

One of the most amazing moments in Jesus' life came just before he died. In mortal agony on the cross he says, "Father, forgive them. They know not what they do."

Some say that's proof of his divinity. He's not like us; he's divine. Even from the cross, he forgives.

Well, today in our Gospel, his divine forgiveness continues.

It's Easter evening. That morning, the Risen Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene at the tomb, and she'd run to tell the disciples the good news. But though they'd heard it, they're hiding behind locked doors.

That's when the Risen Christ appeared to them.

And when he does the first thing he says to them is, *Peace!* Why did he say, *Peace*? Because they were afraid! Fearful that the same authorities who crucified him were now hunting them down!

But maybe they weren't only afraid of the Romans but of Jesus! Yes, Jesus! Jesus, who'd come back! Remember what they'd done! At the last supper, they'd promised that they'd stick with him. Yet when it got dark and the soldiers came for him, they all ran away. Judas wasn't his only betrayer.

So, their fear was understandable. Roman soldiers could do them great violence; but with Jesus they'd have to face their shame, and what he might say or do because of it.

"Where were you?" He'd say. "I had a good view from the cross. I saw the soldiers! I saw my mother, but not you! So, what happened to, "we'll stick with you no matter what?"

But that's not what happens. The Risen Jesus comes among these pitiful disciples and says simply, "Peace!" He forgives them for their unfaithfulness.

So, if you thought Jesus had surely expended all his forgiveness with those amazing words, there on the cross, think again. Once he's raised, the forgiveness continues, this time with his betrayers.

He pronounces "peace" upon these weak, fickle disciples before any of them ask for it. This isn't how we usually think of forgiveness. For us, if we forgive at all, the offender has to ask for it, say "I'm sorry," then, maybe, we'll forgive.

But that night, nobody asked to be forgiven. Nobody said, "I'm sorry," or "We really let you down by running away." Yet, before they could say such things, Jesus said, "Peace," as from the cross he said, "Father, forgive." There's no confession, no contrition, only "Peace." In other words, "I forgive you."

"Who is this who forgives sin?" Jesus' critics complained. And when he kept at it, they got so angry they killed him. But if you thought that preemptive forgiveness ended with his crucifixion, wrong! Jesus is raised from the dead and what's the first thing he does? Forgives his disciple! Forgives us!

Remember, Jesus' story about a farmer who had a fig tree. For three years he came looking for fruit. Fig trees should bear every year. But for three years, no fruit! *Cut it down!* he said. But his servant pleaded, *Master, let it alone. I'll put some dung on it, dig around it, and see what happens.* The Greek literally says, *forgive it.*

Cut it down! That's what such a rotten tree deserves. Yet, *forgive it!* is how the story ends. Our master is forgiving, so there's still time. We get another chance because it's God's nature to forgive.

Easter offers a chance to start over! But we have to accept the offer! We can begin by accepting Good Friday's unwelcome picture of ourselves, that shows clearly what we are - sinners! That honest acceptance frees us to hear Easter's message, "Give up the struggle to be innocent and the hope that God will say you're right and everyone else is wrong. Sure, it's hard. It's easier to say, "I didn't do it," or "it's not my fault," or "but look at what he or she did." But when we do that, ourselves, or on behalf of our children, we not only deprive ourselves (or them) of a chance to learn and grow, and to

take responsibility for our mistakes (or theirs), but we also deprive ourselves (and them) of a chance to learn about forgiveness, grace, and love.

Our life together doesn't depend on always being innocent or right; none of us can be either - all the time. No, our life together depends on forgiveness and trust, things all of us can give each other, every day. If we try to hide or deny our mistakes, or our children's, we have neither, forgiveness nor trust. And when we don't have them, we can't have a faith family. All we have is a bunch of shifting gatherings and alliances that depend on who has pleased or displeased whom lately.

So, instead of that denying and hiding, Jesus invites us to simply ask for the forgiveness we need, the grace we need to be free. He asks us to just admit that we need the gift that he's so eager to give.

And, once we've received it, he commands, he doesn't ask or invite, he commands us, to offer to others what we've just received. In fact, he says that unless we grant others the forgiveness he's given us, we haven't really received his forgiveness. We've only thought we have. His forgiveness, real forgiveness, fosters forgiveness in us. You can't receive it, without wanting to, trying to, pass it on.

To say, in the Apostles' Creed, that we believe in the forgiveness of sins doesn't mean that offences don't matter, nor that things can easily be made right again, but that even our worst failures can't shut a door to God. Failure and hurt can be overcome, first by God, and with God's help, by us.

On the cross, Jesus prayed to God to forgive. It'd be scandalous enough if that was his only forgiveness, but then, on Easter evening, he forgave again. That's how he enabled his fickle followers to keep following him, no, to start over, to begin again. Without forgiveness they couldn't have done it.

In Easter, God not only overcomes our death but decisively deals with our sin, our tendency to turn from God. It's up to God to do something about the problem between us and God. In the resurrection and his return to the very people who so hurt and betrayed him, that's what Jesus, the Son of God, does. By forgiving us, he makes right relationship possible.

We forgive because God in Christ forgives us. We cross no bridge to forgive someone who's hurt us that God's not already crossed in order to get to us. The goal of forgiveness, human or divine, is to restore relationship. In the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God has paid a heavy price to rebuild and to restore the divine-human relationship that we could never have repaired ourselves.

So, forgiveness isn't just something Christians engage in from time to time, if we have the energy and inclination; it's at the heart of what it means to be Christian. The God who made a way toward us in Jesus, is the God who expects us to make a way toward others. So, forgiveness isn't optional for Christians, something reserved for the saintly. It's the normal way of Christian life.

So, when there's a break in our relationship with someone, we're called to begin the work that moves us toward forgiveness. We're to pray for the strength to forgive, to build a bridge to that person. We're not expected to *forgive and forget*, to sweep anything under the rug, to pretend that a wrong never happened. We're expected to forgive. To do everything we can to stay in relationship.

That doesn't mean that God expects us immediately to forgive when the wound caused by the wrong is still sore and bleeding. But we must be clear that wrongs against us are not to be dwelt upon and enlarged. We're to pray that God will give us the grace to do what Christ commanded us to do - forgive those who "trespass against us" as we have been forgiven.

It's sad, that we speak of Jesus' forgiveness, pray for it every week, but have so little of his relentless desire to share it, his passion for reconciliation. We're way too ready to find fault, to list grievances, to become estranged, separated, and stay that way, to excuse our distance from others, even the whole faith family, because of their "faults." Jesus didn't let our faults keep him away from us.

How sad it is, that in families, families by birth or families of faith, people get angry and turn away from each other. “So and so did this. I don’t like him, her, or them, I quit; I’m staying away.” Away, from mom and dad! Away, from the person or the group! How easily we do it! Something happens, and boom, it’s all over; we toss away years of relationship. We withhold our selves, our presence, our gifts. And if we can get others to join us, a friend, child, sister or brother, so much the better!

And then we begin to structure our life so there’s no going back, no starting over. We fill the time and space that used to be shared with other stuff. We do the opposite of what Jesus calls us to do. We not only don’t try to go back, we make it harder to go back.

When we do that we’re literally staying away from home. No, we’re destroying home! Jesus’ shows us that we can’t really be at home, can’t really be right with God or ourselves, until and unless, we forgive those who’ve hurt, angered, or disappointed us, until we’ve tried to be right with them. That’s why, when he came back to the disciples who’d hurt him, the first thing on his agenda was to forgive them, to grant them “peace.” He had to try to be right with them.

What a miracle of forgiveness! Almost like the miracle of resurrection! Though our relationship to God is as good as dead, because of our sin, in Jesus, God forgives us. We can begin again; we can forgive those who’ve hurt us and angered us. We can share in the forgiveness miracle! We can go home again!

Easter means this: No matter how you’ve failed God, how you’ve betrayed Jesus, remember to whom he first appeared after his resurrection, and remember what he said – *Peace. I forgive you.* And, Easter also means this: No matter how anyone has failed you, and how far you’ve turned from them, cut them out of your lives, you can join Jesus in saying, *Peace. I forgive you!* Easter reveals a forgiving God who wants to help us become forgivers, too. So, we can have and we can share, the right relationship with God and others Jesus wants for us all, the relationship he died and rose to give to us. That’s the gift he offers. Let’s not be too afraid, too proud, or too stubborn, to accept it.

Lord Jesus,

In the afterglow of Easter, we reflect on the implications of your stunning, unexpected resurrection. What amazes us today is not only that you were resurrected, that you came back from the dead, ...but that you came back to us!

Though we miserably failed you, you did not fail us.
You returned to us and forgave us.

For your gift of new life, eternal life, we give you praise.
And for the gift of new beginnings, forgiveness, and reconciliation, we give you praise.

We ask that you help us remember our reasons to be grateful for your great gift of forgiveness,
...and that you help us see that there is no way we can be your people,
...no way we can be right with you, without sharing that gift with others,
...without doing the hard work of getting past the things that hurt us and make us angry,
...in order to forgive and be reconciled with those we find difficult,
...even with those we count as enemies.

Help to quit nursing our angers and resentments, enflaming and enlarging them,
...focusing on the things that make us dislike or even despise those who are difficult for us.
Help us, instead, to remember that forgiveness is what you want of us, that you believe we can do it,
...and that you'll be there to help us.

Help us want this, first because we love you.

Help us to want it, too, because you've shown it's the only way to new beginnings, healing, and life.

For the good news of who you are, human, suffering, sharing our infirmities and sorrows, lamenting,
...struggling, resisting temptation, suffering death on the cross,
...and through it all teaching, guiding by example, challenging, comforting, healing,
...we praise you, knowing now the victory of the resurrection
...and secure in our hope for the restoration of your righteousness in all creation!

For the reality of who you are, risen, returning to us, offering us peace, blessing us,
...confirming that death is not the end, preparing us for our own resurrection,
...a life where we have been raised above distracted and selfish living,
...to share in your life, a life of loving self-giving, mercy, and forgiveness.
...we praise you, knowing now the victory of the resurrection
...and secure in our hope for the restoration of your righteousness in all creation!

Let it be, that we who die, and fear dying, may know your presence and your comfort,
...that our days might be spent not in fear but in hope,
...anticipating through your resurrection our own share in your triumph,
...and in the reign of your love and peace.

As those who you have granted resurrection life, we pray for those dear to us.

We pray for ...

Loving Jesus, be with all these people, work your resurrection life in their lives.

We pray in your name. Amen.

The Word with Children

We know a lot about Jesus. We know Jesus was sent by God. We know Jesus died for us on the cross. We know Jesus rose from the dead. We know about the miracles he performed and things he taught. If you wanted to know something about Jesus, where could you look?

(Let the children answer. Assuming one of the children might answer “the Bible,” you might continue:)

That’s right. The Bible. There’s a lot we can learn about Jesus. And we learn it in church, in Sunday school, in books, from our family and friends – but all that they can teach us comes from the Bible.

But there are things we don’t know about Jesus. There are things we might want to know about Jesus – How tall was he? What color was his hair? Could Jesus sing? What was his favorite color? What was his favorite food? Who was his best friend? Could Jesus run real fast?

What would you like to know about Jesus?

(Allow the children to answer.)

Why do you think the Bible doesn’t tell us everything about Jesus?

(Allow the children to answer.)

Well, here’s one reason. In the Gospel of John it says, “Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:30-31).

In other words, the reason the Bible tells us certain things about Jesus is so that we can believe Jesus is sent from God and so we can have real life. God wants us to have the kind of life where we love each other and know people love us, where we love God and know that God loves us, and because of that we do wonderful things for each other.