

Sermon: The Rev. Dr. Robert "Odie" Odierna – Easter 2011

But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has been raised." And then a little while later, Jesus says to them, "Do not be afraid".

It is Easter morning and Christians all over the world are celebrating Christ's resurrection – and are feeling both relieved and joyful that Jesus' Resurrection means the triumph of life over death, hope over grief, and forgiveness over sin. Yes, one of the central messages of Easter is forgiveness – the wonderful reality of God's salvation. But with it comes the challenge that we are called to forgive one another.

It reminds me of the great story about a preacher who was giving a sermon about the need to forgive our enemies. And so he asked the congregation, "How many of you have either forgiven your enemies or know that you need to forgive your enemies." The preacher was happy to see their honesty, as all the hands in the congregation went up, EXCEPT for one elderly man. The pastor went up to him and asked, "Mr. Jones, are you not willing to forgive your enemies?" "Oh," the man said, "I don't have any!" The preacher, surprised, says, "Mr. Jones, this is very unusual. How old are you?" "I'm 95," the man replies. The preacher, now excited that there's a marvelous lesson of inspiration from this man's life of faith, says, "Mr. Jones, please tell the congregation how you have lived 95 years and have no enemies – tell them your secret!" The man, very smugly responds, "I'VE OUTLIVED ALL THOSE BASTARDS!"

Well it's virtually impossible to try to outlive the reality that there are lots of people in the world with whom we are mad at because they have offended us, even sometimes in unspeakable ways - never mind the people in the world who are mad at us because we have hurt or offended them. Since we can't simply get rid of the problem by outliving one another – if we are going to live an Easter faith, we have to face that difficult challenge of learning and practicing how best to forgive, and how to be forgiven.

I find it interesting and helpful that the first thing that is said to the followers of Jesus on what we now call Easter morning, is "Do not be afraid". Several times they are reminded, "Do not be afraid." Why is that – what is the fear Jesus is speaking to? One perspective I have come to believe about this is that we are always very afraid to see and meet, face to face, the people we have offended or who have offended us.

Here we have the disciples – all of whom just let Jesus down a few nights before – deserting him and pretending they didn't know him – leaving him to die a lonely death on the cross. Now granted they didn't expect to see him again – but all of a sudden there he is – and no doubt the first reaction of the disciples was fear, guilt, shame. Perhaps the early disciples were the first ones to coin that famous phrase – The Good News is that Jesus is coming, and the bad news, is that wow, is he mad!"

So many times you have heard me preach that redemption – forgiveness – happens best face to face. And so when Jesus comes face to face with his sinful and shamed disciples – he tries to ease their obvious discomfort by reassuring them, "Do not be afraid." In other words, "I am not

here to punish you. My presence is one of forgiveness, compassion and love – for these things are the ONLY things that will bring you hope and new life."

As Martin Luther King JR once said, "Fear is mastered only through love."

Judas – committed suicide after betraying Jesus – because he couldn't face himself or his friends – he didn't have any helpful understanding of forgiveness and unconditional love.

He destroyed himself before he had a chance to hear Jesus greet him, face to face, and say, "Do not be afraid".

Think about how we feel about facing someone whom we have just offended, rejected, violated, or disappointed. When we have done something hurtful to someone, the last thing we want to do is face them. We anticipate that what is coming is anger, punishment or revenge and naturally we try to avoid it.

When I was caught cheating on a NY State Math Regent final exam when a senior in High School – the last thing I wanted to do was face my parents – or go into the school the next day and face my friends and teachers and fellow students. But doing so helped me experience the forgiveness that helped me develop a better understanding of God's unconditional forgiveness and love.

Most of you know the church suffered almost \$25,000 of vandalism and damage from three people trying to rob our offices last fall. A few weeks ago, I and those on the office staff, were confronted with the question of whether we just give lip service to this Christian message of forgiveness, or whether or not we are going to try to practice it. One of the three people, the woman Stephanie, called me and said that the court was making her do restitution, and since she had no money, she wanted to know if she could come and do community service here at the church.

And so we met with her. I'm sure having to face those she violated was the last thing she wanted to do. Meeting this woman, getting to know her and learning of the severe deficits in her background, began poking holes in my own anger and fantasies of calling my Mafia cousins in Yonkers NY for revenge on these intruders.

Now you've also heard me preach that forgiveness does not have to mean reconciliation. Reconciliation with Stephanie may never happen– we don't have to become friends. And it will be a long time, if ever, that I will trust this woman. But forgiveness in no way requires that you trust the one you forgive. While forgiveness does not excuse anything, we can't let anger and loss prevent us from forgiving. To not forgive is like drinking poison and waiting for the other person to die.

Jesus' Resurrection transforms life from the commonly accepted cycles of anger, retaliation and revenge into a new kind of life that tears down the barriers that divide us. When we come face to face we see the human hearts behind the hurt and angry faces, the fear behind the violence. For me and the rest of the staff the process of forgiveness began because we were forced to come face to face with a person who violated us.

Who do you need to forgive? Who needs to forgive you? Do you need to forgive yourself? Relationships will always be complicated and difficult – and yet forgiveness will always be at the very heart of making them work. And while not helpful in all cases, sometimes, coming face to face with one another will be one way we practice and discover that forgiveness is the key to becoming an Easter people.

Easter is more than a proclamation that someday when we die we will be in heaven. Easter is a proclamation of the power and presence of God in our hearts and minds, helping us to overcome those things that rob life of its meaning, helping us to overcome the tragedies and grief that we face, helping us to overcome fear and hatred, and - helping us to forgive and be forgiven. If we let it, Easter can change how we mourn, how we hope, how we endure, how we live.

And starting today, we can truly live life - to the fullest - because we hear Jesus say to each and every one of us, "Do not be afraid."