

## **“FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD,” A Homily delivered by the Rev. Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas at St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, May 2, 2021**

This morning, we gather for another Easter season Sunday. It is a time in which we continue to recall the experience of the early church in the immediate aftermath of Jesus’ crucifixion, resurrection, and heavenly ascension. If we read the stories that the Bible offers us about the lives of the Christian apostles and disciples, we see men and women not unlike us still struggling to grasp how an empty tomb could be a good thing, a positive thing. All the reports of the risen Christ encountered seemed too good to be true.

Some of Jesus’ followers were so devastated and depressed by the horror of the cross that they couldn’t accept any good news coming in. Even among those blessed to be witnesses in one way or another to the risen Christ and then to his heavenly ascension had their anxieties about being forsaken and abandoned. Remember the words of Cleopas to Jesus on the road to Emmaus? “Stay with us!” he pleaded. (*Luke 24:29*) In that moment, Cleopas spoke to the feelings of the entire church. No one wanted to see Jesus go.

With his huge heart, as he anticipated his own heavenly ascension, Jesus could not help but feel the tension that underlies almost every human separation. As we all know, it’s tough saying good-bye. But under the circumstances, Jesus had his own plea to make--sometimes spoken aloud; other times said between the lines. To Mary Magdalene, who was the first to discover him in his risen state, Jesus gently yet ever so emphatically declared: “Do not cling to me!” (*John 20:17*) He then went on to briefly explain to her that he was about to ascend to the Father and thus could not linger or tarry anywhere long.

Here and at other moments, Jesus’ deeper message was simple: he was not leaving us because he loved us less but, rather, because as God’s son he had his own inevitable destiny to fulfill. Ascension had to follow resurrection just as day follows night—or night, day. Indeed, neither Christ’s death on the cross, nor the empty tomb, nor his ultimate heaven-bound ascension constituted any kind of divine abandonment of humankind as some might fear.

Jesus affirmed all this at the actual hour of his heavenly ascension—in that scene where he figuratively pushes off from us to God. In his final moments with us on earth, he not only blesses his followers but encourages us all, saying: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (*Matthew 28:20*)

Happily, some of the apostles really heard this positivity. It brought freshly to mind the beautiful promise that Jesus had earlier made to them on that fateful night before his arrest when he gathered them together in an upper Jerusalem room for a last supper and final words of instruction and commandment. There Jesus assured his twelve gathered apostles that he would not only return to usher in God’s kingdom, but also in the meantime, before the end time, send to all who cherish his words a Holy Counselor and Comforter to spiritually renew and fortify them in the face of every life challenge. (*John 14:19, 25-27*)

As the early church gradually discovered, overcoming all doubts, what Jesus promised is absolutely true. In his ascension he did not abandon or forsake humankind. Absent in body, Jesus nevertheless continued to abide in spirit with those cherishing his memory and all that he taught. His love and God's love are abundant and unending. That was true then. It is true still.

The Apostle Peter understood this clearly. In his preaching to the early church he, citing the spiritual wisdom of ancient Israel's King David, as well as the Prophet Joel, liked to proclaim God's loving presence in our troubled world. "I saw," he declared anew, "the Lord before me at all times; he is near me and I will not be troubled." (*Acts 2:25; 1 Peter 2:6*)

Although the Apostle Paul started out as a zealous bounty hunter, driven by visions of an angry, judgmental, and punishing God, he too, after his dramatic encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, came to believe in God's love and the palpable presence of Christ's loving spirit. Like Peter, Paul was inspired by the Prophet Joel's statement that "Everyone who calls out to the Lord for help will be saved." (*Joel 2:32; Romans 10:13*) Also confidence-building and faith-renewing for Paul was the older biblical assurance that "Whoever believes in him"—in other words, God and his son, Jesus—"will not be disappointed." (*Romans 10:11*)

The Apostle Paul subsequently went on to offer even profounder, more passionate testimony about God's constant presence and love, manifest through the living, loving spirit of Jesus Christ in the world. In his letter to the Christians of ancient Rome whom he soon expected to visit, Paul posed an important rhetorical question:

"Who can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship, or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death?" (*Romans 8:35*)

Paul then answers this very stirring question both for himself and us as men and women of faith. No, he says emphatically, "in all these things we have *complete victory* through him," Jesus, "who loved us." (*Romans 8:37*) As Paul then amplifies and explains in terms almost poetic:

"For I am certain that *nothing* can separate us from [Christ's] love; neither death, nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above or the world below—there is *nothing* in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord." (*Romans 8:38-39*)

Frankly, I can't imagine a more powerful statement about God's love for us and Jesus' enduring love, care, and concern for us. And from a man like Paul who once didn't have any conception of a loving God or the possibility of a loving savior!

Congregation, foundational to our Christian faith is the Apostle Paul's conviction that, instead of living in a mean, forbidding, and friendless cosmos, we have a friend in God and Christ, who are the ruler of it all. Life can turn cruel, burdening us terribly. But cruelty doesn't align with what God or Jesus intend for us. Because of their love--and through it, God and his son are always seeking to redeem what is amiss and wrong. The Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel captured the essence of what God and Jesus are all about when he quoted God speaking personally to him through a vision, saying: "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice." (*Ezekiel 34:16*) So succinctly stated, God's declaration should further hearten us and lend us hope.

Unfortunately, we live in a time when too much atheism and agnosticism prevail. Generally, either makes us a less happy people--definitely more frustrated and despairing. We see it in all strange kinds of acting out behavior, ranging from drug abuse and violence to sexual promiscuity writ large--all coupled with the grossest, most extravagant excesses of materialism. Even self-professed Christians are not exempt from serious problems of this kind. Rather like kids plucking daisies in a summer game of "He loves me...he loves me not," all too many Christians live with chronic doubts, constantly wavering in their confidence about God's love and how much they can depend on it. Always eager for fresh signs and further proofs that God loves them, they end up so easily discouraged when the least misfortune in life buffets them, treating it as some kind of rejection. Not all the hand-waving in the world praising Jesus can disguise the holes in their faith.

Part of the problem is that they forget that we live in a fallen, less-than-perfect world where accidents happen. Moreover, God has imbued all human beings with free-will which makes it possible for any of us to make choices that at least temporarily thwart his loving purposes. Selfishness and sin are realities that are never going to go away until Christ comes again and God's ultimate reign is consummated. Consequently, bad things can and do befall decent people, even those striving to be faithful to God. Just as bad things happening should not be construed as a judgment upon those suffering them, we shouldn't judge God or dismiss the love of Jesus Christ because bad things intrude upon our lives. As the Apostle Paul so resolutely and resonantly declared in his letter to the Romans, the love of God and Jesus are here for us *in spite* of any bad circumstances. Confidence in the love of God and a loving Jesus can help us survive the most terrible events and then begin to redeem what is hurtful and wrong, creating from it all something healing, hopeful, and good.

Borrowing the terminology from some of the so-called self-help groups that seem so rampant today, maybe it would benefit us all to take a "fearless moral inventory" as to where we stand faith-wise. Namely, acknowledging the fact of our fallen world and human free will, which can be exercised for good or ill, do we truly trust in God's love and Christ's love for us? Do we possess the hopeful state of mind and outlook which is the best evidence and testimony of our trust in such divine love?

For those of us who do come up short, there are a number of simple things we can do to help ourselves get back on track—the faith track. For starters...

- Avoid the trap of atheism, which denies God’s existence, or agnosticism, which denies our ability to be sure about anything dealing with God: everyone holds up something as ultimately important for their lives, which functions as a god. In keeping with the first commandment thundered from Mt. Sinai, let us have no other god but God. (*Exodus 20:3; Deuteronomy 5:7*)
- For your own sake, give God the benefit of your doubts and take a leap of faith: be consoled and encouraged by Jesus’ respect for the honest man who came to him saying, “I believe; help me with my unbelief!” (*Mark 9:24*)
- If you already profess to be a man or woman of great faith, be more humble: stop trying to second-guess God.
- In exalting God and his son Jesus don’t blame them for accidents of nature, errors of human judgment, or the selfish abuse of human free will.
- As part of your faith discipline, always keep your heart and mind open to the many different ways that God and Jesus, particularly through holy scripture, proclaim their love for you and for a struggling humankind.
- In the Easter season and beyond, emotionally and spiritually embrace the deeper meaning of the empty tomb and Christ’s resurrection which God intended as ultimate proof that his love for us can’t be quashed or killed.
- As much as we might wish to be able to see Jesus face-to-face and to have him physically present by our side, may we each rejoice in his ascension to God’s right hand as part of the assurance of the heavenly future and reward that awaits us who love as Jesus loved.
- Each and every day look for those ways in which God through the living spirit of Jesus Christ is seeking to bless us with his love and grace until we are fully and completely reunited with him.

Congregation, we would have a less selfish, mean, and violent world if people trusted in God’s love more as revealed through life and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. After all, love has a way of begetting love. And confidence in God’s love revealed through Jesus Christ can be the fount of a more loving, caring world. Let’s not contribute to the love deficit in our present world by our own lazy skepticism and doubt.

This morning we are invited to partake in the sacrament of communion. It all begins with a proclamation from the Gospel of John: “For God so loved the world that he gave us his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (*John 3:16 KJV*) Let’s celebrate through this sacred meal that we are not creatures of a cold and forlorn cosmos but, instead, a universe and world that shines with God’s love and the loving

spirit of an ascended Jesus. Opening our hearts and minds to receive this double blessing, may we trust, believe, and rejoice. ***Amen.***