
Easter Atonement for Everyone, Really?

**A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith
Easter 2 – Year B**

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Everyone should have a family member like my family member. His hallmark is that he assumes that he belongs to the family no matter what. Now, there's a spectrum of examples of this character trait of his. At the most extreme end is his ability to get into trouble, and real trouble that needs a family help. At the other end of the spectrum are more ordinary experiences, even laughable. And I want to share a couple of those with you just to illustrate to this character trait that I think we need to hear about on this Sunday after Easter. Thanks be to God.

My mother and I like to tease him about the time that we left the house in his care and he made sure that he diligently watered the plant, not noticing of course that it was an artificial plant. So, we got to tease him about that later; that it didn't need watering. And he had this remarkable ability to laugh with us; just like him. He wasn't embarrassed or shamed or anything, he just chuckled with us and said, "Yeah, that's me, all right."

And on a second occasion, we left the house in his care and asked him to hide the key and leave a note as to where he had hidden it so that we could get back in. And guess what he did: he pinned a note on the front door, and in the note it said, "Dear family, the key is under the mat." So we pointed out to him that of course any intruder would see the note on the door and read it and invade the house. And then once again, with just a tiny little smile he laughed at his folly.

Now, we've never made him feel rejected by those kinds of incidents, or the more serious and grievous incidents of his life. And here's the reason: he had been adopted into our family, and my elders who adopted him made sure that the entire family deliberately and intentionally made him feel welcome, as if he were just like the rest of us. And it worked. And so even in more recent occasions where he's been in some significant trouble, we've still not rejected him. He's not been ejected from the family for his challenges.

That's his hallmark that I hear us being called to for this Easter observance. And let me tell you why. He has a kind of confidence and sureness that he belongs as one of us, and because he has that there is a reciprocity where he assumes it and we affirm it. And even in places where he might doubt it, we affirm it for him; even in places where he gets so beleaguered in his life journey that he can't recall it. We make overtures and interventions on his behalf. I would not call it co-dependent; I would call it unconditional love.

And here our epistle reading for today makes a similar kind of point. "My little children," we hear in the 1 John reading. "My little children:" said with the intimacy of a family.

My little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you may not sin, but if anyone does sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous. And he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:1-2).

Now, here's our challenge on this Sunday in which we hear a gospel about the so-called Doubting Thomas. I think we doubt that there is an advocate for the whole world, an advocate who is able through our Lord Jesus Christ to provide atonement for the failings, foibles, faults, grievous actions and behaviors, and sins of the whole world. I think that's our equivalent, we'd call it our spiritual element of doubting the resurrection, denying that there isn't an atonement sufficient to restore, reclaim, rehabilitate, reform, renew the whole world unconditionally.

And that's our challenge I believe for these 50 days—for these great 50 days of Easter, for this Eastertide season: to focus on that resurrection reality; that there might be new life for us and for all people. What would it look like for us to stop denying that atonement power? Well, we get a little window of it in the gospel reading in which Jesus appears among the disciples with Thomas there and proves to Thomas that it's His risen body. 'Thomas put your hand in my side,' Jesus says to him. 'Feel the wounds. Know that it's me.'

But notice what Jesus also says. He had come to them twice and said, "Peace, be with you." These are disciples who have their own issues of having betrayed Him on the night that He was handed over. Yet now He offers them peace and restoration. He restores them as apostolic agents of His. And then He breathes on them. He gives them breath—the breath of life. Remember Genesis: the breath of the Spirit brooding over creation? He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit." It's a new dispensation of the same Spirit that breathed over creation and gave life to all living: a new dispensation occurs when he breathes on them.

But what's the focus of His breathing on them and giving them the authority and power of the Holy Spirit? He says,

"If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

That's the apostolic authority. That's the discipleship power and role and status that they get restored to after having betrayed Him on the night that He was handed over. And that's the apostolic vocation delivered to us, passed on to us, into which we are inaugurated by our baptism in order to become agents. Agents of what? Releasing people from their sins; or retaining them—if we will.

But our calling is atonement. He is "the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world." So, we're being sent out to provide that for other people. Instead, what are we doing? What am I doing in this last year or in these last years? I am binding people. I am retaining them in their sins. Maybe you're doing this too. I shame them, I condemn them. I make snide remarks and ridicule them. I do that to perpetrators, people whom I think are deserving of approbation, of censure, of criticism, blame; I ladle it on them. And they on me too, by the way. We're all equal opportunity accusers in this culture, this culture of accusation. And in that way we're retaining the sins of people; binding them instead of losing and releasing them.

Now, if we're called to be agents of our Lord's resurrection life, newness of life, renewal, we've got to do exactly the opposite. But instead we're in a state of denial, of doubt. We really doubt that the atonement is sufficient for those people, those perpetrators over there, those who are the worst ones. But of course, the Christian attitude is 'it's me, it's me, O Lord; standing in the need of prayer.' I, the 'chief of sinners.' That's the hallmark of our repentance. of our Lenten penitence. 'I crucified you.'

Paul was clear, he was the persecutor. The disciples are clear that they all betrayed Him. We are clear that it's not just those people over there, those perpetrators, but it's in my heart that the shift needs to be made. If we could traverse that divide, how much could be rebuilt? We could be bringing new life into the world, where people would experience us as adopting them into the family in defiance of everything they do, or say, or want to proclaim about who they are; proclaiming they're not like us Christians, or that they're not wanting to belong to us. That's fine.

But instead of accusing them, here's what we could be doing instead. Precisely where they're not capable of doing for themselves, or atoning for themselves; either not willing or not able, we could be atoning for them. 'Proactively on your behalf I clean up that pollution. On your behalf I take in those refugees and asylum seekers that you reject. On your behalf I heal the wounded. On your behalf I make restitution to those who are being exploited. Even though it's not my particular sin, not my people who did that to you, but because there are perpetrators who are incapable, I take it on proactively, I adopt you.' So I'm calling on us to adopt perpetrators and adopt their victims, to be that Christ in the world today.

Our Cathedral Dean said something like this so eloquently in last Sunday's Easter sermon. Did you hear it? Let me quote it. "No one gets to experience resurrection completely until everyone has experienced resurrection." Doesn't it remind you of the pandemic? As long as there are pockets of people on the planet who still have the coronavirus, COVID-19—2019! And now it's 2021, and how many more decades in this century will it be before we eradicate this virus? As long as it's alive and well at any place on the planet, all of us are at risk. We're in this together.

Similarly, the Dean said this about the resurrection.

No one gets to experience resurrection completely until everyone has experienced it. It doesn't matter who is

first just like it doesn't matter who was first to see Jesus in the gospels. It doesn't matter because Jesus has not been fully seen until everyone, everyone has seen Jesus. In fact, according to the Gospel of Mark, what matters is not our seeing Jesus, what matters is our being Jesus. Being Jesus to other people, being resurrection to other people, giving people life and breath, that is resurrection.

Well, finally, we have our Psalm appointed for today which is a beautiful evocation of this kind of unity. What if all humankind could be adopting all humankind and invoking over them this Psalm 33, the classic Psalm of kindred unity and inclusivity?

How very good and pleasant it is when kinfolk live together in unity.

It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard of Aaron, running down over the color of his robes.

It is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion.

For there the Lord ordained the blessing, life forever more."

Let it flow! Flow like the oil of anointing, this atonement good news. Sufficient for the whole world, and ourselves as our Lord's agents and incarnations of that good news.

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.