

The Consolation of the Gospel

Matthew 28:1-10

March 27, 2016

Rev. Dr. John D. Suk

I am going to back into this Easter message by telling you a true story.

Years ago, when I was new to the ministry, my friend Nick and I used to get together once a month to critique each other's sermons and hopefully pick up some pointers. We'd take a whole afternoon for this, meeting in a little coffee shop about halfway between our homes in Sarnia and St. Thomas, in Strathroy. That was in the days before email, so when we arrived we first had to read each other's sermons. We'd sound them out, slowly, each whispering at our own table. We'd mark them up. Then we'd sit down together to compare notes.

The critiques were good practice for both of us, I think. We always managed to find something nice to say about the other's sermon. But we were good enough friends to be honest too.

Anyway, after doing this for a few months, Nick told me about a pattern he saw in my preaching that troubled him. He thought my sermons were too focused on what everyone in church had to do to be good Christians. My sermons were too focused on You **have to** do this. You have to **do** this. You have to do **this** and **that** and **that too**.

I objected. We were Reformed pastors, I said, so this was expected. In our Reformed faith tradition—that means in the Calvinist tradition, which is shared by the United Church in Canada—in our Calvinist tradition we believed in transforming the world. We believed that all parishioners, whatever their occupation, had to do their work just right, to bring about shalom, justice and love. But doing so is difficult, so as their preacher I had to offer many sermonic reminders and exhortations to my congregation to keep it up when it came to doing the right thing. In that community that meant, "support your local parochial Christian school. Vote and campaign. Don't have sex until after you are married. Consider the poor when you do your firm's purchasing or hiring. Don't cheat. Love one another in all things. Read good books. Study. Attend church twice a week, live simply," and on and on. **You have to do this. Or else.**

I suppose that, being 30 at that time and in my first charge, I was a bit too impressed with myself and especially with the spiritual and moral authority that I thought had been handed to me at my ordination. Why shouldn't I tell my congregation what to do? That's what they hired me for.

By now, looking back at those old sermons, I know that Nick was right. I was far too eager to lay down the rules and regulations, the habits and the commands, the piety and the

requirements of Christianity. There was a lot of finger-waving, but not much good news in my preaching—not much *consolation*.

Now, you might think this sort of “preachy,” demanding Christianity that Nick objected to is something that only Conservative Evangelical churches are into. But it isn’t. This sort of “preachy,” demanding Christianity can be a real problem for unlimited, unorthodox, united churches too.

You see, in liberal churches, the focus has long been not on orthodoxy, but on doing social justice. Now, in general, social justice is a great thing—better than great, in fact. But if I limited my preaching to social justice, to insisting that we must imitate Jesus, must always love our neighbours, change the world, do what it takes to make justice and peace embrace—if I limited my preaching to “you have to do this social justice stuff,” I would be doing the exact same thing that I did in my first congregation. I’d always be waving my finger at you, cajoling you, and pushing you, eventually angering you or making you feel insecure, or both.

Finally, that focus on what you have to do, Sunday after Sunday, is eventually going to make church seem like a big downer. You will feel constantly scolded. And that isn’t much fun.

Which brings me to Easter. Easter is God’s cure for preachers who are big nags. Easter is about the consolations of the gospel.

Now, don’t get me wrong. I know that God is a mystery beyond us that we’ll never quite pin down. I also know that it is impossible to understand what happened to Jesus’ body on Easter morning. But getting loud or angry or pounding my fist on the pulpit to insist on a particular interpretation of this ancient resurrection mystery, or dwelling on how little we know about Easter doesn’t really illuminate the good news of Easter.

And whatever else Easter is, Easter is good news. In the stories of the resurrection, we learn that in spite of all the injustice and trouble in the world that led to the death of a good man like Jesus, God’s ultimate design is that life wins.

For example, in the wake of Easter, Jesus’ disciple, Peter, was forgiven, even though he denied knowing Jesus. God’s design for the world is that the women who find the tomb empty go out dancing. God’s design for the world is that the church, as a place of kindness and love, would outlast Rome and its violent system of justice, so-called. God’s design for the world is that foreigners and women and slaves are recognized as fully human. God’s design for the world is that it be a place not only where shalom is possible, but that the world be a place where sometimes shalom runs rampant.

Look, this has been a tough week in the world. The citizens of Brussels—and lest we forget—the citizens of Homs and Ankara and Yemen and Bagdad—have experienced terror that we can hardly imagine. And, many of us have come to church this morning wearing masks, because we’re struggling with private illness or impending death or financial ruin or broken

relationships with siblings or parents or kids. Another report on climate change came out this week that said it is all happening faster than projected, and that before the end of this century large areas of North America's coastlines will have to be abandoned due to rising water. We have debts we cannot pay, bosses we cannot please, and bodies that promise nothing but trouble in the future.

Now, I could get on this pulpit, I guess, and insist that you go out there and fix all of this stuff. Fast! I could say that it is your responsibility. I could wag my fingers and make you feel guilty for not doing enough, or inept for not doing it right.

But it is Easter, so none of that. Instead, I offer you the consolation of the gospel. Following in the rumors of Jesus resurrection, the good news is that new life is possible—and not only possible, but new life may break out when we least expect it, and new life is going to get the last word, too.

And the good news of the gospel that I did not understand as a young preacher is just this: Life is a divine gift. That means there is **nothing** you have to do. There is nothing you **have** to do.

Life is a gift. Enjoy it. It's a God-thing.