



March 23, 2008

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

John 20:1-18

“A New Way of Seeing”

Happy Easter friends! Christ is Risen (“He is risen indeed!”)

Here we are, all dressed up, glad to see spring arrive, ready to eat some Easter goodies, enjoying the special music and the beauty of the sanctuary----- it’s Easter!

So- what’s all the fun and celebrating about? We just said it: **CHRIST IS RISEN!** Ok, that’s good news for Jesus! But it’s good news for us, too—Let’s think about that together.

Easter is the culmination of many things. Easter is the culmination of our journey through Lent—a time of recognizing and remembering two things: sin and death. Each year we are invited to recognize that we are not all God wants us to be. We are not all WE want to be. We are also called to recognize that we don’t have forever to wrestle with that—because our time on this earth is limited. Those two truths: we sin and we will die—are meant to nudge us closer to God and deepen our desire for him to shape us and make us into the people he intends us to be.

Easter is the culmination of that Lenten journey. Easter is the culmination of all of history told through the Bible—it’s the culmination of the many ways God has broken into this world:

In the creation of the universe

In the Exodus of the Hebrew people, brought out of slavery in Egypt

In the sending of God’s prophets, calling us to live differently

In God’s coming in the flesh at Christmas

In the life and teachings of Jesus

In Christ’s sacrifice of his life on the cross

In his being raised from death on Easter!

Easter is the culmination of the meaning of life... giving us the “end of the story”:

GOOD WINS OVER EVIL

LIFE WINS OVER DEATH

ALL IS FORGIVEN

GRACE TRIUMPHS

What is this “grace” that we talk about and sing about in church? I knew a little girl in a former church who was named “Grace”. She was convinced the hymn, “Amazing Grace” was about her! When her Dad tried to explain it wasn’t, she emphatically replied, “Well, I don’t know why not! I’m named ‘Grace’, and I’m pretty amazing!”

Friends, that’s a child who has been touched by grace- God’s grace. Because she knows she is a miracle, a wonder, a gift to this world. “Grace” in the church is God’s free, spontaneous gift of unconditional love. We do nothing to win that love, or to earn it. God just pours it out. We can do nothing to change or stop that love; God just keeps pouring it out, no matter what we do, no matter who we are. This does not mean God approves of everything we do--- definitely not! But God’s **LOVE FOR US** is constant, abiding, and fierce.

Grace can be studied and discussed, but it only changes us when we’ve **TASTED** it, **CAUGHT** it, like a blessed flu virus. Its source is always God, but we can be “carriers” or “bearers” of the “grace bug”.

This bug is contagious. God starts it off, and we continue it, passing it on as we **LIVE GRACE**—living with Jesus as our example. Christians are called to **LIVE GRACE**. Christian writer Philip Yancey asks, “What does a grace-full Christian look like?” Then he rephrases the question, “**HOW** does a grace-full Christian look?... **The Christian life ... does not primarily center on ethics or rules but...involves a NEW WAY OF SEEING.**” (REPEAT)

Living grace means **SEEING DIFFERENTLY**. What does the new way of seeing show us?

OURSELVES—just as we are. Grace enters us when we bring our imperfections in honesty to God. Light only gets in through the cracks!

An old story teaches that God holds each person by a string in life. Each time we sin, the string is cut. Then God ties it up again, making a knot, bringing us a little closer to him. Again and again we sin and the string is cut. Again and again God ties a knot. With each knot we are drawn closer to God. Some may worry that this image might **ENCOURAGE** us to sin. I’d say, “Don’t worry—we don’t need help

or encouragement--- in each day our sin, not only in actions, but in attitudes and things left undone—our sin is sufficient to draw us closer to God, as we recognize it and bring it to God.”

What else does living grace, through new ways of seeing show us?

OTHERS-

When we look with our own eyes at the church, what do we see?

We may see well scrubbed families whose lives appear to be “all together”—

OR

We may see hypocritical people who look shiny on the outside but are not so great on the inside.

When we look with the eyes of grace we see what **GOD** sees:

A community of people thirsting for **GRACE**.

Philip Yancey shares what he saw in his church when the people gathered for communion, as he looked through the eyes of grace:

A few times at my church I preached the sermon, then assisted in the ceremony of communion.... Because my wife worked for the church, and because I taught a class there.... I knew the stories of some of the people standing before me. I knew that Mabel, the woman with strawy hair and bent posture who came to the senior citizen’s center, had been a prostitute. Now she was standing at the communion rail.... Her hands outstretched, waiting to receive the gift of grace. “The body of Christ broken for you Mabel.”

Beside Mabel were Gus and Mildred, star players in the only wedding ceremony ever performed among the church’s seniors. They lost \$150 per month in Social Security benefits by marrying rather than living together, but Gus insisted. He said Mildred was the light of his life, and he didn’t care if he lived in poverty as long as he lived it with her at his side. “The blood of Christ shed for you, Gus, and you, Mildred.”

Next came Adolphus, an angry young black man whose worst fears about the human race had been confirmed in Vietnam. Adolphus scared people away from our church. Once, in a class I was teaching...Adolphus raised his hand and pronounced, “I wish I had an M-16 rifle right now. I would kill all you white honkeys in this room.” An elder in the church who was a doctor took him aside afterwards and talked to him, insisting that he take his medication before services

on Sunday. The church put up with Adolphus because we knew he came not merely out of anger but out of hunger. If he missed the bus, and no one had offered him a ride, sometimes he walked five miles to get to church. “The body of Christ broken for you, Adolphus...”

I smiled at Christina and Reiner, a ... German couple employed by the University of Chicago. Both were PhD's and ...came from the same... community in southern Germany.... Their son had just left on a mission trip to India. He planned to live for a year in the worst slum in Calcutta. They had always honored such personal sacrifice, but now that it was their son, everything looked different. They feared for his health and safety. Christina held her face in her hands, and tears dribbled through her fingers. “The blood of Christ, shed for you, Christina, and you, Reiner.”

Then came Sarah, a turban covering her bare head, scarred from where doctors had removed a brain tumor. And Michael, who stuttered so badly he would physically cringe whenever anyone addressed him. And Maria, the wild.... Italian woman who had just married for the fourth time. “Thees one will be deferent, I just know.”

“The body of Christ.... the blood of Christ”...What could we offer such people other than grace?

Strangely enough, the lens of grace reveals those outside the church in the very same light. Like me, like everyone inside the church, they too are sinners loved by God.

THIS is who we are..... me..... you. Have you seen this, too? I bet you have. This is **US**, not just people Yancey's written about in a book. The miracle is--- this vision which clearly takes in our flaws, our sin, does not lead us to despair! Don't we feel a lump in our throats of hope--- even joy! When we see ourselves as God sees us, through the light of grace? Why?

BECAUSE OF EASTER. The story of Mary Magdalene on the first Easter morning reveals she had “vision problems”. In the depths of loss and sorrow Mary saw Jesus as a gardener among the tombs.... until he spoke her name. “Mary,” he breathed, and Christ's living presence opened her eyes to a new way of seeing: “It's not the gardener.... This is God with us.... He is not gone..... he is here... he lives again!”

Because of Easter we know we are deeply flawed and broken people. **AND** we know that we are God's beloved precious children. Easter tells us that sin, sorrow

and death are real. Easter tells us that **WE** are tangled in webs of sin, sorrow and death. And Easter tells us that **GRACE** is bigger and stronger than anything else in the universe. Easter invites us to Look! **SEE!** See with the eyes of grace! And when we do we understand: Easter is the **TRIUMPH** of Grace over all that would oppose it.

Yancy reminds us that Bill Moyers' documentary film on the hymn "Amazing Grace" includes a scene filmed in Wembley Stadium in London. Various rock bands had gathered to celebrate changes in South Africa, and for some reason the promoters scheduled an opera singer, Jessye Norman, as the closing act. For twelve hours the crowd was blasted through banks of speakers. Then it was time for Norman to sing. The film focuses on a single circle of light which follows her, a majestic African American woman wearing a flowing dashiki, as she steps on stage. No band, no instruments, just Jessye. The crowd stirs, restless. Few recognize the opera singer. A voice yells for more Guns 'n' Roses. Others take up the cry. The scene is getting ugly. Alone, *a capella*, she begins to sing, very slowly.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.*

A remarkable thing happens that night. Seventy thousand raucous fans fall silent before her aria of grace. By the time she reaches the third verse, *'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home*, several thousand fans are singing along, digging far back in memories for words they heard long ago.

Jessye Norman later said she had no idea what power descended on Wembley Stadium that night. But don't you think maybe we know? The world thirsts for grace. When grace descends, the world falls silent before it.

Happy Easter-- the celebration of the triumph of grace. Grace is here. Grace is given. Grace is all we need. Grace melts all "ungrace" away. May we be faithful carriers of that grace, servants of Christ sent to help others "catch" grace in God's redemption of the world. Glory to God in the highest! Amen.