

Making the Easter Story Our Story

Or:

March 23, 2008

Year A: First Sunday of Easter

Acts 10.34-43

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Briefly, before we get started with this morning's message, I want to tell you that starting next week and going all the way through May I will be preaching on a new sermon series: *A Church Family that Makes a Difference*. It is our Mission Statement. But what do those words mean? How significant is just a statement in our journey with Jesus? And more importantly, does it make any difference in our lives? We will address what it means to be A Church Family that Makes a Difference starting next Sunday.

[Acts 10:34-43 \(NRSV\)](#)

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, <sup>35</sup>but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. <sup>36</sup>You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ -- he is Lord of all. <sup>37</sup>That message spread throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John announced: <sup>38</sup>how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. <sup>39</sup>We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; <sup>40</sup>but God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear, <sup>41</sup>not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, and who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. <sup>42</sup>He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead. <sup>43</sup>All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

There is a story about a man and his ever-nagging wife who went on a vacation in Jerusalem. While they were there, the wife passed away. The undertaker told the husband, "You can have her shipped home for \$5,000, or you can bury her here, in the holy Land, for \$150." The man thought about it and told him he would just have her shipped home. The undertaker asked, "Why would you spend \$5,000 to ship your wife home, when it would be wonderful to be buried here and you would spend only \$150?"

The man replied: “Long ago a man died here, was buried here, and three days later he rose from the dead. I just can’t take that chance. . .”<sup>1</sup>

I have had a common theme that I’ve preached on here during Holy Week. I called it *The Story of Easter*. On Thursday we learned of the story of Passover as we gathered for Holy Communion. On that night Jesus said, “this is my body broken for you. This is my blood poured out for you.” The Passover was a reminder of God’s protection of the Hebrew people while they were in slavery in Egypt. On a Passover night, Jesus uses the story of the Passover to say that God continues to protect them. But Jesus expands the story with his Last Supper and now the story is about Jesus and how God continues to love and forgive even us.

Then on Friday we talked about disappointments. We learned that for those first Christians, Friday was not supposed to happen. Our Messiah was not supposed to die. Jesus was supposed to be invisible. He was supposed to end all suffering and death. The Easter story is about disappointment, it is about failed hopes, it is about failed dreams. The story of Jesus and what we call his passion – his moment of suffering and death - mirrors our own expectations when things do not go our way. Folks, we’ve been there. We know the story of disappointment, we know the story of failed assumptions, we know the story of a life snuffed out too early, we know about plans that never come to fruition. We all know about those Good Friday’s.

But this morning at our Sunrise Service in absolute darkness – wow did Easter come early this year, especially in the Pine Ridge – we lit one flame and focused on that light. We watched the sun come up over the Ridge and our story changed. We witnessed the hope found in the Resurrection. That light – found in the rising sun – told us that a New Day is here. Those disappointments, those failed expectations – they are laid to rest. That is yesterday – that is old news – that is part of a story that we read and tell about now in the past tense. Now – right now – you come here today to worship God on this the holiest day of the year. You come seeking a new story. You come to understand why this Easter story matters. You are here today to seek its importance and more significantly, why it should become your story.

A pastor tells of a little boy who was not happy about going to church on Easter Sunday. His new shoes were too tight. His tie pinched his neck and the weather was simply too nice to be cooped up inside. He sulked the whole way to church. On the way, he said to his parents, “I don’t know why we have to go to church on Easter, anyway, they keep telling the same old story and it always ends the same.”<sup>2</sup>

Sure, we know how the story ends. It’s hard not to live in our culture and hear some thing about Christianity. And even though Christmas gets more publicity, most people know or have heard of this “magic” as one of our children called it last week of this Jesus who dies and rises from the dead. We may know how the story ends but how many of us really know the story of the Resurrection.

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<sup>1</sup> Joke forwarded to me by Jan Cressy.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Flanagan. “God’s Greatest Surprise.” (Norfolk, Nebraska: Norfolk United Methodist Parish. April 7, 1996.)

Bill Bryson tells of the time he traveled to Hannibal, Missouri to visit the boyhood home of the noted author Mark Twain. He described the house as a “trim, white-washed house with green shutters, set incongruously in the middle of downtown.” It cost \$2 to visit Twain’s home and to walk around the site.

Bryson said he found the home to be a disappointment. He expressed in his book his disillusionment like this:

“It purported to be a faithful reproduction of the original interiors, but there were wires and water sprinklers clumsily evident in every room. I also very much doubt that young Samuel Clemens’ bedroom had Armstrong vinyl on the floor or that his sister’s bedroom had a plywood partition in it.”

He said that the house, which is owned by the city of Hannibal, attracts some 135,000 visitors each year. But Bryson was disappointed that he was not able to actually go inside the house. “You look through the windows,” he says. “At each window there is a recorded message telling about each room.”

As he proceeded from window to window, he met another tourist who seemed to know a lot about the house. Bryson asked him: “What do you think of it?” The friendly stranger replied:

“Oh, I think it’s great. I always come here when I’m in Hannibal. . . two or three times a year. Sometimes I go out of my way to come here.”

Bill Bryson was fascinated, “Really?” he replied.

“O yes,” the man said. “I must have been here 20 or 30 times by now. This is a real shrine you know.”

As the two of them continued walking and touring together, Bryson said to the man:

“You must be a real fan and follower of Mark Twain. Would you say the house is just like the way Twain described it in his books?”

“O, I don’t know,” said the tourist, “wouldn’t have the foggiest notion. I’ve never read any of his books!”<sup>3</sup>

Visiting his shrine, but ignoring his books. I think that is a pretty good description of how many view the story of Jesus Christ. We visit his shrine when we can, we watch it a little on television, we gather the family together on important holidays like Christmas and Easter, but his story – found in the Gospel – rarely becomes our story. Maybe we are afraid, afraid of persecution, afraid of mockery, afraid that we will lose our friends, afraid to truly give our life over to God. We visit the shrine but the story of the Resurrection rarely becomes our story. But I tell you just as I told our brothers and sisters this morning out at Norwesca that today is a New Day. The sun came up just like it was supposed to. Today is a day when the story of the Resurrection can become and should become our story.

Eric Butterworth tells about a young soldier who lost his legs in battle. Something died within this young man when he found he would never walk again. He lay in his hospital bed, staring blankly at the ceiling. He refused to talk to anyone who tried to help him. He refused to cooperate with doctors or nurses who wanted to help him to adjust.

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<sup>3</sup> Illustrations. “Never Read Any of His Books.” eSermons.com. March 27, 2005.

One day another inmate of the hospital strolled in and sat down on a chair near the bed. He drew a harmonica from his pocket and began to play softly. The patient looked at him for a second, then back to the ceiling. That was all for that day. Next day the player came again. For several days he continued to come and to play quietly. One day he said, "Does my playing annoy you?"

The patient said, "No, I guess I like it." They talked a little more each day.

One day the harmonica player was in a jovial mood. He played a sprightly tune and began to do a tap dance. The soldier looked on but was apparently unimpressed. "Hey, why don't you smile once and let the world know you're alive!" the dancer said with a friendly smile.

But the legless soldier said, "I might as well be dead as in the fix I'm in."

"Okay," answered his happy friend, "so you're dead. But you're not as dead as a fellow who was crucified two thousand years ago, and He came out of it all right."

"Oh, it's easy for you to preach," replied the patient, "but if you were in my fix, you'd sing a different tune."

With this the dancer stood up and said, "I know a two-thousand-year-old resurrection is pretty far in the dim past. So maybe an up-to-date example will help you to believe it can be done." With that he pulled up his trouser legs and the young man in the bed looked and saw *two artificial limbs*. The tap-dancing fellow with the harmonica was not simply a Pollyanna. He once lay where that young soldier now lay. He himself had known the power of a resurrection. He had learned to live life abundantly -- even without his legs. Needless to say, the young soldier's own resurrection began that moment.<sup>4</sup>

The Resurrection is a story of Hope. The Resurrection is a story of what is possible. It is story about not giving up. No matter what you have done. No matter where you came from. No matter that you had nothing. The Resurrection is a story about you and more importantly it is a story for you. That is what is so significant about today's passage. I had a professor once say that this snippet from Acts is a great summary about the life of Jesus Christ. You want to know briefly about the story of Jesus Christ -- here's a passage for you. In a day of quick sound bites -- when many of us don't have time to read the Bible -- well here is quick story that you can read. You want to know the importance and impact of the Gospel on your life -- read, tell, and make this story become our story.

**36**You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ -- he is Lord of all.

There is another story that touches me every time I hear it is the account of the ship called *Amistad*. It takes place in the 1840's. By then the slave trade between Africa and the America's was illegal but very lucrative if you could get away with it. While crossing the Atlantic this group of slaves overcomes incredible odds and overthrows their captures. However, they don't have the knowledge to get back home and are soon captured some American soldiers.

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<sup>4</sup> "Search for Tomorrow." *Dynamic Preaching*. 2002.

Now to understand the story of *Amistad* is to understand the United States. This is just 20 years before the Civil War. Already lines are being drawn between the north and the south, between slavery and freedom, between what is right in the eyes of God and how slave labor can make one wealthy. Well, this battle going on America now finds itself in court. These human beings – ripped from their homeland – shipped over in horrible conditions – land in a country, in chains. They are far from home. They do not speak the language and now their fate is entirely in the hands of other people. A few years ago this incredible story was told in the movie, *Amistad*. And there is a part that gets me every time I watch. As the court battle rages on a small group of Christians is outside the jail constantly praying and singing for these Africans. They give them crosses, they give them Bibles, they tell them that God loves them, even though they do not understand. At one point in the movie the tension is high. Steven Spielberg, a master story teller, does it well. The tension and the music builds until finally one of these would be slaves – a man named Cinque – stands up in court and yells out GIVE US FREE! GIVE US FREE! GIVE US FREE! He repeats these words over and over and over and there is silence.

In the next scene Cinque is talking to his friend Yamba who is looking at a Bible. He can't read it but he is starting to figure out the story through the pictures.

"Why are you pretending to read that," Cinque says, "nobody is watching us."

"I'm not pretending," Yamba says, "I'm beginning to understand it."

Cinque comes over to his friend and begins to look at the Bible pictures with him. Yamba interprets. "Their people have suffered more than ours. . . Their lives were full of suffering."

Turns the page. "Then he was born and everything changed."

Turns the page. "Who is he?" Cinque asks.

"I don't know?" Yamba responds, "but everywhere he goes, he is followed by the sun."

Turns the page. "Here he is healing people with his hands."

"Protecting them. . ."

"Being given children. . ."

"What's this?" Cinque asks.

"He could also walk across the sea."

Turns the page. "But then something happened. . . He was captured. Accused of some crime. Here he is with his hands tied."

Turns the page. "He must have done something?" Cinque asks.

"Why?" responds his friend. "What did we do? Whatever it was, it was serious enough to kill him for it."

"Do you want to see how they killed him?" Yamba asks Cinque. Cinque nods. Yamba shows him the picture of the crucifixion.

"This is just a story, Yamba." Cinque says.

"But look." Yamba says, "That's not the end of it."

Turns the page. "His people took his body down from this . . . thing . . . this . . ." And in the movie Yamba makes the sign of the cross.

Turns the page. “They took him into a cave. They wrapped him in a cloth, like we do.”

Turns the page. “They thought he was dead, but he appeared before his people again. . . and he spoke to them.”

Turns the page. “Then, finally, he rose into the sky.”

Turns the page. “This is where the soul goes when you die here. This is where we’re going when they kill us.”

And then Yamba looks at his friend and says, “It doesn’t look so bad.”

In the very next scene of the movie the African’s are heading back to the court room, walking in chains and you see Yamba hugging his Bible. They walk by the abolitionists who hold out their crosses. They walk by the Catholics who cross themselves, and you see Yamba look around everywhere and he says the Cross.

Then in Court the camera looks at Yamba and you see his face and he knows that it’s going to be OK. No matter what happens in that courtroom that day, Christ also went through it. These would be slaves have an advocate in Christ. And when they win the case Yamba holds up his Bible and sings and rejoices. It is an incredible scene based on actually eye witness testimony. Those words of Cinque ring true: GIVE US FREE has new meaning! This is the story of the Resurrection. These chained – would be African slaves – are now free!

Folks, this is the story of the Resurrection. This is our story. We may be chained to the past. We may be chained to our sin. We may be chained from ever moving forward. But when the Resurrection story becomes our story, we-are-free. This is a story about you, this is a story for you, this is a story about life. And this all happens . . . *choir singing*

Please turn to Hymn #364 and sing with us the first verse of *Because He Lives*.