

Third Sunday of Easter (Year B)

Cathedral Church of St Peter, St Petersburg

14/15 April 2018

✠ **I speak to you in the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

I sometimes have these heretical thoughts. Well, not heretical, really. You know how tediously orthodox I am. But thoughts that are directly contrary to all the best liturgical thinking. Now fortunately for all of us, I am not in charge of worship, so I can't go imposing my latest weird thoughts on you on Sunday mornings. (And if you're asking, "Who *is* in charge of worship?" the answer is, depending on exactly what you mean, the Dean, Canon Tallman, or the Book of Common Prayer. All comes to the same thing, really.) Anyway, I do sometimes have these offbeat thoughts, and here's the one that the lectionary inspires in me today. You may notice that we're not saying the General Confession during Eastertide. Now the Prayer Book doesn't require that omission, but it does permit it, and lots of parishes, following longstanding and very theologically well-grounded tradition, make that same omission. Well, I think maybe we should have the General Confession *only* during Eastertide.

Because what we see in all our readings today is that again and again we want to roll that stone back in front of the tomb, stomp on the green blade that riseth from the buried grain, stop the new life dead in its tracks before it gets out of hand. That is sin, but it's sin that can only be seen as sin in the context of new life, in the context of Eastertide; and so wouldn't it make sense to say the General Confession in the one context in which such sin can be seen for what it is?

Take our first reading, which gives us a very abbreviated story of a healing miracle performed through Peter. (Did you know that the Prayer Book gives explicit permission to lengthen any reading? Just throwing that out there.) The miracle has become known, people rush out in amazement to see and admire the miracle-worker, and Peter begins his address: "You Israelites." Now I've read a surprising amount of commentary that worries that this speech is somehow anti-Jewish, and I can't for the life of me see it. "You Israelites," Peter begins, identifying himself as an Israelite like his hearers, and invoking the God of their ancestors, and arguing that God's saving purposes for Israel—the saving purposes God has always had for

Israel—have been accomplished through this man Jesus. Yes, you put him to death—but you didn't know. You didn't know. But now I'm telling you, and don't you want to be part of this astonishing new life?

Well, some of them didn't. Some of them wanted that stone rolled back and that intrusive green blade stomped down, and they went and ratted Peter out to the vestry of the Church of We've Never Done It That Way. But here's the thing: some of them did want it. And that's what Peter wanted: not to convict, but to invite. Come share this new life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved. And five thousand people said yes. New life for us.

And then they all just agreed and had coffee hour and it was splendid and Christians never argued ever again because the new life has no difficulties the end.

No. Death has no difficulties. It's life that's tough. Saying yes to life is saying yes to struggle and challenge and change and fear. There was only one time—one time—in the whole history of the Church where there was no room for two Christians to disagree with each other, and that was when there was only just the one Christian. For a short period, the entire Church on earth consisted of Mary Magdalene. She alone had seen the risen Christ, she alone held the entire message in her precious heart, and she alone, for that short time, was the entire Church on earth. And then she had to go and tell Peter and the rest the life-giving message. And now Peter has just made five thousand converts at his second sermon—his first sermon made three thousand, so his numbers are going up; someone make that man a bishop—and you're not going to believe the crazy things some of those people want in the next Prayer Book.

Save me, God, from the sin of saying no to new life. And not just the sin of saying no to new life for others. The sin of saying no to new life for myself. I could be Senior Warden of the Church of We've Never Done It That Way. The new green shoots are pleasant to look at, but let's not go overboard. Yet John says, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." I am a child of God. Not (or not just) a mildly pleasant chap with some interesting things to say about early-fourteenth-century philosophy. I am a child of God. As Peter told his hearers that they have been caught up in the saving

purposes of God, John tells me that I have been caught up in the saving purposes of God. The Spirit that moved over the waters of creation, the Spirit that was breathed into the nostrils of the first human being so that it would become a living thing, the wind of God that blew the waters apart so that the children of Israel could cross to their new life on dry ground, the Spirit that raised Christ from the dead, the Spirit that was invoked over the waters of baptism so that Christ's saving work would be applied to me and make me alive in Christ: all of that has made me a child of God.

All of which is, if you think about it, too amazing to comprehend, and too high a dignity to be quite comfortable. But John doesn't stop there. (Why can't he just stop there? Oh, because the new life won't be contained, and the stone won't be rolled back, but new green shoots are going to keep rising.) No, John doesn't stop there. "Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed." And as it is being revealed, will there not be a temptation to stomp on the green blade before it riseth into something we think we're not ready to become? You bet there will be. It is a specifically Easter sin—a sin that is seen to be a sin specifically in light of the Easter story—and seems to call for a specifically Easter confession.

And then there are the disciples in our reading from Luke. Joyful, right? Well, yes, but also startled, terrified, disbelieving. Jesus takes a very practical step to show them that he's not a ghost, but Luke doesn't tell us they were convinced by that, or by anything else yet, really. But, whether they are ready or not, he lays on them a commission: "You are witnesses of these things."

They weren't ready. They had no idea what it would mean. But they did say yes. How do we know they said yes? Because "Peter addressed the people: You Israelites . . . to this we are witnesses."

Look, God is going to have his way with us one way or another: either by the way of judgment, or by the way of glory. Don't you want to be caught up, fully caught up, in the Easter story in all its power, in all its glory, in all its runaway-train excitement? And if you do, from time to time, yield to the temptation to stomp a green blade or two, fortunately you don't have to go to church to confess it. Just throw yourself back on the saving work of Jesus, to whom with the Father who sent him and the Spirit who quickens us to new life, be ascribed, as is most justly due, all might, dominion, majesty, and glory, world without end. *Amen.*