

Preaching Peace
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Easter Sunday, year B, April 5, 2015

Not that long ago, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus was considered the greatest story ever told. But recently a neighbor of ours was surprised to discover that many people don't know the story. This neighbor teaches creative writing at a prestigious private college in the New York area. Last week she gave her students an in-class assignment to tell the story of either Passover or Easter. A few of her students had some vague ideas what Easter or Passover were about. But most of their facts were garbled, and not a single one of them knew either story well enough to tell it. For them, Easter means a spring vacation from school, involving family gatherings where people eat eggs, chocolate and jelly beans.

If someone were to give you the assignment to tell the story of Easter, what would you say?

Today Karen began our service by reading the story of Jesus' resurrection according to Mark – when some women went to Jesus' tomb early on the first day of the week and found the stone at the entrance to the tomb had been rolled away. When they stepped inside the tomb, they saw an angel who told them, Jesus is not here. He has been raised from the dead. And they ran out of the tomb, amazed and terrified. Each of the four gospels has different details, but that's the basic story of Easter. Jesus was crucified and died a torturous death. But three days later, the tomb was empty, Jesus began to appear to his disciples, and everything changed.

When Peter told the story of Easter, in the speech John read from the book of Acts this morning, Peter called it a message from God of peace to the people of Israel. He began with a short summary of Jesus' life and death. Then he said, "But God raised him on the third day and allowed him to appear ... to us ... as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead."

Easter is a powerful story of God's victory over sin and death. It is also God's affirmation of everything Jesus said and did while he walked among us. Truth and justice, mercy and self-giving love cannot be killed on a cross. Evil may prosper for a time, injustice and oppression may seem to have the upper hand, but God's way will win in the end. That's the story of Easter, and according to Peter it will turn our lives upside down.

In the passage John read this morning, Peter had just seen a vision from God. It's a great story, and if you have never read it, I recommend it, chapter 10 of Acts. In the vision, God told Peter to eat all sorts of food, animals that Jewish people considered unclean. Peter said, "Oh no, Lord. Nothing that is profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." He was disgusted at the thought.

But while Peter was trying to understand what this vision meant, the spirit told him to go to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile Roman soldier. Keep in mind, that just as Peter had always believed he was not allowed to eat food considered unclean, he also believed it was wrong for him, as a Jew, to associate with Gentiles. Gentiles were considered unclean too. But Peter obeyed the spirit, and when he arrived, Cornelius said an angel had told him to send for Peter, and he had assembled all his relatives and close friends to hear what Peter had to say.

At this point Peter realized that God was doing a new thing. So he said, “Now I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to God.” And then he told Cornelius and his household the good news of the gospel, the message of Easter. And while he was speaking, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles there. Peter baptized them, and stayed with them for several days.

The story of Easter opened up a new way for people to relate to God. Peter and the rest of the disciples didn’t know it at the time, but the seeds of this way were present from the beginning of Jesus’ life. In the gospel of Luke (1:79), when John the Baptist was born, his father said John would prepare the way of the Lord, and “guide our feet into the way of peace.” And when Jesus was an infant, the prophet Simeon took him in his arms and said, “Now... my eyes have seen (the salvation of God) ... a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.” (2:30-32). Now even Gentiles can see the light of God and relate to God, not just through the rituals and laws of the Jewish faith, but also directly through Christ.

When Peter realized this, it shook his world, and it can shake ours as well. The story of Easter challenges *us* today, to keep examining *our* faith in new ways. God still shows no partiality. God has no favorites, whether we are liberal or conservative, a citizen or undocumented, straight or gay, rich or poor, PhD or a high school drop-out, Protestant, Catholic, or no religion. Jesus is Lord of *all*. And God’s spirit will keep moving among us and keep amazing us until God’s Kingdom comes.

Recently our nation has been debating gay marriage and religious freedom. Some Christians want to guarantee a right to refuse service to people whose lifestyles they disapprove of. But whether you believe same-sex marriage is right or wrong, the good news of the gospel has nothing to do with excluding people or withholding services from them. Jesus was killed partly because he insisted that even tax-collectors and sinners were God’s children too. If Jesus could share a meal with tax-collectors and sinners, why can’t one of his followers today bake a cake for someone they believe to be a sinner? Isn’t that what Jesus would do?

After his vision, Peter opened his heart to people he found strange, maybe even disgusting, and included them in God’s grace. The message of Christ does not give us the freedom to judge, discriminate and exclude. Instead it opens up God’s love and care to everyone who fears God and tries to do what is right. We have the freedom, not to exclude, but to include everyone, and treat them with respect and dignity, as God’s children. It is a message of peace. It’s a message of joy.

So on this glorious day of Resurrection, may we tell the story of Easter, and include God’s amazing offer of grace to all people, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

And now I invite you to stand and say together the Affirmation of Faith printed in your bulletin. This is one of the earliest affirmations of faith we have, coming straight from the Bible, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. And it is another way to tell the Easter story.