

Sermon Transcript: And Then What Happened

Sometimes when I'm preparing for a sermon, I actually end up preparing two sermons. You get the one that got finished. Because as you go through a week, you're trying to figure out, well, what's the good word to bring at this time in this space with this scripture? And so this week there was this nagging feeling and it caused the writing of a sermon, but it was messy and things didn't come quite together. And so I went over and kind of started anew over here and put together this complete sermon. And I gave that sermon at the 8:00 service and it was fine, right? It's fine. I mean, you know, it's the week after Easter, folks. Okay. I mean, is the service today going to be as good as it was last week? Maybe. Will the music be as good this week as it was last week? Maybe. Will the sermon be as good as last week? Probably not.

So, you came back on what is classically one of the lowest attended Sundays of the year. So, you all are in for it. You're in. You're not like, "I don't know, do you want to go to church? I guess we will," kind of folks. You're the people who come the week after Easter. So, I wanted to give you a nice neat and tidy little message which I had. But I'm going to tell you something that happened to me is that in between the services, somebody came up to me and just needed to talk. And it was about trying to discern what the right thing to do is in their life. And man, that just dug into my head and it made me think about what's the right thing to do.

The passage today begs us to think about what is the right thing for us to be doing as the church. The passage today has literally what happens right after the Easter message. We just continued the reading from last week and Jesus appears to the disciples and there's a lot of debate over what is all the meaning in this passage. But there's this one point where Jesus, after saying several times, "Peace be with you"—it's obvious Jesus is about bringing peace. Peace be with you. It's about peace. That weighed heavily on my mind this week. Jesus is about bringing peace. This week didn't feel like it had as much peace in it as it needed.

The Assignment of the Church

He comes and he says, "I give you the gift of the Holy Spirit and the sins that you—you can actually bind sins and release people from sin." And this has been classically understood over the course of the history of the church, particularly in the Catholic church, as the ability of priests to give you absolution of your sins. That's why we have the confessional booth. This verse sets up the confessional booth. For it is the right of the church, those who put on the mantle that Christ hands down, to tell you whether or not your sins are forgiven.

Now, along came the Protestant Reformation, and we said, "I don't know about that." And our feeling is that maybe this scripture isn't so much about giving you a special ability or authority. It's more like giving you a responsibility or an assignment. That this passage that says you have the power to either bind or loosen sins—that we have believed in the course of our understanding the scriptures that this is about us being accountable and holding people accountable to the faith. About looking out into the world and identifying what is sin and what is not. By identifying where forgiveness will stand and where it will not. That you because of the Holy Spirit, you because of your faithfulness in being a follower of Jesus Christ, you will have that ability;

moreover, the assignment to do that. And when you let that which is wrong go by without comment, you are missing the assignment.

And some of us need a lot more assurance to take on that assignment. Thomas gets a bad rap, but it's just that like he missed the first party. Everybody else got to see the wounds and everything, but Thomas in our story, I don't know, he was working a second shift at the factory, but he missed the first meeting and had to meet up with them later and says, "Unless I get some evidence, some hard evidence, I'm not on board with all this." And he gets it. But Jesus is clear to say in this passage that, "But blessed are those that don't have to see. Blessed are those that just believe and then take on the assignment from there."

A Week of Messy Realities

This week was a mess. I'm going to start by saying this though: there's a lot of things that are a mess about this week that I'm going to share with you. And I just want to be very clear about this: I take it very seriously that this pulpit that I preach from is not a political stage. I am not to abuse this space and declare some allegiance to any type of political movement or thought. I believe I have to be very careful about what I say about certain government actions or political actions because it can convey the message that I'm up here trying to push some type of political agenda. I want to be very clear that's not my intention.

But I do believe that sometimes something is so wrong that it's not a political question. It's a moral question. It is a religious imperative that we speak into it. So, I don't really have any comments today to make about the government, but there's some things going on that they're involved with and I want to try to stick to that so that we can be careful that we don't fall into some type of partisan religion.

The first is that I want to share with you what happened with Kay, the mother who has been in this country for over two years on asylum because her life was in danger in Nicaragua. Came in here under an asylum—I don't know if you call it a visa or whatever—anyway, and went to her regularly scheduled check-in appointment at the federal building in St. Louis as she's done, as she's supposed to. Didn't break any laws, just went in for the check-in and never came home, leaving dad and an 18-month-old son at home, not knowing where she was. We were able to identify she's being held at a detention facility in Missouri.

And we talked about last week how we had this wonderful guy, Brad, who was going to show up and say her name. Well, we were told that this trial would happen in Kansas City and Brad was right next door to where the trial is going to be. Remember that? Those of you who were here, how amazing that was. That would be great. Except for whoever posted that online did not tell the truth. And the trial was not held there. And Brad showed up and they acknowledged that, "Yes, that's what we told everyone, but that's not what's happening." But they put Brad in a room with a monitor so that he could just sit and watch what would happen and could not speak and could not be heard and could not say her name.

And what he watched on the screen was people brought in the room half a dozen at a time, asked very complicated legal questions that then got translated, and in bunches at a time people—

judgment was put upon them. We got enough of a message to Kay such that she did know to raise her hand and say, "I would like—I'm trying to get a lawyer," but those who didn't know how were just given two choices: self-deport or we'll ship you out. That was the trial; giving them those two choices. So, you know, I don't know anything about immigration policy, so I'm not going to say anything about that. But she has an appointment with a lawyer for April 22nd that we were able to get her connected with. Thanks be to God. What the judge gave her was a continuance to April 21st and told her, "Whether you have a lawyer or not, you come back here and make a plea."

I'm not trying to be political. I don't think that was wrong. It doesn't feel like peace and justice and what is right and what is good. And I acknowledge that systems make mistakes. So maybe we're just dealing with a lot of mistakes in a row here. I went over this week to Kay's house and met with her son and dad and other members of the family. And I have to tell you that when you sit on the floor and play with an 18-month-old boy who has no idea really where mom is... it digs at your heart. There's just something wrong here. She didn't break any laws. There's no charges written down. Just, again, I'm not making a political speech here. I'm just telling you that there's a human being who's just trying to get out of danger. And this human being now is separated from her 18-month-old son.

Speaking Against the Darkness

I also had a week where I found out that statements were made that were evidently part of a war. It's a holy war. Us Christians, this is us. I thought, "When did I get invited into this?" You work so hard to keep state and politics out of the church. And then what happens when state and politics brings the church in? And I think, well, if you invite me in, then I get to talk. If you're going to invite me in and say this is mine, then I'm just going to say, then don't say that when we are in a situation where our government is saying that we are going to annihilate a civilization—that we are going to wipe out a civilization.

It's wrong. I'm not talking about a Republican/Democrat thing. I'm not talking about I'm a Trump fan or I'm not a Trump fan. I'm just saying that these words—these words are wrong. It's not a political thing. This is a faith human being. We were told to take on this mantle and it does not feel authentic to not say the words out loud that genocide is wrong. Am I really going to get in trouble for saying that? That killing an entire civilization—and I'm not saying I know how to do foreign policy, I don't know anything, I'm just a preacher—but you invited me in when you said we were part of this. So here I am in the room and saying that's not right.

At the end of the scripture passage, John says, "Look, I'm telling you all these things. I'm telling you all these stories. I'm telling you all this stuff that Jesus did so that those who hear it might"—and this is a translation little debate—"continue to believe or may come to believe." In the original Greek, it's a difference of one Greek letter. And there's old manuscripts that say "come to believe" and some that say "continue to believe." I think what that means is that the community understood that by telling these stories, by how authentic we are to the truth that we're given, by how much we stand up for what is right or what is wrong, others will look at it and then decide: "Do I believe that? Can I come to believe that?" And those who are already in

the faith, if their faith is to be maintained, we need to maintain our standing up for what is right and what is wrong. We need to be that witness out in the world.

And we're not always going to have all the facts. And sometimes we're just going to have to go off of belief, off of faith. And I'm saying to each and every one of you, you need to decide what your faith tells you. You need to decide what is right in your heart. You need to decide what God wants for the people. And then you need to speak for that and act for that and show for that in whatever unique way you have. But what we are not meant to do is to hear the good news that Christ is risen and then to go quietly back to our homes that night.

A Week of Wrongs

Some things in this world are wrong. And there's lots of things that are wrong. You look around our community and there's way too many people who are hungry. There's way too many people who don't have a place to live. There's way too many people who suffer from mental health challenges and they get lost in the system. There's way too many people who end up just going to jail because the system doesn't know what else to do with it.

Right now, right now, here's another thing in my week—you're getting unhinged, unedited Pastor Rob—another thing in my week is I have this young adult in our community who's trying to navigate the system through his own mental health challenges. And the number of hoops he has to jump through to avoid being put in jail because of a mistake that was made several years ago is ridiculous. And you hand this young person a set of forms to fill out that they can barely read and comprehend and get through and say, "If you don't fill this out and turn it in at this right time and come up with this fee and pay it over at this location and then travel to this other location and then follow up with this advisor over here—if you don't do all those things, then we're going to put you in jail for 30 days."

That's wrong.

And I guess I'm just admitting to you is that I sat through a week and saw too many things that are wrong. And it just felt like a big old mess and it seemed too hard to preach about. And I guess after this conversation with this person earlier this morning, I thought, you know, maybe it doesn't have to be neat and tidy. Maybe it doesn't have to be all figured out. Maybe it's enough just to stop and say, "It's wrong. And I'm going to look for what I can do to be part of what's right."

And your answer to what's right in this situation might be very different. Lord knows we've got all kinds of thoughts and politics and orientation and ways of being in this room. This is what I want you to hear clearly: Be a person of determined faith. Be a person of integrity with your faith. Whatever it is, it can be the complete opposite of what I would do.

Because what I believe is that what Jesus came in that moment and gave to them was the Holy Spirit, which often is revealed by not just one person acting, but it's revealed by the people of God reacting. And some of us are going to blow it. And some of us are going to do what's right.

But if enough of us try to do what is right and good and just and peace-loving and grace-filled, then I believe that the Holy Spirit guides it all.

So I might be wrong. You might be wrong. But the spirit of God will always be right. So let's look for that to guide us in telling us what's right and what's wrong. Let's speak it out loud. Let's love each other along the way. And then let's figure out what each of us can do because I don't think the answer is nothing.

You're going to have to figure out the rest. Hallelujah. Amen.