

# “An Easter Way”

John 20:19-31, 1 John 1:1-2.2, Acts 4:32-35

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April 8, 2018

Pastor Steven Koski asks, “Are you following the way of Jesus in the world or arguing about who has the right opinions or beliefs about Jesus?”

Every Sunday we celebrate ever-expanding love, joy, grace, and Easter. The Easter accounts celebrate the transformational power of Easter to forgive, redeem all, renew life, renovate with joy, make glorious by grace, to fashion peaceful completeness, and unite all in fellowship. Easter is like a shower that washes away our dirt, fear, hate, shame, guilt, suffering, so we gleam with joyful love. Easter is like a sunrise that disperses the darkness enabling us to see the wonders of God’s love. Easter is an ever-growing celebration of ever-emerging resurrection.

**John 20:19-31 NLT “That Sunday evening the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! “Peace be with you,” he said. As Jesus spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! Again he said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.” One of the twelve disciples, Thomas (nicknamed the Twin), was not with the others when Jesus came. They told Thomas, “We have seen the Lord!” But he replied, “I won’t believe it unless I see the nail wounds in his hands, put my fingers into them, and place my hand into the wound in his side.” Eight days later the disciples were together again, and this time Thomas was with them. The doors were locked; but suddenly, as before, Jesus was standing among them. “Peace be with you,” Jesus said. Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and look at my hands. Put your hand into the wound in my side. Don’t be faithless any longer. Believe!” “My Lord and my God!” Thomas exclaimed. Then Jesus told him, “You believe because you have seen me. Blessed are those who believe without seeing me.” The disciples saw Jesus do many other miraculous signs in addition to the ones recorded in this book. But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing in him you will have life by the power of Jesus’ name.”**

Jeanne Person said, “The story of Thomas is all about inclusion, about ever widening the circle of those who can encounter the risen Christ. Christ bursts through boundaries: of time and tomb; closed and locked doors; barriers of hatred, prejudice, and social and economic oppression; glass ceilings of gender inequality. Christ’s love breaks through every rolled stone, bolted door, solid wall; every closed and locked heart; so that no one is left out. Touch me, the risen Christ says. Draw close to me. Let all the world come to me.”

*Synthesis* has this to say about Jesus words, “Peace be with you.” “These words convey more than a casual greeting. They carry the full grace which the Risen Lord has to bestow on them—the peace to calm their troubled hearts, which the world cannot give. These are also words of forgiveness, as Jesus reconciles to himself the followers who had abandoned him at the cross.”

None of Jesus’ resurrection appearances have Jesus shaming the disciples or telling them to adhere to a list of rules or you must believe certain things about God. Jesus does not say, “I told you so,” “You messed up,” “You denied me,” “You are sinful,” now be remorseful. In all of the resurrection appearances Jesus says, “Peace be with you,” then celebrates an aspect of abundant life. In this particular resurrection appearance Jesus says, “As God has sent me, so I send you.” Jesus, our oldest brother, came with compassion, forgiveness, grace, healing, peace, and joy. Jesus taught in parables, because God’s ever-expanding love cannot be described in words. People tried to get Jesus to judge or exclude certain people; instead, Jesus cared for every sinner, outcast, and misfit. People tried to get Jesus to give them a list of rules to follow; instead, Jesus invites us to love. Jesus blessed people who never went to temple. Jesus is saying to you, “Peace be with you.” In other words, you are forgiven, so let go of all your burdens, guilt, and regret. Jesus is saying to you, “As God has sent me, so I send you.” In other words, be compassionate, gracious and extravagant in love, be an enhancer of joyful life.

**1 John 1:1-2:2 NLT “We proclaim to you the one who existed from the beginning, whom we have heard and seen. We saw him with our own eyes and touched him with our own hands. Jesus is the Word of life. This one who is life itself was revealed to us, and we have seen him. And now we testify and proclaim to you that Jesus is the one who is eternal life. Jesus was with the Father, and then he was revealed to us. We proclaim to you what we ourselves have actually seen and heard so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that you may fully share our joy. This is the message we heard from Jesus and now declare to you: God is light, and there is no darkness in Jesus at all. So we are lying if we say we have fellowship with God but go on living in spiritual darkness; we are not practicing the truth. But if we are living in the light, as God is in the light, then we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin. If we claim we have no sin, we are only fooling ourselves and not living in the truth. But if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all wickedness. If we claim we have not sinned, we are calling God a liar and showing that his word has no place in our hearts. My dear children, I am writing this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate who pleads our case before the Father. He is Jesus Christ, the one who is truly righteous. He himself is the sacrifice that atones for our sins—and not only our sins but the sins of all the world.”**

**Acts 4:32-33 MSG ,“The whole congregation of believers was united as one—one heart, one mind! They didn’t even claim ownership of their own possessions. No one said, “That’s mine; you can’t have it.” They shared everything. The apostles gave powerful witness to the resurrection of the Master Jesus, and grace was on all of them.”**

We are to give witness to resurrection and be gracious. The early church was drawn together by their realization that each of them is a sinner being transformed by God’s grace.

Is worship attendance declining because too often too many churches, too many church-goers, argue about who has the right opinions or beliefs about Jesus, rather than inviting others to join them, as an equal, following the gracious way of Jesus? I hope, we Christians, will grow our gracious welcome of the unchurched. If I were unchurched today and my only perception of church was the news, I would stay as far away from the church as I could get. All these stories of Christians trying to control the way people live, to legislate morality, shaming, guilt, judging and declaring the ills, pain, and suffering of the world is God’s wrath, teaching if you do not believe certain things you are going to hell. If God is angry with us, testing us, judging us, inflicting us with pain and disease and only letting a few people into heaven, then I do not want to be any part of that kind of church. I do not believe in a fickle, cruel god. We are to give witness to resurrection and be gracious.

Humanity tends to miss the point, to get bogged down in rules, to limit the transforming power of Easter. Richard Rohr says, “What we don’t transform, we transmit.” On earth none of us is fully transformed, so we transmit our flaws to others. When we are unable to let go of our anger, guilt, shame, pain, mistakes, hate, fear, anxiety, fatigue, sickness, grief, suffering, confusion, unknowing it festers within us. Each of us projects our flaws on others until our flaws are transformed by God’s grace, forgiven, washed clean, healed, and made glorious. We criticize others to try to make our self look better. We judge others to justify ourselves.

As individuals, and as a church, we should recognize that we are messed up, broken, sinful people being made glorious, not by any of our thoughts, actions or beliefs, rather all by grace, a free gift of God’s transforming love. The early church was drawn together by their realization that each of them is a sinner being transformed by God’s grace. We cannot begin to fathom the wonder of God much less communicate the enormity of God’s love and joy. We get glimpses of God’s will, but it is always incomplete and sometimes wrong. Rather than telling someone how they should live, we should share how we are being transformed by grace. The earliest followers of Jesus were not called Christians. They were called people of the way. They held many and even opposing beliefs about Jesus but were united in their desire to share God’s grace. If your stories, faith, beliefs, morality, advice and theology doesn’t lead you deeper into the mystery of God’s unconditional love and inspire you to love people more, then you should question your theology. Jesus came to reveal the gracious, joyful heart of God and commands us to share God’s grace and joy.

Cynthia Campbell wrote, “Presbyterian Reformed Christian faith is fundamentally grounded in grace and gratitude. It is about God’s free and unconditional love for the whole world revealed in Jesus. We don’t deserve God’s love. We can’t earn God’s love. All we can do is receive this incomprehensible gift with grateful

hearts and respond to it with generous lives living in the freedom and fullness of that love. This means Christian faith is never about fear—fear that we are sinners in the hands of an angry God. We may be sinners but the hands we are in are those of a loving parent whose love for us is unconditional and irrevocable!”

Is faith less about correct beliefs and more about being grasped by the power of love? Ernie Campbell asks, “Are you following Jesus or merely believing in Jesus?” You can believe in Jesus and not be gracious to everyone. As Richard Rohr says, “You can believe all the right things and still be a jerk.”

William Willimon was a chaplain at Duke University. One day he got a phone call from an irate father. The father’s daughter had committed to work for two years in Haiti with the Presbyterian church. The father shouted over the phone, “This is absurd. She is at the top of her class, accepted to the best medical school in the country and she is going to dig wells in Haiti!” William, trying to lighten the mood, replied. “Well, I doubt your daughter received much training from Duke for this kind of work but she is a fast learner and will get the hang of digging wells in no time at all.” The father wasn’t amused, “This is not laughing matter and I hold you personally responsible.” William responded. “It is not my fault your daughter has been grasped by the power of love embodied and revealed in Jesus and has taken the invitation to follow the way of Jesus seriously. She has experienced God’s grace, realizing she is God’s beloved child. Out of gratitude for God’s grace, she wants to follow the one who revealed God’s joyful, gracious heart by revealing grace and joy to others, to find herself by giving away herself in love.” The daughter discovered that following the way of Jesus reoriented, transformed and turned her world upside down. She was transformed by the power of Easter. She accepted the invitation to extravagantly love others. Her faith became less about being successful and more about being gracious.

The First Presbyterian Church of Bend, Oregon celebrates Spacious Christianity and strives to live it. Spacious Christianity is generous, wholehearted, inclusive faith. Spacious Christianity accepts, welcomes, honors and loves people as they are. Spacious Christianity provides a safe, gracious space to cultivate, hope, healing, transformation, community and love. Spacious Christianity welcomes questions believing they lead us to delight in the mysterious love of God that draws us into a future that is much more than we can ask or imagine, living lives of hope, healing and purpose. Spacious Christianity strives for wholeness as individuals, a church and world, that goes beyond dualism, beyond agree or disagree, beyond either/or to both/and. Spacious Christianity listens to the other, people who are different from us, for encounters with the other invigorates transformation. Spacious Christianity realizes our perception and experiences of Easter, joy, peace, love, grace will grow for eternity.

My perception is we are a church of Spacious Christianity, a church like those early believers, who gave witness to resurrection and were gracious. Like those early believers, we recognize that we are broken and by God’s grace we are being made whole. We are gifted in helping people realize they are God’s beloved masterpiece and providing people with meaningful ways to put their love into action serving others through Hands-On Mission. We excel in making God’s grace tangible, so a person perceives that they are being transformed, made whole, and being resurrected. We are also spacious theologically, spiritually, politically, financially, ethnically, culturally and in age which enables us to expand our perception of God, inspiring us to cultivate each other’s talents and joys as we journey together, being woven together in vibrant harmony. We celebrate God’s ever-expanding love. The Spacious Christianity of North Presbyterian Church makes us unique and appealing to many. Be a witness to resurrection, share with others how God is transforming you with grace. Invite others to come worship with us, to join us in wrestling with questions, to experience the wonder of God’s grace that is making all eternally glorious. Amen