

April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday
Caldwell Presbyterian Church
Rev. John Cleghorn

People of the Gap
John 20:1-18

The photograph on the front page of the New York Times last Monday spoke more than words ever could. It showed a stately church sanctuary with thick limestone columns and ancient Christian symbols. But a closer look showed something was sickeningly amiss.

Some of the hand-carved pews lay askew atop the others. One pew was covered with dripping blood stains, reminiscent of those we see depicted on Christ's head under the crown of thorns at the crucifixion. The stains covered half of one pew, streaming from the top of the bench down to the seat, where the blood had pooled so thick in the seats it turned the old wood into a deep, dark crimson.

The scene was from last Sunday. Isis suicide bombers had attacked the Coptic Christian church during Palm Sunday mass, declaring their intent to extinguish Christianity in Egypt.

The image gave a stark reminder of the fact that we live in the in-between – between the world God desires and the world that is. As people of faith, we are people who live in that gap between the already and not yet.

Of course, there are all sorts of other earthly, temporal gaps that divide the very ground we walk on, the very air we share, or so it can seem at times. Some gaps are communal.

There is the ancient divide of race – and how it shapes other fissures. The black-white wealth gap, the stubborn education achievement gap. The segregated gaps between our neighborhoods.

Then there is the political divide, which many say has never been greater. There is also the gap between religion and culture. The gender gap. The gap between the beautiful truth and reality of LGBTQ people and the equality and acceptance that society fails to extend to them.

The gaps in our personal lives are just as plentiful. Divides between our joy, our hopes and dreams and what can seem at times the relentless drudgery of day-to-day existence. Divides in our relationships, perhaps, between what they once were or might have been and what they have become.

Or maybe we come this morning even confessing a different kind of gap. Maybe we come confessing in our hearts a gap between hearing the old story of the first Easter morning and finding its relevance in our lives amid the confounding complexity of life in 2017.

All of these splits arc back to the ultimate break between the world as it is and the world that God desires, as revealed in the prophets and the parables of scripture alongside the life and teachings of Christ Jesus.

Today on Easter morning, we might ask ourselves: As Easter people, as people of the resurrection, what does it mean to be people of reconciliation? What does it mean to be people who stand in the gaps in our lives, following our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who in his crucifixion and resurrection stood in the gap for all of us?

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One wonders. One wonders how many questions and emotions must have run through Mary's head and heart when she awoke on the day after they crucified Christ. Before the day was over, Mary would traverse a range of gaps in her experience and understanding of what God was up to.

As John tells it, the story begins in morning twilight, that narrow slip of time between night and morning. As Mary walked to the tomb of her crucified son, she was burdened by indescribable grief, numbed by a sudden rip in her reality from what might have been and what was, or so it seemed. She had come to Jerusalem thinking Jesus just might change the world. Then she saw first-hand how cruelly, coldly and cunningly the earthly powers conspired to kill him.

Upon finding the stone rolled away and the tomb empty, Mary experienced yet another gap – her confusion between her grief and her revelation, between seeing and believing, between witnessing and understanding.

In Mary's exchange with the one she assumes is the gardener, we dwell with her in that marginal space that is between mistaking and recognizing. What was it, she thought, that seemed familiar about him? Then, at the moment of her recognition, the risen Jesus tells her not to touch him, because he himself was in between, in between his resurrection and ascension.

We can hardly count the gaps and open spaces in this story – because that is its revelation. It moves between the world as it once was, the world before Christ and Resurrection, and the space and time ever since. That is the difference Easter makes, isn't it?

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God is and has always been a God of resurrection and reconciliation. In the first century, the Apostle Paul wrote these words to the church at Corinth. "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself."

In other words, in Christ God was – and is - standing in the gap for us.

Fifty years ago, our denomination looked out at the world. It was the chaotic 1960s, a period of swirling change not unlike these days in our lives. The Civil Rights movement. The early stages of the women's equality movement. The quagmire that was the Viet Nam war. The sexual revolution. The rise of the drug culture. A growing awareness of harm to the environment.

As in other times in history, the Presbyterians of that day felt called to offer a new statement of faith, a witness to where God was amid the societal storm of the 1960s. All of the issues dividing society, after all, were also dividing the church.

They focused on the theme of reconciliation in Christ. They chose a memorable phrase to describe their times – confessing that the church stood in “peculiar need” of reconciliation. “In peculiar need ... “ It was a confession that only in and through Christ could the church navigate its complex times. What resulted was one of our most powerful creeds – the Confession of 1967.

C '67, as it has become known, centered on racism, national conflict and the environment. It proclaimed that Christ’s life, death, resurrection and promised return form the church’s mission in the world. I love C'67 because it transcends its era. Sadly, it speaks to what still plagues us a nation and as a church.

The confession declared:

- That the church is called to uphold all persons.
- That the church must labor to abolish racism or any other form of oppression, exclusion or domination.
- That the sin of poverty amounts to a form of enslavement.
- That the environment is a gift of God to be protected.
- And that no nation can claim God is on its side more than any other, for to do so is to deny the Lordship of Christ Jesus over all the world.

Tragically, fifty years on, much of the work that existed then remains. The gaps and divisions that the Confession of '67 called out still mark our national life together, and our church life together. Yes, there has been some progress. Yes, much remains.

So the world and the church still stand in peculiar need of reconciliation in Christ, the one who stood in the gap then and still stands in the gap today.

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Some might say there is even more fundamental work to do for us in these days. The meaning of the word “reconcile” is to bring back together. In regard to the issue of race in America, some argue that perhaps black and white America never were “together” in the first place, never were equal, still aren’t, by a long shot. We must not assume the “re” in reconcile without asking whether we have done the hard and honest work as a nation of coming together in equality for the first time.

For us at Caldwell, helping heal the gaping wound of race is only one part of our own “peculiar” calling. We are an intersectional church, one that gathers a particular kind of diversity made up of several groups of people who have been wounded and oppressed in the broader society. African-Americans, yes, but also LGBTQ brothers and sisters and people of other differences from so-called “mainstream” America. Then there are the many of us who count ourselves as allies of those who have been marginalized.

In my doctorate study, I sought to discover other Presbyterian churches that look like us. What, if any, other Presbyterian congregations in America represent the intersection of race, sexual orientation, class, religious background and other factors of diversity that we have been given here?

My research spanned about a year. I consulted the most knowledgeable denominational leaders and academic researchers. In the end, I found 10 churches that described themselves as looking at all like this congregation. In fact, upon closer research, I could find only 5 or so Presbyterian Church (USA) congregations that intersect all of the types of diversity that God has given us. That's out of 9,800 in the denomination.

That means we have our own very particular and peculiar calling as a congregation. We're called to speak out of our intersectional life and service together. We are, in an almost unique way, people of the gap, those called to bear witness to how Christ calls us together, keeps us together and equips us to serve others threatened with marginalization and injustice.

Ten years ago on Easter Sunday, The Charlotte Observer named you the "Miracle on 5th Street." But we know the secret to the miracle, those two most powerful words. It is "in Christ" we have come this far and it is "in Christ" that we face our future together as a resurrected church.

We do so knowing the hope of the cross, just as it was expressed 50 years ago in the Confession of 1967. Reflecting on the hope we have from the cross, the confession gives us an inspiring phrase in regard to our mission.

"With an urgency born of this hope," its authors wrote. "With an urgency born of this hope, the church applies itself to its present tasks and strives for a better world."

As if to speak to our own deeply divided and challenged times in America, the Confession continued.

"(The church) does not identify limited progress with the kingdom of God on earth, nor does it despair in the face of disappointment and defeat. In steadfast hope, the church looks beyond all partial achievement to the final triumph of God."

And so, as Easter people, as people of resurrection, we are called to be people of reconciliation. We stand in the gap, in all the gaps that scar our broken and weary world, failures of understanding and acceptance in the broader society across differences of race, sexual orientation, class and religious background.

Because God came into the world in Jesus Christ. Because Christ walked among us as a person, experiencing every aspect of the human endeavor, its highs and lows, its trials and triumphs. Because Christ died and was resurrected... Because of all of these truths, we know the gap between our sin and God's grace is forever closed. And in that resurrection is liberation and strength to pursue a reality on earth as it is in heaven.

But this earthly plane is still marked by too many gaps between the world God desires and the world as it is. So, here at Caldwell, and with our lives, we respond to the call to bear witness to peacemaking, not always perfectly but at least faithfully and steadfastly.

Late last week an NPR reporter had caught up with the Bishop of the Coptic Christian church that was bombed just last Sunday, killing 50 people. His was the church where those blood stains had seeped so deeply into its age-old wooden pews, pews where worshippers sat for countless Sundays.

On this Easter, the reporter asked, could the bishop forgive the ISIS combatants who had declared war on Christianity in Egypt?

In his response, the bishop hardly hesitated.

“Absolutely, absolutely,” he said. “I don't have to forgive the act because the act was vicious and it was evil. But we're all humans. We're all under the brokenness of sin. And we all have a possibility to repent.”

“We are very happy,” he said, “to continue loving and forgiving and hoping.”

Surely as they stand in the gap, facing threats of their own extinction, these Coptic Christians draw an urgent hope from Christ's resurrection.

Surely, with the same urgent hope, we can stand in the gaps that face us here, in the name of the risen Christ.

Thanks be to God,

Amen.