

**“Forgiven and Free”**  
**A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRoade**  
**The Resurrection of the Lord**  
**Easter Sunday**  
**April 4, 2010**  
**Scripture: John 20:1-18**  
**(with reference to Luke 15:1-3; 11-32)**

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION:** *Glorious Lord of life, as we hear and think about your Word to us today, grant that as we celebrate with joy Christ’s rising from the dead, we may be encouraged to live the way you would have us live. Amen.*

Don’t you just love Easter morning? There is a note of jubilation in the air which simply can’t be beat. Easter proclaims that all the tenderness and love of Christ, which on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we saw scorned and mocked and stretched out on a cross – all that beauty and goodness are alive again. Here we are in this beautiful place, filled with the beauty and sweet aroma of Easter lilies, and surrounded by the grand Easter music. Some of us are here every week and some of us only come on Easter morning – but regardless of how often we are here, today we are *all* here – and everybody is all dressed in their Easter finery. We began our worship time together, not with our usual “Good morning”, but instead with “Christ is risen...He is risen, indeed!” And we sang “Jesus Christ is Risen Today”; even raising our voices a bit above the accepted level for Presbyterians at worship. What could be better than this?

It occurs to me, though, that regardless of how well dressed we are or how well dressed the sanctuary is, we arrived today just like we do every Sunday – as a motley crew. One family is smiling, though the beads of sweat under their collars tell us that just ten minutes ago they were yelling in the car. Why is it so hard to get ready for church, no matter what the day and no matter what time the worship service starts?

There is a woman wondering if her friend two pews up has gained weight or was that just an unfortunate wardrobe choice? There’s a man in a suit who looks prosperous, but he wonders if he will ever

be able to buy a new suit now that his business has taken such a downturn. There’s a woman wondering if she can make it if she leaves her husband. There’s a little boy who loves church because it’s the only time that his parents are both next to him for more than five minutes. There’s a little girl drawing pictures of horses as she wonders whether people will be nice to her in Sunday school. There are people here who have already been reading Scripture and people who have already had their first drink.

There are people who lose all track of time, lost in worship, and people who have already calculated how long each part of the service will take and when we’ll get out if the preacher actually quits on time.

Yes, even on this special day – this Easter Sunday – it’s just us. It’s just us – a rag tag collection of humanity who all happen to be disciples of Jesus Christ. Nothing has changed. It has always been this way. Our Creator God has chosen to make himself known through a community made up of the likes of us. The gospel of salvation in Christ, the thundering news of triumph over sin and death, the very hope of the human race, is going to be passed along through people like us, or not at all. You may well wonder, “God, what were you thinking?”

Do you think those original disciples might have been wondering the same thing? Just think – Jesus was dead. His death was a violent and painful one. And then less than 40 hours later, his closest followers were in a state of shock. They could not believe what had happened. Suddenly, he had come into their lives, and just as suddenly, he was gone.

They felt hurt. They had come to see that Jesus had something to offer – something they could not do without. How, now, would they live without him?

They felt anger. Anger for those who did not stop until they got what they wanted: Jesus dead. Anger at themselves for not doing more to prevent it from happening, because they saw it coming, they felt it coming. And, anger at Jesus for letting them do it – for letting them kill him – and for leaving them alone.

They felt empty inside, drained, numb. When Jesus died, something inside of them died with him.

They were just as much a rag tag bunch as we are.

And then something happened – something beyond wonderful, past amazing: Jesus came back from the dead.

Easter morning is probably one of the most difficult days for which to write a sermon. Those of you who come to church only on the high, holy days of Christmas and Easter look forward to a sermon based on the traditional texts for those special days. So...what’s a preacher to do?! It really is not easy to try and meet every one of your needs. But...those of you who are here every week, or at least most every week, know that for the last month or so we have been focusing on the theme of forgiveness.

So this morning, we will continue with that theme, and while my sermon will in part be based on our lectionary texts, we will also revisit the text with which we started our Lenten Series – the story to which we usually refer as “the Prodigal Son.” However, since one of the books I have been reading for the last few months is “The Prodigal God”, written by Timothy Keller, we are going to consider this story with new eyes, as we hear it from this side of the cross.

Just to recap the story: There was a father who had two sons. The younger of the two asked his father to give him his share of the inheritance “now”, which the father did. With his new found wealth, the younger brother set out on his own to make a new life for himself. He ended up squandering everything he had, and eventually came back home.

Before he had gotten to the door, the father came running out to meet him. He threw a major party in celebration of his son’s return. But, when the older brother heard about all of this, he was angry! He said to his father, “I have always done what you wanted, and you have never thrown me a party. But for him, who has wasted your money on wine, women and song, you pull out all the stops.”

While most of us have read this story putting ourselves in the place of the “younger son,” I challenge you to see yourselves as the “older son”.

I also invite you and challenge you to see the father in the story as “God” – our God who is gracious and just and who forgives our sins.”

In the introduction of his book, Timothy Keller says that, “the word prodigal does not mean

“wayward”, which is the way in which most of us had read and understood this story. Rather, “prodigal”, according to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, means “recklessly spendthrift”. It means to spend until you have nothing left. This term, therefore, is as appropriate for describing the father in the story as it is to describe his younger son.

Many years ago, there was a movie titled, “Stars in My Crown”. It told of an elderly black man who owned a little farm outside a southern town. Some very precious metal was discovered in that area, and suddenly there was pressure on him from many people to sell his land. But he would not sell. He wanted to stay exactly where he was. However, the people in the area would not take “no” for an answer. They did everything they could to make him move. They burned down his barn, shot through his house one night, and eventually threatened to hang him by sundown the next day if he did not agree to sell.

The local Methodist minister heard about the trouble and went to visit the old man. At sundown of the next day, all the leading citizens of the community came to the farm dressed in their white hoods. They were ready to hang the man if he continued to refuse to sell. The farmer came out on the porch to meet them wearing his best clothes – like the clothes we wear today – his Easter finery. He said that he was ready to die and that he had asked the minister to draw up for him his Last Will and Testament, which he wanted to have read at that time.

The minister read the will, and those present realized quickly that the old man was giving everything to them. He willed the farm to the banker who seemed so hell-bent on having it. He gave his rifle to another of the men there who had first learned to hunt with it. He gave his fishing pole to another. In fact, that old man gave everything he had to the people who were prepared to kill him.

The impact was incredible. Seeing goodness given in the face of such animosity was more than any of them could tolerate. One by one, in shame, they turned away, and the entire lynching mob disappeared. The minister’s grandson had watched everything from a distance, and as everyone departed, he ran up to his grandfather and asked, “What kind of a will was that, Granddaddy?” The minister answered, “That, my son, was the will of God.” Doesn’t that story make you think about the cross?

Our God is a god who offers us forgiveness and righteousness in his eyes.

As we gather this morning remembering and celebrating the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, let us remember and celebrate, as well, the fact that no matter who we are, no matter what we have done, no matter if we are the youngest or oldest or no matter how far from the path we have strayed, God loves us, forgives us, and welcomes us home.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.

*Today’s sermon is based upon a Lenten Study written by Marjorie Thompson, author, pastor and retreat leader in the ministry of spiritual formation, which was printed in “The Thoughtful Christian” to which First Church subscribes. Thanks are also given this morning to Timothy Keller for his book, “The Prodigal God”.*

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The First Presbyterian Church  
of Dunedin  
455 Scotland Street  
Dunedin, Florida 34698  
(727) 733-2318 fax (727) 738-4297  
WEBSITE: [fpcdunedin.org](http://fpcdunedin.org)  
E-mail:  
[officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com](mailto:officeadminfpc@tampabay.rr.com)  
Victoria ByRoade, Pastor