



Coming Clean



A Sermon By
The Rev. Andrew W. Walter

February 18, 2018
Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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<http://graceepiscopalchurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/2018-02-18-AWW.mp3>.

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The Last First Sunday in Lent
February 18, 2018
Mark 1:9-15

As some of you know, my wife, Susan, travels pretty extensively for work. Every Monday morning, she is off to New York, or Houston, or Chicago, and she usually doesn't return until Friday night. What none of you know is Susan has a habit of taking one of our car keys with her. This probably doesn't seem like a big deal to you, but it's one of those little things that really gets under my skin, because I'm always afraid I'll lose my key and be stuck someplace, since she has the other key with her in some other city. So, I'm constantly telling her to leave the key at home, leave it at home, leave it at home, but Susan responds by saying I have to remind her on Sunday night, when she's packing and getting organized for the week. Otherwise, the reminders aren't helpful.

Well, two weeks ago, on Sunday night, somehow I remembered, and I reminded Susan to leave her key at home. So, you can imagine how disappointed and upset I was on Monday morning, when there was only one key in our key dish. I texted Susan right away: "You didn't leave the key! Why didn't you leave the key? I even reminded you this time!"

But, Susan claimed she had left the key. "I put in right there in the dish," she said.

"No, you didn't. There's only one key here, and I always put my key in the dish. You must have put yours someplace else. Where did you put your key?"

We went back and forth like this all week, and having checked her bags and belongings, and not finding any key, Susan was pretty sure she left the key at home. "I put in right there in the dish," she kept saying.

"No, you didn't. There's only one key here, and I always put my key in the dish. You must have put yours someplace else. Where did you put your key?"

Finally, by Friday or Saturday, I had worn Susan down, and she began to question what she did with the key. "Maybe I lost it," she said. "It's been crazy at work. I don't know."

"Ha! I knew it! There's only one key here, and I always put my key in the dish. You must have put yours someplace else."

Then, last Sunday morning, I was getting dressed for church, when I felt something in my pants pocket. I put my hand in to find out what it was, and when I pulled it out... it was the missing car key. I felt terrible. Clearly, I left the key in my pants all week, even though I "always" put my key in the dish, and to make it worse, I kept insisting it was Susan who lost her key.

But now, I faced a dilemma: do I tell Susan the truth, or do I pretend like I found the key someplace and act like nothing happened?

Since I'm the Rector, I asked myself what would Jesus do, and obviously, Jesus would confess and tell the truth. But, Jesus was never married. And, I knew if I did come clean, I would never hear the end of it.

All of us make mistakes, some of which are little, and some of which are large. Each and every day, we commit errors, and blunders, and miscalculations. We do things we regret. We say things we wish we could take back. But, we never like to acknowledge it. We don't like conceding we were wrong, or saying, "I screwed up." We don't like coming clean about our faults, or our failures, or our shortcomings, because we don't want to admit we're not perfect.

We live in a culture of perfectionism, where winning, success, being the best, and being right are the perceived norm. No matter who you are in America, you can always do better, be happier, be richer, look younger. We see this in magazine covers where supermodels are airbrushed, in music where the most beautiful voices are digitally enhanced, in bookstores where the shelves are lined with self-help guides to make us more mindful, more patient, more organized, and more prepared.

It's like we're expected to cruise through life without any problems whatsoever. Our children are supposed to be excellent students, and outstanding athletes and well-behaved all the times. We're supposed to have a really great career, help our kids with their homework, cook dinners like Martha Stewart, and have deep, meaningful conversations with our partner or spouse. And, we're supposed to do all of this while looking just right, with our hair all in place, and not aging one minute. As the psychologist David Caruso once observed, "American culture demands that the answer to the question 'How are you?' is not just 'Good'... We need to be 'Awesome.'" And, admitting that you're having a rough time or things aren't going well is almost "inappropriate."¹

But, as we all know, things don't always go well, and life isn't perfect. Behind all of the gloss and veneer, life is full of issues and challenges. There are kids with emotional problems, and kids who struggle in school. There are teenagers wrestling with stress, eating disorders, and questions of sexuality. There are adults dealing with infertility, addiction, domestic abuse and divorce. And, there are people making mistakes, screwing up all the time, making a mess of things at home, making a mess of things at work. That's real life. That's how life works. Life is dirty and messy. People are broken and flawed. So, at some point, we have to stop pretending otherwise.

The season of Lent is an opportunity for us to be open and honest with ourselves, about who we are, where we are, how we're doing, and what we want out of life.

The word, "Lent," comes from an old English word meaning "spring," not only a reference to what will be happening outside, but also what could be happening inside, a sort of spring cleaning of the soul.²

Historically, Lent was a time when new Christians prepared for baptism, and when other Christians, who had fallen away from the church because of their sins, recommitted themselves to God through self-examination and repentance. Just as Jesus spent forty days in the wilderness preparing for his ministry, the early Christians observed the season of Lent through prayer, and fasting, and self-denial. For them, it was forty intense days of getting ready, forty days of learning, forty days of growing, forty days of focusing on God and nothing else. It was forty days to make a new start.

For us, the season of Lent is the very same thing. It's a time for us to look inside and take stock, a time for us to acknowledge our problems and our struggles, a time to come clean about all of our faults, and our failures, and our shortcomings. And, it's a time for us to admit that we need God. We need God's help. We need God's strength. We need God's love, because we can't do everything by ourselves. We can't control everything in this world. And, nothing in life is perfect

Usually, people give something up during Lent. They give up wine, or chocolates even Facebook. But, this year, how about giving up the pretense of our own infallibility and having it all together? Instead, bring whatever load you're carrying with you to church on Sunday and lay it at the altar. Say: here you go, Lord. Here I am, imperfect and insufficient. Help me. Help me be the kind of person I want to be. Help me live the kind of life you want me to live. I'm ready, and I'm willing.

Amen.

¹ Sheryl Sandberg, *Option B*

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home by Another Way*