

Sermon for the Third Sunday of Easter
April 14, 2024
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Acts 3:12-19
Psalm 4
1 John 3:1-7
Luke 24:36b-48

O God, whose blessed Son
made himself known to his disciples
in the breaking of bread:
Open the eyes of our faith,
that we may behold him
in all his redeeming work.

Just before the first reading of this Third Sunday of Easter,
we witness Peter's first miracle.
As he walks into the temple he is asked for mercy from a lame man.
Peter responds:
"Silver and gold have I none,
but what I have I give unto thee:
In the name of Jesus the Christ, stand up and walk."
And the man does precisely that.

Then we get to today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, basically telling them:

You people have killed the Lord of Salvation,
the very son of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
You turned him over to Pilate.
You rejected him.
You killed the Author of Life.
And God raised from the dead.

Peter boasts of recriminations,
berates the people at the Temple.
But at the same time, he offers them forgiveness:

"Repent therefore,
and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out."

Sins are what the First Letter of John is talking about.

"All who have this hope in him purify themselves,
just as he is pure. ...
You know that he was revealed to take away sins,

and in him there is no sin.
No one who abides in him sins;
no one who sins has either seen or known him.”

John defines sin as lawlessness.
The law comes from the 613 commandments in the Torah,
Which Jesus reduces to two:
“Love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your mind.
This is the first and great commandment.
And the second is like unto it.
You shall Love your neighbor as yourself.
On these two commands hang all the law and the prophets.”

But how do we define “sin”?
In the Book of Common Prayer,
we confess we have sinned in “thought, word and deed” ...
“things done and left undone.”
We also confess the sin of not loving God with our whole heart,
and not loving our neighbors as ourselves.

In my own studies, I’ve found a simpler definition:
Sin is missing the mark, falling short,
not being able to measure up to the mark God sets for us
and the mark we set for ourselves.
That’s the problem.
How often have I heard:
Work hard enough and you will succeed.
Just pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.

I fear that this is the Great American Heresy:
We can find some way, to earn our way into God’s good graces.
And if we can earn God’s grace,
Maybe we can buy our way into heaven.
Sorry, it just isn’t so.
We must rely on God’s grace to save us from ourselves.
And the reality is:
It is only through God’s grace that we can possibly measure up.

As we say in our Baptismal vows:
Will you whenever you sin and fall away,
repent and return to the Lord?
Our response is: “I will with God’s help.”

It doesn’t say “if” you sin.
It says “whenever” you sin.
We would like to believe we can keep from sin.
Just by the sheer force of will.

It just isn't so.

As we say at the offertory:
"All things come of thee O Lord.
And of thine own have we given thee."

All we do we do with God's help.
That is the mark we must set for ourselves.
To say to ourselves: I cannot make it on my own
– but only with God's help.

We must let go of the pride that would keep us silent before God
And ask for the gift of God's grace.
Just as the beggar reached out to Peter for God's mercy,
we must humble ourselves in the service of God.

That is the measure for us in the Collect today when we prayed: "Open the eyes of our faith,
that we may behold him in all his redeeming work."

The Spanish saint Teresa of Avila wrote:

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
Compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.*

We are the work of the Lord in the world,
and we need to look around and understand
what we do for each other is the redeeming work of Christ on Earth.

Amen.