

“Love Wins!”

I John 4:7-16

Series: BELIEVE Chapter 21: Love

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Imagine how shocking it was for the disciples to discover that their crucified, dead and buried Rabbi Jesus was risen indeed. Recently I had a similar shocking experience. I came back from lunch one afternoon, walked into the office and was told, “Ruth Ann Law just called. Her husband Rich is dead!” “What?” Rich, a long-time member of Woodside, wasn’t sick. “Are you sure?” I asked. “Yes, I just got off the phone with her. She confirmed this several times.” What happened? How can this be? I paused for a moment of prayer and then called to comfort Ruth Ann. And the person who answered the phone was Rich! Wow! Either my long distance phone plan can reach heaven or Rich is alive! “Rich?” I asked tentatively. “Yes?” “Is this Rich Law?” “Yes” he repeated. “Rich, you’re alive!” “Of course I’m alive,” he replied. “Who is this?” “Pastor Greg...no actually it’s Pastor Doug. They told me you died.” “Well I’m very much alive,” he assured me. “That’s great” I said. “Does Ruth Ann know?”

That little misunderstanding gave me a small taste of the surprise the disciples received on the first Easter. What does the Resurrection of Jesus mean? It means Love Wins! When Jesus came out of the tomb He released a deep love, a powerful love, an unstoppable love. It’s a love that is stronger than anything you find here on earth.

What is love? Well, it’s complicated. If you listen to all the songs about love, they give you mixed and confusing messages. For example The Beatles say “All You Need is Love” and Led Zeppelin’s got “A Whole Lotta Love” which they must have stolen from Air Supply who’s “All Out of Love.” The Black Eyed Peas ask, “Where is the Love?” Not in the microwave ‘cause “You Can’t Hurry Love.” Not in the mall ‘cause you “Can’t Buy Me Love.” You can “Love Me Do,” “Love Me Tender,” but “Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow?” We have a “Crazy Love,” “A Groovy Kind of Love” except when “Love is a Battlefield” and then “You Give Love a Bad Name.” I guess it all goes to show that “Love Stinks.”

We all want love. We can’t live without it. Yet when I ask someone, ‘What is love?’ they find it difficult to put into words. They usually define it as a feeling or emotion. It’s warm, tender, affectionate. Butterflies in the stomach, a chill up your spine, an ache in your heart. You can fall into love and be lovesick. You can even have love at first sight but that’s probably not a good idea since love is also blind.

When asked to define love, what I often hear is romantic attraction, infatuation, passion or obsession. Some of these are what I call the “if” kind of love. “I will love you, if you meet my expectations, if you perform well in school or on the sports field.” “If you do what I say, I will love you.” “If you buy me what I want, I will love you.”

Another type is the “because” love. “I love you because you are lovely.” “I love you because you are so good to me.” “I love you because you are so popular, funny, wealthy.” “I love you because you give me security.” This is love with strings attached, conditional love. And since it’s impossible to satisfy all the conditions, the “if” kind of love doesn’t last. When popularity, beauty, and wealth disappear, so does “because” love.

Yet there is a deeper, higher, stronger, longer lasting love. It does not impose demands. It does not lay down conditions. There are no ifs, ands or because about it. This love has only one source: God. Today we begin a new phase in a series called BELIEVE. This Spring we will learn how to BE more like Jesus on the inside – how to be more joyful, peaceful, patient and hopeful. Today we begin by learning how to love like Jesus. Easter is the best time to learn how to get God’s love in your life. Why?

On Easter we discover **A Love that Never Deserts**. In the Bible the Apostle John makes this simple yet powerful statement: “God is love” (I John 4:8, 16). If John said God is wrath, we would always tremble before Him. If God is luck, we would never trust Him. But John declares God, in His very core, is love. Not an “If” love or a “Because” love. No. The Greek word for love in the New Testament is a very special word: *agape*. Some call it “In Spite of” love. Unlike “if” love, there are no conditions, no strings attached. It is unconditionally offered to everyone, the good and the bad, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor. Unlike “because” love it is not based on something a person does or has. God loves us in spite of who we are or what we do. You don’t have to be attractive, strong, wealthy, smart or even religious. God freely gives His love to you.

God will not desert you, God will not give up on you, God will not stop loving you. Dr. Jerry Root was stuck in the Vienna airport when a young woman with a clipboard approached him. She wanted him to take a survey about the airport, yet Jerry wound up asking her all the questions. First he asked her name.

"Allegra," she replied. "Allegra, are you from Vienna?" She answered, "No, I grew up in southern Austria." "What brought you to Vienna?" She was a student. Where did she go to school? What was she studying? After 20 minutes or so I knew a good deal about Allegra. I knew her mother abandoned the family to go to Canada with her lover. I learned her father's bitterness was toxic. I learned her brother also attended the University of Vienna, but that they were estranged.

When I expressed my sadness for what seemed to be a good deal of estrangement from the people closest to her, she said it was far worse. Her boyfriend went to study art in Florence for six months. He asked her to wait for him, and she did. Her boyfriend returned the very day before I met Allegra only to inform her he met somebody better in Florence.

After 20 minutes, she had not asked me one question. She wondered if I was a plant, put there by the airport, to see if she was doing her job. I assured her it was nothing like that, but I had something to say to her once she finished her survey.

She rushed through the airport's survey, put down her pen, looked me in the eye, and eagerly asked, "What were you supposed to tell me?" I said to her, "Allegra, the God of the universe knows you and loves you; He would never abandon you or forsake you." I said it to her again: "Allegra, he loves you!" I said it again: "Allegra, he loves you!"

After the third time she burst into loud sobs. Everyone in the gate area was looking in our direction. Through her tears, Allegra blurted out, "But I've done so many bad things in my life!" I responded, "Allegra, God knows all about it and that's why he sent Jesus to die on the Cross for all of your sins and to bring you forgiveness and hope."¹

Easter says God's love will never leave you, abandon you or desert you. The Bible says,

Nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:39)

How can we be sure God loves us this much, "in spite of" our faults, flaws and sins? The second thing we discover on Easter is **A Love That's Never Defeated**. The Apostle John says,

This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (I John 4:9-10).

It's easy to say, "I love you." Yet true love requires action. God showed His love in one incredible act: He left Heaven, took on a body and plunged into our sin-soaked world. Jesus was agape love in the flesh. He entered enemy territory with one purpose: to save us. It was a life and death rescue mission – His death for our life.

I discovered an incredible story. In September 1940, Witold Pilecki, a member of the Polish resistance against the Nazis knew there was something evil happening in a local camp. He couldn't stand by and watch so he did the unthinkable. To get information and offer help he had to go inside the camp. He got a false identity card with a Jewish name, he allowed himself to be arrested on the streets of Warsaw and sent to the camp. Pilecki, a husband and father of two, willingly went into a camp called Auschwitz.

Pilecki became prisoner number 4859. He was despised, beaten, and threatened with death. Yet for three years he organized inmates into resistance units, boosted morale, documented war crimes and smuggled out intelligence. He even built a secret radio

¹ Dr. Jerry Root, "When Evangelism Really Isn't That Hard," Christianity Today (2-17-17)

station from scrap parts. In the spring of 1943, Pilecki escaped and told the Allies around 2 million souls were killed at Auschwitz. When the reports reached London, officials thought he was exaggerating. Of course today we know he was right.

Yet the incredible story of Witold Pilecki doesn't end there. When Soviet forces defeated the Nazis and took over his beloved Poland he returned again to enemy territory to fight with the Polish Underground and free his people. He was arrested by the Ministry of Public Security, repeatedly tortured, but never revealed any sensitive information. On May 25, 1948 Pilecki was executed at the Mokotów Prison in Warsaw. Pilecki fought for his people and his nation with a love that could not be defeated. When the death sentence was pronounced on him he said,

I've been trying to live my life so that in the hour of my death I would feel joy rather than fear.

Witold Pilecki followed in the steps of His Lord and Savior Jesus who willingly entered enemy territory, faced certain death, and laid down His life. When He hung on the Cross, suspended between heaven and earth, bearing the full weight of all the sin of all humanity from all history, He looked out over the people who flogged Him, stripped Him, whipped Him, nailed Him to the Cross and with one of His last breaths said, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). And friends, He said that about me. He said that about you. Our sins put Him on the Cross. He took our place. He paid our punishment. He died our death. It's not that we loved God. He first loved us. In spite of all we did to Him, Jesus showed us unconditional, sacrificial, selfless agape love. It is a love that will not be deterred, not be denied, not be defeated.

Finally Easter tells us about **A Love that Never Dies**. The Apostle John writes,

And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. (I John 4:14-17)

On the first Easter John saw with his own eyes that Jesus is alive. For the rest of his life he testified that Jesus is the Savior of the world, that God's love defeated sin, defeated evil, defeated death. Easter means Love wins! If you welcome Jesus as your Savior, God will live you. That means His unconditional, "in spite of" love will live in you. Love will win in you.

- Self-doubt, self-hatred, self-pity and selfishness lose. Love wins!
- Guilt, shame, regret and despair lose. Love wins!
- Anger, rage, resentment and grudges lose. Love wins!
- Worry, fear, anxiety and addiction lose. Love wins!

And if this love flows to you it will start to flow through you to others. As John says, you will be more like Jesus. That's what we will discover this Spring: how to be more like Jesus from the inside out. Join us each Sunday as we find out how to be more joyful, peaceful, patient and hopeful. If you really want to get this love in your life join a Growth Group where you will learn with other people how to live in God's love and have God's love live in you. Today, on the back of the Connection Card, make a commitment or recommitment to let Jesus be your Savior, to let Him come in and be your Lord, to let His love win in your life. When you do, John says, God's "perfect love drives out fear" (I John 4:18) and "we will have confidence on the day of judgment" (I John 4:17). You will know that God's love never dies and neither will you. Like Withold Pilecki you will have joy and not fear at the moment of your death.

This promise is very precious to me this Easter. When I came home from the worship service on Christmas morning my wife Lisa said, "Doug, your Mom called. Your Dad is in the hospital." Over the next month I walked a journey which many of you have tread. I prayed for my Dad's recovery and made visits to his bedside in North Carolina. There were hopeful moments when he seemed to rally and difficult passages when all his organs appeared to be giving up. I sensed the time left to us was rapidly running out and there were some things we needed to say.

My Dad, Carl Hoglund, was the oldest son of Scandinavian immigrants. My grandparents were stoic, self-made folk who came to these shores with nothing, started a business in their garage, and became an American success story. Yet they were not warm, affectionate or spiritual people. They did not go to church. Following their example, my Dad gave all his time, attention and energy to the family business, was away a lot while I was growing up, attended church very little and found it hard to say, "I love you."

I am grateful to say that in his later years he did tell us he loved us and sat next to my Mother in worship on Sundays and became a Deacon. Yet despite being a pastor, I never asked him about his relationship with Jesus. Did he really believe or was he just going through the motions? I wanted to know for certain that he accepted God's gift of salvation, that I would see him again in our Heavenly Father's House.

As I prepared to leave his hospital room and fly home I knew now was the moment. "Dad, do you believe in Jesus as your Lord and Savior?" He replied instantly and confidently, "Absolutely." I was amazed at the boldness of his response. Our family joined hands and prayed for the last time together. We never spoke again. The next time I saw him he was unconscious in hospice. He went to be with the Lord on January 20.

I wondered at how my Dad became so certain of his faith. The day after he passed away I was going through his papers and found something he wrote which appeared in their church bulletin.

On a plane from Denver to Newark, sitting next to me was a preacher returning from a conference. Our conversation became religious after relating to him that my son Douglas was a minister. Then he asked the question how do you think you will get to Heaven. I answered, "live a good life of good deeds." WRONG!

“Accept Jesus and you are in,” was his reply. He is your personal surrogate. It was the shortest sermon I have ever listened to.

He ends his testimony with “I am no longer a bystander.”

Love won in my Dad’s life. If you want to stop being a bystander and be part of the victory join me in the Easter greeting: He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!

Years ago, when my daughter Kristin was in high school, she told me a story her teacher shared with the class. Apparently this teacher lives on a large wooded lot, a perfect property on which his dog Rascal may roam. One night, however, the dog returned from his romp in the woods with a dirty limp rabbit in his mouth. When the teacher finally wrestled the poor creature out of Rascal's maw, he discovered, to his horror, this was not just a wild jackrabbit. It was none other than Mr. Bunzy, the beloved pet of the children next door. When he recalled how Justin and Caitlin loved Mr. Bunzy, he got a sick pain in his stomach. What was he to do? Then an idea popped into his head.

First he cleaned the dirt off the poor rabbit. Then, glancing through the woods to his neighbor's house, he saw the cars were gone and the lights were off. Quickly, he crept through the woods, opened the cage and placed the lifeless Mr. Bunzy back inside. Back at home, a few hours later, the teacher was startled by the sound of hysterical cries. They must have found Mr. Bunzy. Playing the role of the concerned neighbor, the teacher went over and asked, "What's wrong?" "It's Mr. Bunzy," the mother cried. "We buried him three days ago and somehow he came back!"

Easter is the day when the disciples were jolted by a similar shock – their crucified, dead and buried Rabbi Jesus came back to life. Just as we know dead rabbits stay dead, they expected dead rabbis to stay dead.