

**Easter 6 Year B 2021**  
**May 9, 2021**

Alleluia! Christ is risen! **Christ is risen indeed! Alleluia!**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

There are few things that our culture knows about Jesus better than this commandment; that Christians are supposed to love. Unlike many other items on the list of things our culture thinks they know about Jesus, at least this one is true. On its face, this commandment seems very straightforward. Christians are to love one another and the whole world the way Jesus loves us. It would even be fair to say that the whole Church, everywhere in the world, is founded on this one commandment.

And that's a good thing! This "Law of Love" as it's sometimes called, comes up a lot in the New Testament. Yet, in some churches it seems like this law is all there is, like Jesus' only purpose is to hand down new rules to follow. It has clear appeal; if Jesus' purpose is to lay down laws for us, then we can tell who is a real follower of Jesus based on how well they follow the laws. Then, we can rank ourselves as better or worse Christians by comparing how well they follow the laws with how well we think we follow them. By creating a religion around rule-following, we can make a hierarchy, with the "good Christians" on the top and the "bad Christians" on the bottom. And this is exactly what many churches seem to do.

It's easy to see why so many churches and so many Christians would be drawn to this kind of religion: it gives them control. If our religion is based entirely on laws, then we can control our eternity. Since we are in control of our own actions, we can choose to follow the laws laid out by Jesus more closely, and thereby ascend the ladder of Christianity. In the same way, we can tell ourselves that the people below us belong there. If they had made better choices, if they had followed the law of love better, they could join us in claiming the name, "good Christians."

But this mindset doesn't stop at religion, does it? How much of our culture is based on the idea that the best people rise to the top and that they deserve what they get? That we can raise or lower our status by making good or bad choices?

This fixation on control seems to have the opposite effect from what Jesus intended. Instead of encouraging us to love and care for the least, the lost, the victimized, and the forgotten of our world, we're encouraged to walk right past them, secure in the knowledge that they did this to themselves. We assure ourselves that they made "bad choices" and they got what they deserved. And all because we want control. We want to feel in control of our own lives, and our own fates.

We extend that desire for control even to God and our own salvation. Our world and culture seem to be drenched in so-called "choice theology." A theology that tells us, as one of my seminary friends liked to joke, we need to make a choice for Jesus, because Jesus can't choose for himself. It tells us that we can decide to be saved, and that non-Christians, or more likely, not-like-us-Christians, haven't made the same all-important choice that we did or they didn't make it the right way. This choice theology takes faith and turns it into a set of boxes to tick on a checklist. Choice theology equates believing in God with believing in aliens, it wants us to say "yes, I think they're out there somewhere," to search and study and contemplate before we can make our own informed decision about our beliefs.

Choice theology is usually dressed up differently. They might use words like "give your heart to Jesus," whatever that means. Or put up billboards that ask if we're going to heaven or hell, because apparently, we get to decide. Choice theology implies that we make one choice and then for the rest of our lives we don't change our mind. But what if we do change our mind? What if we wake up one morning and we can't choose to follow the law of love for whatever reason? What if we wake up one day and can't choose Jesus? What if the injustice and cruelty of our world, of our

culture, and of our lives breaks us, and not only can we not choose to believe, but we declare that we don't want anything to do with God or Christianity? *Does our salvation slip away, never to return? Can we choose Jesus again tomorrow? Do we have to in order to be saved?*

Now, I'm sure some terribly clever choice theologian has answers to all these questions. But at the end of the day, if believing is a choice, then doubt is condemnation. If faith is an act of our own will, what hope do we have? If we have to save ourselves by our own will, with our own choices, then what did Jesus die for? We want to be in control so badly that we're willing to push our God out of our religion. We don't want God to save us. We want to save ourselves, by ourselves. We want to save ourselves, by ourselves, so much that we would crucify our savior again. We make grace into a commodity, we turn love into a law, and we reduce our faith to a choice. All so that we can say we saved ourselves, that we earned it, and lord it over others.

But that's not what faith is. We don't believe in God the way one believes in aliens. Faith isn't a choice that we make; faith is falling in love with God. And it's a funny turn of phrase, "falling in love." We don't think about it much for how often we use it. Anyone who has taken a spill, who's tripped, slipped, or stumbled will tell you; you don't choose to fall. I personally know this all too well. Something happens, you lose your balance, and gravity takes over. Similarly, we don't choose to love, we just fall. No one meets a person and then decides if they love them. No parent contemplates the costs and benefits of their child, calculates return on investment, and then decides if they love them. They just do.

We fall in love because love has a *gravity* all its own. Apart from our own will or choices, love pulls us toward its source; love pulls us toward our God. For all of us, this process of faith, the process of falling in love with God looks different. Some of us have been falling in love with God for as long as we can remember. Some of us might feel like we've fallen in and out of love a few times or more. Some of us fell in love with God all of a sudden, while for others it's been a slow process. But this falling begins in baptism, beginning with God's promise to love us unconditionally as God's children. Throughout our lives, we continue this free fall, continually falling in love with God who loves us first.

And so, from all of this, we find that the command we receive from Christ this morning is not a prerequisite for our own salvation, and it's not a tool we can use to decide who is better or best. This command is an encouragement to spread the life-changing love that we've already experienced. Jesus himself puts choice theology to rest in today's Gospel reading: "You did not choose me, I chose you!" he says. And with that our balance, our desire to control, is thrown off. We begin to fall, and gravity takes over. The love of God in Christ pulls us along like gravity, through our doubts and our dark days, through the injustice and cruelty that surrounds us. This choice that Christ makes for us, saves us. Its gravity draws us toward Christ, and draws us together into the church where we are gathered as one in Christ with Christians all around the world.

God's love for us pulls us into orbit. When we think about space stations and satellites, we may think that they are floating in space, somewhere deep in the sky above us. We may think that they have somehow escaped the gravity of our world, but they haven't. They're just falling constantly. And as they fall, the ground moves away from them and so they keep falling. This is a life of faith. We are orbiting around the source of love, forgiveness, mercy and hope. Even when we feel far away from God, fully out of orbit, fallen out of love, God's love, that mighty gravity pulls us back. God continually pulls us back into orbit, back to the source of all goodness and grace, back to the community in the church, back to the world in need of grace, justice, and mercy, back to loving salvation. Thanks be to God. Amen.