New Testament scholar, John Dominic Crossan, recently came out with a book reflecting on the many trips he has led through the Mediterranean, following in the footsteps of the Apostle Paul. Surprisingly for a scholar, though, the book isn’t really about the writing. It’s a coffee table book he co-wrote with his wife, full of the images they encountered over the years on their travels. There are photos of paintings and frescos hidden on the walls of small chapels and caves throughout Turkey, Greece, and Southeastern Europe, along with short stories and musings about the art. The book came to be when Crossan began to notice a startling and remarkable pattern in the art he had seen- the pieces were full of scenes in which Jesus was not only resurrecting from the dead but was pulling others up out of hell with him. Some of the renderings were of Jesus specifically taking Adam and Eve out of hell, releasing them from the fire of hades. Crossan noticed something else, too. Time after time, the way theses frescoes were labeled and displayed never included the word “resurrection” but instead the Greek word “anastasis.” Now, to a Greek speaker,
you could say those two words mean the same thing. But, for Crossan, a New Testament scholar, he understood the connotation to be very different, because anastasis literally means “an uprising.” The images evoked an understanding of the resurrection in which all people rose up- not just Jesus with an empty tomb like we see in Western Christian art, but Jesus causing these uprisings, freeing all people- even the sinful ones like Adam and Eve- from eternal punishment.

The book is called: Resurrecting Easter: How the West Lost and the East Kept the Original Easter Vision. The vision, he argues, is one in which a Jewish, Galilean peasant named Jesus- a nobody, non-violent resister- is killed at the hands of violence and empire, and manages to not only resurrect himself, but cause an uprising of people liberated from the hands of the world’s sin and violence.

To be honest, if you saw the images, you might not even notice what’s at stake. Neither did Crossan, until he started examining all the photos he had taken over the years. But, there is a huge theological issue that emerges from how Eastern Christians viewed the resurrection: namely, they believed from very early on that Jesus had come to save all people, including those who we in the Western church have named sinners.

The struggle with sin isn’t new. It was something Paul spent quite a bit of time with in those first century years after Jesus was gone, and he writes about it extensively in his letter to the Church in Rome. In the text we just heard, we find Paul conflicted over how
to deal with his own sin, and really, how to redefine sin beyond the confines of Jewish law. Like Alanna explained last week, the law, or the Jewish Torah, held together the Jewish community. It gave them an identity as a minority people, throughout history and over and against the Roman Empire. But, it was also exclusive and the customs didn’t make sense to the gentiles who had heard about Jesus. Paul didn’t want to throw the baby out with the bathwater and get rid of everything about the law, but he was trying to figure out what sin meant in light of Jesus.

Part of me thinks Paul might be disappointed to learn that we are still trying to figure out what sin means. In Romans 7, though, Paul makes a remarkable rhetorical move. You might have missed it, but he turns inward. His writing moves to the first person, and he openly talks about his own sin and internal conflict. He confesses, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”

I heard a sermon once on this text where the preacher said Paul was embarrassing himself, revealing just a bit too much. Obviously, Paul hadn’t been taught the old rule that sermons shouldn’t be all about the preacher, though I tend to be more sympathetic and appreciative toward him. For starters, you can’t turn a corner nowadays without running into someone talking about the power of vulnerability. Brene Brown has made a whole career of it, and I think it’s because it resonates with people. Paul might be showing his weakness, here, but he is doing it to connect with others who are, no doubt, experiencing the same kind of inner turmoil.
No doubt, we all struggle with sin. We don’t like to talk about it, maybe because it’s hard to define, but particularly because of the shame and trauma it triggers for some in how they were taught about sin by the Church. On the other hand, I’ve heard some tell me they don’t like the prayer of confession for example, because they think, “well, I didn’t do any of those things this week.” But Paul, unlike the Church over the years, talks about sin with great humility. I would say he describes sin like a never-ending churning inside you to deal with right and wrong, action and inaction, and the guilt that comes with it. For Paul, it seems like it’s an out of body experience, watching yourself from above continue to do and think the things you know deep in your heart are damaging. He makes sin personal so the Roman church can more easily swallow the giant pill of truth that comes with naming sin. It’s part of the reason we do confess our sin together instead of individually- it’s less painful to own up to big problems together, rather than trying to tackle them separately.

I recently watched the new HBO series called Chernobyl. If you haven’t seen it I highly recommend it to you. The show tells the story of the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl and the devastating aftermath, but it also goes deeper into the political realities of the Soviet Union at that time. What is revealed throughout the course of the series is the truth, not only about what happened, but the reality that truth itself was at stake, because the Soviets cared more about the perception that everything was under control than the damage they did to peoples’ lives. When the main character goes on trial to give his testimony, he fearfully tells the truth about what happened to a panel of Russian higher-ups. But,
you can imagine what happened next. Nothing. His story was erased from the records, never published, and he was sent into exile. To this day, the truth of what he said and the truth about what happened has never really been acknowledged.

In some ways, I think this is what Paul was dealing with, too. The struggle to tell the truth. To be transparent. The old laws and structures couldn’t be the only way anymore. He knew that if the Church in Rome was going to survive in the midst of Empire, they had to be different. They couldn’t hide behind the law. They had to be honest about themselves, if they were going to speak truth to power. You see, the façade of empire masks truth in order to maintain power, but Paul understood that to follow Jesus meant to deal with the truth head on, to wrestle with it, and engage it. Empires fear truth and honesty about brokenness and sin because when people know what’s really happening it causes them to stir and resist. Paul knew that naming sin was part of an uprising. The Easter Vision he had in mind couldn’t exist with the truth swept under a rug.

I wonder what sin we keep swept under the rug—what brokenness clouds our own Easter Vision. It’s tempting to talk about sin in a condemning way, to blame those “other people.” And it wouldn’t be hard, given the sin that has been right in front of our eyes these past weeks as the immigrant crisis grows at our border. But I get the feeling that, like Paul, most of us come in here with a pretty good sense of where sin is in the world, and on top of that all of our own shortcomings, too. We may not want to talk about them, but that doesn’t mean we don’t carry around a
whole lot of shame about our own sin, or where we’ve screwed up, and who we’ve managed to hurt. I trust that for you and for me, the inner conflict of our souls yearn for forgiveness and healing, and that Paul’s words touch on the most tender nerves inside us- we seem to do everything we hate, and we don’t know how to make things better. At a glance, Paul’s words could be taken as the most depressing and hopeless realities of our lives.

What I was taught about sin growing up was that it was those things that we do or do not do that keep us separated from God and one another. A pretty good definition of sin compared to what some learned, which, in my opinion, generally suggested sin should be based in fear and shame, with the goal of control. I do remember hearing often, though, in the little evangelical corner of the country I grew up in, that Jesus died on the cross for my sins. I remember the awful feeling I would get when I thought about this, especially considering I was supposed to feel so grateful. What I now know is that this is a troubling atonement theory, perpetuated to make people feel terrible about themselves, and put them at the mercy of the Church. I also remember hearing “hate the sin, love the sinner.” But, this confused me too, because I wondered who out there was writing the book on what all the Christian sins were. Turns out there’s no definitive list.

I was afraid to talk about sin this week for all of these reasons. Do no harm isn’t just an oath physicians should take. The church has done a very good job of making people feel bad about themselves, for a very long time, and I want no part of that. On
the other hand, sin is so misunderstood, and Paul has this amazing moment, where he names his own brokenness, he tells the truth, and engages with it, and confesses “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” It’s the most transparent moment of his life. And he does it for the sake of others, so they can know they’re not alone in the struggle. Later on, in Romans 8 Paul makes the ultimate claim, that “nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.” Out of the most vulnerable confession, he comes to the most reassuring statement he ever makes. Maybe his point, in the end, is that it’s less about knowing what sins are, or who the sinner is, and more about the truth and honesty of it all, and the grace that comes of it.

Maybe the Easter Vision John Dominic Crossan discovered in the art of Eastern Christianity is the one we have been missing all along. It’s not a picture of Jesus dying on the cross, or a single, solitary empty tomb, but a picture of Jesus literally pulling people up from the depths of sin and shame. With every yank and tug you can almost hear Jesus saying, “and nothing will separate you, and nothing with separate you, and nothing will separate you.”

I would like to believe that as time goes on there would be less need for me to be pulled up out of the depths of sin, but I have actually discovered the opposite. Like Paul, it seems, the more aware we are of ourselves and the world, the more inner conflict we face, and the more grace we need. But, maybe that just means we get better at telling the truth and paying attention, which is probably the second thing Jesus told each of those people he was lifting up from hell- “nothing can separate you, now tell the truth.
and pay attention.” And, so, every week, that’s my goal. To come here and confess, to be assured of God’s love for all of me—every bad and wonderful part—and then to listen for the truth of the Gospel, which calls me to go out and pay attention in this broken world. And my prayer, as always, is that you would join me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.
Pastoral Prayer

David Shinn

O God, the center of our worship, you are here in this sacred space that has housed and sheltered generations after generations of believers and seekers. We come this day to offer our praises and prayer. We are reminded by the cross of our life long need of grace, by the pulpit our deep desire to know you, and by the table and the font our commitment to be your people. We thank you for spreading your wings over us for protection. We thank you for welcoming us even as we come with our doubts and brokenness. We thank you for your eternal love that will never leave us. Nothing will ever separate us from your love.

Lord, we come as captives of sin, and our lives twisted by the grips of sin. We are alienated from you and others. The image of God in us leads us to seek for your grace, which we will not deny. It propels us to take on the destiny appointed by you, which we will not refute. Have mercy on us, O God, according to your steadfast love. Empower us to rise up with you as you pull us up. May we not mask the truth and desire your love in our lives.

Lord, we are haunted and broken once again by the image of drown migrant worker and child seeking security and hope. Our collective conscience is in shock of this preventable tragedy. We pray that your love would pour forth in the lives of all who are fleeing from atrocity, violence, and warfare. We pray for our elected leaders to act with kindness and mercy. We pray for our law enforcement officers to respond, protect, and serve.
Gracious God, pour out your mercy and comfort in our community for all who are bearing the heavy weight of grief. The absence of their loved ones is unbearable. May you bear the weighty yoke of grief with them and sustain them on their journey of peace.

Bless all who are seeking healing from surgery, chemo related treatment, and rehab. Bless them with healing and strength, and for their family who are caring for them.

For all who are walking on the path of hospice care, we pray for their journey to you.

Guide us to care and love the earth as you intends for us. May all creatures sings praise to you.

God of love and grace, the wideness of your mercy is like the wideness of the sea. May we trust in your kindness, justice, and goodness as we daily live out your call for us. With thanksgiving and praise, let us reflect your image of love and share the boundless blessings with all.

And now, let us pray the prayer that Jesus has taught us all to pray, Our Father…