

“Easter Prepositions”
April 8, 2007
Brentwood First Presbyterian
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Isaiah 65:17-25
Luke 24:1-12

Our redeemer lives! The ancient words of the church on Easter morning were for the pastor to say, “Jesus is risen.” And the congregation responds, “He is risen indeed.” Lets try that. “Jesus is risen.” ...

Jesus’ resurrection invites laughter. The kind of laughter we sometimes experience when something so impossible happens we can do nothing else but laugh.

A Sunday School teacher asked her class on the Sunday before Easter if they knew what happened on Easter and why it was so important.

One little girl spoke up saying: "Easter is when the whole family gets together, and you eat turkey and sing about the pilgrims and all that." "No, that's not it," said the teacher.

"I know what Easter is," a second student responded. "Easter is when you get a tree and decorate it and give gifts to everybody and sing lots of songs." "Nope, that's not it either," replied the teacher.

Finally a third student spoke up, "Easter is when Jesus was killed, and put in a tomb and left for three days." "Ah, thank goodness somebody knows" the teacher thought to herself.

But then the student went on: "Then everybody gathers at the tomb and waits to see if Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow he has to go back inside and we have six more weeks of winter."

The emphasis placed on religious celebrations becomes clouded by the emphasis placed on them by glitz and glamour of commercialism. Even children can become somewhat confused over the meaning and importance.

Friends, you have come here this morning with a sense of anticipation and longing. There are sobering questions on your mind and much hangs in the balance. Is there hope? Is there new life? Is there reason for joy? The answer to your questions has arrived today. It is here waiting for you. It is a three-word message: Jesus Is Risen! ... Good news for the sad. Good news for the anxious. Good news for the bitter. Good news for those burdened with shame. Good news for those who have lost someone special. The Good news is this: Jesus is risen! ...

Sequence 1

We grieve our loss
The two Mary's and Joanna found the empty tomb

Mark was three years old when his pet lizard died. Since it was her grandson's first brush with death, Grandma suggested that Mark and an older boy in the family hold a "funeral" for the lizard. Grandma explained what a funeral was: a ceremony where you say a prayer, sing a song, and bury your loved one.

Grandma even provided a shoe box and a burial place in the backyard. The boys thought it was a great idea, so they all proceeded to the backyard. Taking the lead, the older boy said a prayer. Then he turned and asked little Mark if he wouldn't like to sing a song. With tears in his eyes, Mark clasped his hands, bowed his head, and belted out "Hit the Road, Jack" by Ray Charles.

That's exactly what Pilate, Herod, the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, Caiaphas, Ananias and everyone else who had plotted the death of Jesus were singing on Friday. That was their fondest wish. "Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more, no more, no more, no more. Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more." They buried his body and they thought he'd gone.

Jesus was put to death by the oppressive Roman government. He was consigned to oblivion. To nothingness. And put in a tomb with a boulder sealing it. At the crack of dawn on Sunday, the Joanna and the two Mary's came to the tomb carrying burial spices they had prepared. They found the entrance stone rolled back from the tomb, so they walked in. But once inside, they couldn't find the body of their Master. They were puzzled, wondering what to make of this. Then, out of nowhere it seemed, two men, light cascading over them, stood there. The men said, "Why are you looking for the living one in a cemetery? He is not here, but is raised up."

The best laid plans of mice and oppressors oft go awry. His oppressors sent him into nothingness, and sealed his tomb with a boulder. But Jesus was like a Jack in the Box. They couldn't keep him contained in the tomb, could they? He popped out! The Jack who spoke a truth the oppressors did not want to hear came back! Jesus is the Lord of the dance and he leaped up high. He is the life that will never, never die.

But why did Jesus die and then come back? Why did he hit the tomb, and then why, like "Jack in the Box," did he pop out of the tomb? Why did God resurrect him back to life in such a dramatic way?

Sequence 2
We are in awe of the unexpected and unexplainable
The women wondered, are in awe, and bowed

The strange messengers, the bright lights, the empty tomb. It was too much. Joanna and the two Marys were awestruck, and covered their faces on the ground.

The German theologian Jurgen Moltmann expresses in a single sentence the great span from Good Friday to Easter. "God WEEPS with US so that we may someday LAUGH with GOD." We are in awe of and we bow to a God who weeps with us. We are in awe of a God who, as Isaiah tells us, desires a new creation where weeping shall be heard no more.

If Easter says anything at all to us it is that Jesus will always be with us. The pyramids of Egypt are famous because they contained the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptian kings. Westminster Abbey in London is renowned, because in it rests the bodies of English nobles and notables. Mohammed's tomb is noted for the stone coffin and the bones it contains. Arlington cemetery in Washington, D.C., is revered, for it is the honored resting place of many outstanding Americans. But the Garden Tomb of Jesus is famous because it is empty! We are in awe of and we bow to the empty tomb. Our redeemer lives!

Peter and the other first disciples were expecting a conquering king who would relieve the Jews of their oppression. Peter and the first disciples, like us modern day disciples 2000 years later, do not always get what they ask for. Instead, they, like us, always get what we need.

Chuck Swindoll writes:

"If our greatest need had been information,
God would have sent us an educator.
If our greatest need had been technology,
God would have sent us a scientist.
If our greatest need had been money,
God would have sent us an economist.
If our greatest need had been pleasure,
God would have sent us an entertainer.
But our greatest need was forgiveness,
So God sent us a Savior!"

Peter and the first disciples expected a Lord of military power. Instead, they got the Lord of hope.

Sequence 3
Scripture gives us hope
Remembering Jesus' promises gives the women hope

The two men with brilliant clothes reminded Joanna and the two Marys that Jesus told them he had to be handed over, crucified, and be raised on the third day. And they remembered his words.

I recall a geography lesson from elementary school in which we learned that the southernmost point of Africa experiences terrible storms. For many years no one even

knew what lay beyond that cape, for no ship attempting to round that point had ever returned to tell. It was known as the "Cape of Storms." But the 16th century Portuguese explorer Vasco De Gama successfully sailed around that very point and found beyond the wild raging storms, a the calm sea we call the Indian Ocean, and beyond that, the shores of India. The name of that cape was changed from the Cape of Storms to the Cape of Good Hope.

Until Jesus Christ rose from the dead, death had been the Cape of Storms on which all hopes of life beyond had been wrecked. No one knew what lay beyond that point until, on Easter morning, those ancient visions of Isaiah became the victory of Jesus over our last great enemy. Suddenly, like those ancient explorers, we can see beyond the storm to the hope of heaven and eternal life with our creating, redeeming, and inspiring God. More than that, we dare to believe that we shall experience in our own human lives exactly what the Son of Man experienced in his. For the risen Jesus says to us, "Because I live, you shall live also." This is the heart of the Easter faith. Our redeemer lives.

A modern writer tells us, "Somewhere deep in the forest of life many Christians come to a fork in the path. Some head in one direction, traveling their life in bitterness, shouting at the world for its unfairness, wagging their heads over the sad plight of our time, cursing 'what this world has come to nowadays.' Others, however, are given the gift of traveling the other way, the path of a cheerful confidence in God's plan ... This is the path that knows a banquet table waits at the end and that a house of music and dancing can already be heard in the distance. This is the path that sees a world full of miracles. This is the way of blessing, the path of gratitude." The modern author further writes, "I am convinced that it is the risen Jesus who stands at this parting of the ways. If the good news of Easter is true, then we have hope, and it is hope that sustains us when we face our darkest hours."

But Easter isn't just about surviving death, that is, being born into God's new creation. It is not just about Jesus rounding the Cape of Storms and coming back to tell us about God's new creation, important as that is. It's also about the power of trust in a world which has lost all hope. It is about knowing that no situation is beyond the power of God's redemption.

There is the story of a school teacher who was assigned to visit children in a large city hospital, and who received a routine call requesting that she visit a particular child.

The teacher took the boy's name and room number, and was told by the teacher on the other end of the line, "We're studying prepositions in this class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework, so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until the visiting teacher was outside the boy's room that she realized that it was located in the hospital's burn unit. No one had prepared her to find a young boy so horribly burned and in such great pain.

The teacher felt that she couldn't just turn around and walk out. And so she stammered awkwardly, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher sent me to help you with prepositions." This boy was in so much pain that he barely responded. The young teacher stumbled through his English lesson, ashamed at putting him through such a senseless exercise.

The next morning a nurse on the burn unit asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" Before the teacher could finish her outburst of apologies, the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him. But ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back; he's responding to treatment. It's as if he has decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw the teacher. It all changed when he came to a simple realization. With joyful tears, the boy said: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on prepositions with a boy who was dying, would they?"

Jesus suffers, loves, and lives where even hope has died.

You see, Easter isn't just about surviving death to be born into God's new creation. It's also about the power of trust in a world which has lost all hope. It is about knowing that no situation is beyond the power of God's redemption.

But upon what prepositions should we ourselves focus this Easter morning?

Sequence 4
Attending to prepositions
Raised BY God on the third day

When I was a college freshman, someone knocked on my door. I opened it, and the upperclassman outside asked if I was saved. I grew up in a Reformed tradition, and so I assumed that God always loved me. That I was rescued by Jesus 2000 years ago, not by any decision that I made. That like a human parent, God loved me regardless whether I returned that love or not. The upper classman asked me if I was saved, and I asked, "Saved FROM what?"

We do not attend to our prepositions. Like the boy in the burn unit, we need someone to teach us about the prepositions. The prepositions of the resurrection. There are just three of them: By, From, and For. If we can remember the three prepositions of the resurrection, the three prepositions of Easter, we will understand what God did, and why.

It was God who raised the human form of Jesus from the dead. Because God in human form, Jesus, was dead, he could not raise himself. Jesus was resurrected BY God. We also are rescued BY God. Humanists cannot rescue themselves, and neither can we. We are rescued BY God FROM our sin and messiness. We are rescued BY God FROM our fear, anger, and shame. The emotions which blind us from seeing what is important. We are rescued FOR embodying and continuing Jesus ministries, the same ones he started

2000 years ago. The ministries of giving and forgiving. The ministries of welcoming, and inclusion. The ministries of taking care of and loving others. On Easter Sunday, we are saved BY God, FROM our messiness, FOR continuing Jesus' ministries. In our church, Jesus is alive. Jesus is no longer bound to distant years in Palestine. He is right here, right now, in this time and place. Our redeemer lives. Jesus is alive!

Conclusion

Ground Hog day and Easter bunnies. Hit the Road, Jack, and Jack in the Box. The Cape of Storms and the Cape of Good Hope. By, From, and For. This Easter morning, Jesus is the Lord of the dance and he leaps up high. He will live in you if you will live in him. For he is the life that will never, never die.

It was 1930, and a communist leader journeyed from Moscow to Kiev. His mission was to address a huge assembly. His subject, promotion of atheism. For a solid hour he aimed his heavy artillery at Christianity, pummeling his audience with argument and ridicule. At last he was finished and viewed what he thought would be the hopeless ashes of his audience's former trust in God. "Are there any questions?" the speaker demanded. One man arose and asked permission to speak. He mounted the platform and moved close to the atheist. The audience was breathlessly silent as the man surveyed them first to the right, then to the left. At last he shouted the ancient Christian greeting, "JESUS IS RISEN!" The vast assembly arose as one and the response came crashing back like the sound of an avalanche, "HE IS RISEN INDEED!" Let's try that again. "JESUS IS RISEN." ...