in Galilee, not Jerusalem, where the Temple was located. After his childhood, there's no evidence that Jesus went back to Jerusalem until the last week of his life.

"Don't look for me here in the cemetery...Don't even look for me in the Temple...Meet me back in Galilee, where people are busy with the business of living life..."

That's the role of the church. We get cut in on the deal in our capacity to partner with God in his redemptive mission. And according to the Bible, where is that redemptive mission taking place? *In the world.*

The gospel is personal, not private. ... Which means sometimes turning a critical eye at systems and structures that harm people and keep them down. This is the edgy and uncomfortable part of the Christian faith. A personal spirituality that is only concerned with personal betterment and thinking positive thoughts or whatever may be individually satisfying, but it is not the Christian faith. The Christian faith is *always* pro-humanity.

... Because *justice is the consistent thread* that runs through both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The Christian faith has difficulty standing by while some people are getting all the goodies and others get little or nothing. One of the things our team learned in Tanzania is that malaria kills more people every year than any other disease in the world; followed by tuberculosis and AIDS. And if somehow, affluent nations could find a way to invest just \$3 billion a year for ten years in insecticide-impregnated mosquito nets, we could pretty much eradicate malaria. So far, these efforts have been unsuccessful, even though \$3 billion is a drop in the bucket compared to what we've thrown at the war in Iraq.

Or we could talk about the 46 million Americans and rising, who lack health insurance coverage and the lack of political will in Washington to really tackle this issue.

You could say, "Yeh, Yeh, Yeh, but these are political problems..." *Well, what would Jesus do?* ...Because there is so much in the world that hurts Jesus' heart of love, deeply embedded in Christian spirituality is the conviction that unless *all* of us are saved, *none* of us are saved.

To recall John O'Donahue's words, Jesus was... "...dangerously and beautifully free... *Honest to God*...He was incredibly free and delighted and kinda half intoxicated with a sense of risk and delight and compassion and a great sense of sureness..."

And he invites us to live that way too...of we dare.

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