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**The Implications of Easter (1)**  
*“Declared with Power by the Resurrection”*  
Romans 1:1-7

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Diogenes Allen is a professor of Philosophy at Princeton Theological Seminary. With a name like Diogenes how could he have become anything else? In one of his books Diogenes describes a conversation that he had with a person who claimed that religion had nothing to offer him. *“Why should I go to church,”* that person asked, *“if I have no religious needs?”* (1)

Now we would probably answer a question like that by talking programmatically first. We’d say things like, *“you need to come to church because the choir is inspiring, or the Bible Studies are lively, or the preaching is provocative, or the Grief and Divorce Recovery programs are helpful, or the fellowship is loving and accepting, or the youth ministry is vital.”* Some of us might even up the stakes of the conversation theologically, and challenge the notion that it’s possible to be a human being and not have religious needs. But I suspect that there’s not a person sitting here in this sanctuary this morning who would have responded to this individual in quite the same way that Diogenes did.

*“Why should I go to church?”* was the question; and Diogenes’ answer was simply, *“because Christianity’s true.”* Now, just as soon as he’d said it, Diogenes says that he knew that it sounded *“foolhardy”* and *“audacious.”* This isn’t how we usually think. Very few of us are comfortable these days making any claims for truth beyond what we think is true for us personally. We live in a relativistic culture, which simply means that you’ve got your truths and I’ve got my truths, but there’s no such thing as truth – something that is always and everywhere true for everyone.

Twice during Holy Week I saw dramatic presentations involving Christ’s appearance before Pontius Pilate. In the course of Pilate’s interrogation of Jesus, the conversation found in the Gospel of John turns to the subject of truth. Jesus said, *“For this I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.”* Then Pilate replied, *“What is truth?”* (18:37-38). And I suspect that we’re more comfortable with Pilate than we are with Christ in this. Pilate wondered if there really was anything that was true while Jesus said that he was the truth.

This connection of Jesus Christ with the truth is something that the Gospel of John especially emphasizes. John tells us that Jesus is the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth (1:14) who is the source of grace and truth for us (1:17). In

the Gospel of John Jesus said, "...you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (8:32). And then, later, Jesus made it clear that He Himself was "the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). And after His departure, in the Gospel of John, Jesus promised that He would send "the Spirit of truth" (14:17) whose ministry it would be to "guide us into all the truth" (16:13).

You see, truth is an important category that the New Testament uses to tell us about who Jesus Christ is. But let's be clear about how this category of truth is actually used.

*Jesus didn't say to his disciples, "I am here to tell you about the truth." He says, "I am the truth." ...Jesus did not arrive among us enunciating a set of propositions that we are to affirm. There is no point at which Jesus says, "You need to believe four propositions about me: number one: I was born of a virgin; number two: Scripture is inerrant..." Jesus doesn't talk like that. Jesus never asks us to agree; he asks us to join up, to follow... He did not say, "I have come to start a discussion about what is true." Rather, he came saying, "I am the truth." The truth is a person, personal. (Willimon)*

This is what Elton Trueblood, the Quaker theologian who was such a good friend of this congregation for so many years, meant when he said that "*the primary proposition for the Christian, his ultimate act of faith, is the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ*" (35). It's why when somebody comes forward to become a part of this community of faith that we don't grill them on the specifics of their theology but ask them instead about a relationship – "*Do you know Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, your personal Lord and Savior?*"

As Dr. Trueblood used to say –

*Faith is a personal commitment to Jesus Christ. For the Christian, Christ is not the end of the quest; He is the beginning. Starting with Him, we are forced by intellectual integrity to proceed a long way. If we are committed to Him, we trust Him about the being and character of God, about the reality of prayer, about the possibility of miracle, about the life everlasting. The deepest conviction of the Christian is that Christ was not wrong. (39)*

And according to our Scripture lesson this morning from the beginning of the book of Romans, it's the resurrection of Jesus Christ that establishes the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ once and for all.

For the next few weeks we are going to be talking about what has been called "*Spiritual Easter*." Last Sunday morning, Easter, I talked about my conviction that Jesus Christ was bodily resurrected on the third day. I believe that the tomb was empty and that Jesus was seen. This is "*Physical Easter*." It refers to what happened. "*Spiritual Easter*" refers to the difference it all makes. And while there are lots of implications to the fact that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead on the third day, there is no meaning that the New Testament attaches to this event that is more important than the way that it "*shows*

*powerfully that Jesus Christ was the Son of God*" (Romans 1:4). By raising Jesus Christ from the dead *"God has affirmed that Jesus really was, all along, His 'Son'"* (Wright 125). It vindicates His mission and validates His claims. I like the way that the historian Arnold Toynbee expressed this truth.

In his book The Study of History Toynbee devoted an entire chapter to the study of saviors. He talked about the four kinds of saviors who have shown up on the stage of human history: saviors with a scepter – the political saviors; saviors with a book – the philosophical saviors; saviors with a sword – the military saviors; and saviors from imagination – the mythological saviors. And then Toynbee pointed out how each one of these savior types – the politicians, the kings, the generals, the revolutionaries, the teachers, the gurus and the mystic heroes and heroines – all of them *"ultimately capitulated to the great enemy death"* (Halverson 25). As he explained, *"When the last civilization shall have come to the river of death, there on the other side filling the whole horizon with Himself will be the Savior."*

You see, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day is not just about His personal survival, it's about the certification of Jesus as the Christ; God's stamp of approval. By raising Jesus from the dead, God publicly and permanently endorsed Christ's teachings as true and His work as complete. It's an important part of what gives us our confidence in the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we can know that Christianity's true. So, what do we do with this knowledge?

We Christians don't have a very good track record of handling the truth. The Crusades, the Inquisition, the Wars of Religion, the burning of heretics and the Holocaust are all examples of what some Christians have done with the truth. Without a doubt, people with sure convictions can be some of the most difficult people you'll ever have to deal with. I met some of them on the sidewalks outside the Convention Center in Kansas City where the General Assembly of the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*) was meeting in the summer of 2001. They hoisted hateful placards and spewed vicious words, all in the name of Jesus Christ.

Fred Phelps and the members of the Westboro Baptist Church of Topeka, Kansas, have staged some 20,000 of these protests since 1991. Convinced that they have the truth, they'll tell you in no uncertain terms that they're right and you're wrong. And while they clearly represent a lunatic fringe in the church, they nevertheless pose a dilemma that all faithful people must face sooner or later. If you believe that you have the truth, then how do you relate to people who disagree with you? Must we necessarily be bullies? Are exclusion and arrogance our only options? George Hunsinger doesn't think so.

A professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Dr. Hunsinger is the leading spokesperson for a position in the church today that's known as *"Generous Orthodoxy."* *"Generous Orthodoxy"* tries to take both of the ideas that appear in its name with utmost seriousness. *"Generous Orthodoxy"* suffers no lack of conviction about the full truthfulness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It enthusiastically affirms everything that the New Testament asserts about Jesus Christ and His saving work. By its very definition, *"orthodoxy"* takes the question

of truth seriously. It recognizes that our beliefs must line up with the truth of who Jesus Christ is and what Jesus Christ has done.

But in doing this, *“Generous Orthodoxy”* recognizes that it can’t be fully faithful to the truth that it finds in Jesus Christ without at the same time being humble, patient, gentle and kind; in other words, *“generous.”* If those who know the truth are not acting in ways that are consistent with the truth that they say they know, then the truth is not really being served very well is it? If we believe that Jesus Christ is the truth, a claim that is grounded in the vindication of His resurrection according to our Scripture lesson this morning, then it seems to me that our commitment to the truth is not primarily a matter of assent to a set of abstract ideas and their promotion at any cost, but rather should be expressed in our desire to be more and more like Him. If Jesus who is the truth wasn’t a spiritual and moral bully, then how can we who say that we’re following Him be spiritual and moral bullies ourselves? And if Jesus who is the truth was always considerate and respectful of others, then how can we who believe that He really is the truth be otherwise?

For decades now I’ve wrestled with a little story that I first read back in Seminary in the late 1970’s. It was in Jim Duke’s course on modern Christianity that I was first introduced to Gotthold Lessing’s *“Parable of the Rings”* from his play *“Nathan the Wise.”* It tells the story of a wise king who wore a magic ring that had been handed down from father to son for generations. The power of the ring was in its ability to make its wearer blessed; beloved of both God and man. But this particular king had three sons, all of whom he loved dearly. Unable and unwilling to choose between them, he had two perfect copies of the ring crafted so that when he died all three sons would be given one.

Soon a feud between them developed; each brother insisting that he wore the true ring while his brothers wore the fakes. Finally their dispute was brought before a wise judge who declared it impossible to know which ring was the real one and who therefore decreed each brother to start acting as if the ring he wore were it.

*Let each one strive to gain the prize of proving  
by results the virtue of his ring, and aid its power  
with gentleness and heartiest friendliness,  
with benevolence and true devotedness to God...*

If we believe that Christianity is true, and I do, then the way to show it is by living out the truth of Jesus Christ *“before the eyes of others”* (Neill in Mouw 44). We need to look like that truth that we say we believe.

Last week in my preparations for Maundy Thursday, I spent some time with the Gospel of John’s account of what happened in the Upper Room. And with new forcefulness it hit me that when Jesus got up from the table, took off his outer robe, girded Himself about with a towel and washed His disciples feet, that it was in full awareness of the truth of who He was and what He was there to do (13:3). The truth of Christianity is all bound up with this idea that Jesus Christ was not here to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many

(Mark 10:45), so that if we say that we are committed to that truth, then it will be "*in paths of service free*" that we show it.

If you've never considered the truth of Christianity, or are willing to reconsider it, I'll be remaining down front after the service this morning, and I'd like to connect with and begin a conversation that I believe could very well change your mind, and change your life. And if you already believe that Christianity is true, but have never publicly declared it by a confession of faith, or by baptism, or by membership in a local church, then this morning is your opportunity to do so. If it's really true, then what could matter more than personally owning it in an act of public witness? And if you are already a disciple of Jesus Christ and a member of a community of faith, then the truth of Christianity is something we've got to live passionately, consistently, and deliberately. This week let's seek ways to show the truth of Jesus Christ that we say we believe. Let's pray ---

## Sources

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