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Sermon Title: Jesus's Apology Tour
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: John 20:24-31

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But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, 'We have seen the Lord.' But he said to them, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' Then he said to Thomas, 'Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe.' Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!' Jesus said to him, 'Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe.'

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.

This is a hard way to begin a sermon a week after Easter. Last Sunday was so spectacular! A thousand people in church, glorious music, an exquisitely gorgeous day. It was one of those days when you think to yourself, "Nothing can ever top this!"

With all that joy, I start today's sermon with a heart-wrenching story from an Op-ed piece in *The New York Times*, the story of a truly broken family in China.

BEIJING — In 1970, when [China](#) was in the grip of the Cultural Revolution, Zhang Hongbing, a 16-year-old in Guzhen, a county in Anhui Province, made a fateful decision. During a family debate that year, his mother, Fang Zhongmou,

had criticized Mao Zedong for his cult of personality. Her son and his father, believing her views to be counterrevolutionary, decided to inform on her. She was arrested that same day.

Mr. Zhang still recalls how his mother's shoulder joints gave a grating creak as her captors pulled the cord tight. Two months later, she was shot to death.

In 1980, four years after Mao's death and the end of the Cultural Revolution, the verdict on Fang Zhongmou was reversed. A local court declared her innocent.

In the months and years that followed, Zhang Hongbing and his father scrupulously avoided all reference to this episode ...

In 2013, the Chinese media reported the lifelong regrets of Mr. Zhang, then 59 years old. For years he would often break down in tears, howling and wailing. "I see her in my dreams," he said, "just as young as she was then. I kneel on the floor, clutching her hands, for fear she will disappear. 'Mom,' I cry, 'I beg your forgiveness!' But she doesn't respond. Never once has she answered me. This is my punishment."

Why, in those dreams, does Ms. Fang never say a word to her son? It's not, I think, that she wants to punish him, for she knows that the true blame lies with others — with those who were in power at the time. She — like the souls of all who perished during the Cultural Revolution — is awaiting their apology. She has been waiting for 44 years. (Hua, Yu. "China Waits for an Apology." *The New York Times* 11 Apr. 2014: A27. Print.) http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/10/opinion/you-hua-cultural-revolution-nostalgia.html?_r=0

The human heart yearns for what we sometimes call "closure." Something bad happens, something awful. Somebody has failed somebody else, somebody has hurt somebody else, there's a breach in the relationship; friendship, family are ripped apart, torn asunder, folks no longer talking to one another. Anger, bitterness, resentment; it builds, it lasts, it destroys.

In this tragic story from China, even the deceased mother from beyond the grave is waiting for closure, an apology, after 44 years. And the guilt-ridden son is waiting for some sign that he is forgiven, even from beyond the grave. Apology, the need to receive one, the need to give one, is universal. Jesus knew that.

On Easter Jesus had some fence-mending to do. We probably think Easter must have been a happy day for Jesus and his friends, and it mostly was,

I'm sure, but still, there was some fence mending to do. There was breach and brokenness and bitterness in every relationship around Jesus.

Judas had betrayed him. Peter had denied him. Eleven of his closest friends had abandoned him. All of them doubted him. Not one believed in him. Some didn't even recognize him on Easter! So Jesus went on an "Apology Tour." In a most usual way. What he did was he put himself in a position for reconciliation. He wasn't apologizing; he literally hadn't done anything wrong. But for fence mending to take place, for healing, for reconciliation to take place, for relationships to be restored, somebody had to take the first step. That somebody is Jesus. We might say Jesus did the "Christian thing." He took the first step. He laid the groundwork for apology.

Now, apologies come in different shapes and different sizes. It's not "one size fits all." You and I know that. We've all been apologized to, and we know in an instant if it was real, if we believed it, if we accepted it, or if more was needed, or if we rejected it. And most of us have apologized for something, to someone; we have maybe planned for it or sweated over it. We may have been pressured into it or looked forward to it. We may have needed it or resented it. But when we finally did it, we knew whether we really meant it or if it was halfhearted or if our fingers were crossed while we did it. Every situation is different. Every person is different. Every apology is different. Jesus understood that. For Jesus, his Easter had a great beginning, just like ours last week. It was a great day! The old Gospel hymn proclaims

*Up from the grave he arose
With a mighty triumph o'er his foes.
He arose a victor from the dark domain,
And He lives for ever with his saints to reign.
He arose! He arose! Hallelujah! Christ arose!*

Then Jesus had some work to do. His "apology tour" began. First, that very Easter day, Jesus sought out two sad men walking sadly back to their hometown of Emmaus. They were depressed. They had been followers of Jesus. Not disciples, but followers. They had actually been in Jerusalem for Holy Week. They knew all the ups and downs of what had happened — the betrayal, the trial, the execution. They even hung around long enough to hear the rumor that Jesus had risen. But they didn't believe it. For them it was over. Jesus joined them on that sad walk.

They didn't recognize him. Their disappointment, their brokenness, their sorrow blinded them to God's presence right in front of them. Maybe, literally, they couldn't see through their tears. But Jesus stuck with them. They had given up on him, but he hadn't given up on them. They talked.

They shared. They opened up, and when they got to Emmaus, the two men invited the stranger, Jesus, to join them for dinner. And in that moment, the Bible tells us, around the dining room table, breaking bread together, in that moment, they recognized Jesus. Then, POOF, he's gone. And they hustled back to Jerusalem with a skip in their steps, a smile on their faces, to tell everybody, "Christ has risen!"

That's one kind of apology. No tears. No confession. No making somebody twist a little bit. Jesus just put himself back in their lives and allowed their relationship to be rekindled just by being together. And sometimes that's all it takes.

The next stop on Jesus's Apology Tour was a week later. By then, people really were catching on to the reality that Jesus was very much alive. The women of Easter were the first to believe. They were the first to the tomb, the first to be told, the first to tell others. Then, the two sad guys on the road to Emmaus get turned around. Then Jesus appeared to the disciples, first hand, face to face, a group hug, so to speak. A chance for all those disciples who had wimped out to be back in Christ's embrace.

Oh, except for Thomas. Thomas was absent from the happy reunion, and as a result he didn't buy it. Couldn't believe it. I'm sure he dismissed his friends as victims of mass hysteria, "group think." To put in simply, "Doubting Thomas" doubted. So a week later, Jesus shows up again, making sure Thomas was present, and Jesus presses himself upon Thomas, literally; Jesus gets as close to Thomas as possible, and he challenges Thomas, he dares Thomas, "Here I am, Thomas, I'm real, you can touch me. You can really touch me. See the holes in my hands where they nailed me to the cross? See the wound in my side where they speared me? You think this is an illusion? A dream? Some mind game? Some parlor trick? You think this is a séance, a joke? A vision? Go ahead, Thomas, test your doubts. Touch the holes in my hands. Feel the wound in my side."

At that point, Thomas is humbled, embarrassed, probably ashamed, and he wants very much to be back in Jesus's good graces. But Jesus doesn't linger on their broken relationship or on Thomas's doubts or his apology. Instead, Jesus turns their attention outward, all the way to us, actually, saying "I'm glad that you are able to believe now that you have seen me ... but blessed are all those folks at Greenfield Hill Church who have never seen me ... but dare to believe!"

In other words, Jesus was saying to Thomas, "O.K., now that we've got this cleared up, let's not dwell on it, there's work to do. There are billions of people out there who will never see me face to face, in the flesh. And they

need the hope you no longer doubt. Let's figure out how to spread the HOPE around. This example of apology is pretty straightforward. The truth is made clear. An apology is given. And they move forward.

O.K., one more stop on the Apology Tour. It's now a few weeks after Easter; Jesus is firmly entrenched in reality. He is alive. Most everybody's happy. Most everybody. Jesus senses that Peter is struggling. Peter needs help. Big, bad, bold, brash Peter needs help. And Jesus knows why. Peter is wracked with guilt, and he can't get over it.

That's one of the tough lessons about forgiveness. God forgives us relatively easily. Our loved ones find their way to forgive us, some faster, some slower, but people who really love us get there. But it can be hard to forgive ourselves. We may undervalue God's forgiveness. We may take the forgiveness by our loved ones for granted. But down deep we know ourselves too well to let ourselves off the hook too easily.

So we wallow in our guilt, we hang on to it. We are all different, we make apologies differently, we accept apologies differently. That's why we've looked at three stops on Jesus's Apology Tour. In the first one, Jesus just showed up. It was his way of saying to the two sad men, "We're O.K., right?" And they sort of said, "Yeah, we're good." In their own way, apology given, apology accepted, No big deal.

In the second one, Jesus really had to get right in Thomas's face, make him see the reality. As soon as he did, they moved on. In their own way, apology given, apology accepted.

In the third case, Jesus had to push hard. But carefully. Jesus shows up early one morning, the disciples are out fishing, so Jesus cooks their breakfast for them on the beach. It's a nice touch. Everyone's relaxed. Content. Just the right time for Jesus to zero in on Peter. "Do you love me?" Jesus asks. "Yes, Lord, I Love you." Another nice touch. Very sweet. Surprisingly, Jesus asks again, "Peter, do you love me? A little bewildered, Peter responds. "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." O.K. something's going on here. There's a little edge, a little uneasiness. Then, a third time Jesus demands. "Peter ... do ... you ... love ... me?" Everybody is watching. Everybody is listening. Everybody is unsettled. And Peter, always a bit over the top, declares a bit too defensively, maybe through clenched teeth, "Yes ... Lord, I ... love you." It hangs in the air. Three times. Three times Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" Three times Peter answers, "Yes, I love you." Three times, Jesus tells Peter to show it. "Feed my sheep," he says. Three times, get it? Peter got it. Three times. Remember? On Good Friday, Peter had turned his back on Jesus, three times. Three times Peter had been asked,

simply, "Do you know Jesus? Aren't you one of his friends?" Three times Peter denied ever knowing Jesus. Three times. Each time a bit over the top, each time a bit too defensively, maybe through clenched teeth. Three times. Peter rejected Jesus. Jesus knew it. Peter knew it.

It was like a wall between Peter and Jesus. Everyone else was reconciled. Everyone else was happy. Everyone else was back in the fold. Everyone else could say, "Yes, we're good." Everyone else could move ahead. But Peter was stuck in the past. Jesus came to wipe away our past, but with Peter it took a little extra oomph. Once was not enough. Twice was not enough. It had to be clear. Three times. Three declarations of love. Three question marks. Three promises.

Some apologies go like that. A little extra work. A little squirming. Some demands. Some promises. And then, "Hey, we're good?" "Yeah, we're good." Maybe a hug. Then move on.

To prepare for today's sermon I went to the movies. A true story called "The Railway Man." It is a really hard movie. It's about British soldiers in World War II, captured by the Japanese and forced to build a railroad through Thailand and Burma. It is a brutal story. The hero, the Railway Man, survives the worst, only to live his life filled with hatred. That hatred fills his life, leaving room for little else. To tell you more would ruin it for you, and I would urge you to consider seeing it.

I will say only this. The movie, a true story, I repeat, proves the premise of this sermon. Apologies matter, in all shapes and sizes. Jesus was right. Jesus used the days and weeks after Easter to put himself in a position where people could break down walls, where people who needed to get back together got back together. Where people who needed proof got proof. Where people who needed to be pushed got pushed. Where people who needed a group hug got a group hug. Where people who needed to get over it got over it. Where people who wallowed in self-pity got invited out of the wallowing. Where people locked in guilt got unlocked. Where people who had done the unforgiveable got forgiven.

In other words, the real work of Easter was not Easter itself, but what you and I do with Easter in the weeks and months ahead.