

SO MUCH GOOD NEWS

John 20: 1-18

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Because many children are in worship on Easter Sunday, I try to keep my Easter sermons to 15 minutes or so. There are so many other messages today. The magnificence of the music, the hopefulness and beauty of the spring flowers, the scripture passage itself. A 15- minute sermon is enough.

And it would be easy to preach 15 minutes if I had entitled this sermon, "So much bad news." I wouldn't even have to do much research. Just from the past week alone, I could talk about news stories like the Palm Sunday bombing of churches in Egypt, the growing threat of war with North Korea, violence erupting in many places around the world and in this country, even on a passenger airplane. I could even talk about the Cleveland sports teams that struggled this week. That sermon would be easy to write. No challenge at all. It might even be a good sermon, one I'd be complimented on, because bad news sells.

But our scripture for today gives me a different assignment. This is not Maundy Thursday. Today's not the day to talk about the loneliness of the Garden of Gethsemane, or what it's like to be betrayed by one's friends. This is not Good Friday. The story for today is not about an unfair trial, or an innocent man being put to death. This isn't a Saturday sermon, a sermon about living in days of mystery and grief.

Today is Easter, and we are Easter people. We know the realities of the world around us. We know the truth of Thursday and Friday and Saturday, but we are here this morning to proclaim that there is a deeper truth, a more lasting truth, a story that triumphs over all other stories. We are here because love has won. Grace has won. Death and sin and evil do not have the last word.

One of the highlights of 2016 for me was the opportunity to spend a week in Collegeville, Minnesota at a writing conference. One of the other participants was an Episcopal priest in North Carolina who told me this story.

“It was an early spring evening, a few weeks after Easter. I was getting some food together for a quick supper following a Wednesday night service when my three-year old son Alex came walking out of his bedroom. He couldn’t sleep and wanted to join me at the kitchen table.

As I started to eat, Alex grabbed my hand – and while looking at a big ole blister smack in the middle of my right palm, (a blister I got while gardening), he asked, “Dad, are you Jesus?”

“No, Alex, I’m not Jesus,” I said.

“Did you have a nail in your hand like Jesus did,” he asked.

No, Alex, I didn’t. It’s a blister I got from working in the garden,” I told him.

“And then he said, with the imagination of a three year old, “I’d like to see you nailed to a cross, dad, like Jesus.”

“Alex,” I exclaimed, “would you like to see me die on a cross like Jesus did?”

“Jesus didn’t die on a cross,” Alex said.

“O yes he did,” I answered, “but he came back to life again.”

Without missing a beat, Alex said, “Dad, did you ever do that?”

“Do what?” I said, knowing darn well what Alex had asked.

He said, “Did you ever die and come back to life again?”

There was a pause. I thought long and hard and said, “Yes, Alex, I did. I’ve died many times. And each time I’ve died, I’ve come back to life again.”

His response was, “I’ve never seen you do it, dad. Can you do it again?”

What I wasn’t able to tell him at three, we were able to talk about when he got much older, and it was that I saw him die to the life he knew in his mother’s womb as I witnessed the miracle of his birth. We’ve since talked many times about how life is a journey in which we die and come

back to life again in ways we often can't predict or plan – and certainly can't control, try as we might. Sometimes it happens through decisions and choices we make in our relationship to self. Sometimes it happens through decisions and choices we make in our relationships with others. Sometimes it just happens, without rhyme or reason.”

I know what my friend Bob is talking about, because I've seen it happen, too. I've seen it right here in this church family. I've seen the good news of Easter with my own eyes. I've seen people so burdened with grief that they almost could not function. And slowly, gradually, with the pain not unlike the pain of childbirth, they begin to emerge from the tomb of grief and find new life. Their sorrow is not gone nor forgotten but they experience joy again. They begin to walk with a spring in their step again.

This past Christmas Eve, as I watched people in worship, I saw four people I've known and loved and prayed for. Two of them had gone through painful divorces, two of them had lost their spouses to death. They walked in with new significant others and to me, it felt like Easter. It was Christmas, but it was new life. And I could almost see the hope alive in the air. So much good news.

Five years ago this past February, life changed forever for the people of Chardon, Ohio. A school shooting at Chardon High School took the lives of three young men and left another one paralyzed. The carnage might have been worse were it not for the heroic actions of a man named Frank Hall. Hall, then an assistant football coach and study hall teacher, was the cafeteria monitor that day. He chased down the shooter, leading him out of the cafeteria and out of the school building before anyone else could be hurt, at great risk, of course, to himself.

It was a heroic day for Frank, but that's not nearly where his story ends. You see Frank and his wife Ashley are Easter people. They are people who look the reality of bad news in the eye and know that they can do better. It started when they had been married only three months. Ashley, then a caseworker at Ashtabula County Children's Services, heard about a 3-year-old boy who needed a family. She came home and told Frank about him. “No way,” he said.

We just got married.” But he couldn’t stop thinking and worrying about the little boy. “I drove around with a hole in my heart,” he said. “The next day, he was at our house and he’s been my best friend ever since.” That’s Christian, who’s now 13 and the oldest of the nine children at home, all of them adopted, including twin girls born to an addicted mother, and three of Christian’s siblings who have since joined the family. Did I mention that the Halls lived at the time in a three-bedroom 1 1/2 bath ranch house? The story of Frank’s heroism that tragic day in Chardon made national news. His picture was on the cover of Sports Illustrated, and 60 Minutes reported on it. He caught the attention of a multimillionaire Minnesota real estate developer who has since purchased a larger home on seven wooded acres in Austinburg for the Hall family. So much good news.

Chicago has been ground zero for bad news lately, one Good Friday story after another, as the murder rate has skyrocketed. But let me tell you the story of Gregory Jones and one of his students named Maya. Gregory Jones became principal of a high school on Chicago’s south side in 2012, determined to raise the graduation rate and to make the school a place where students would enjoy coming to school. He added a full orchestra, a sculpture program, and set out to improve the school’s struggling sports teams. He became aware of a student named Maya, who lives in one of the district’s most crime-infested neighborhoods. Maya started freshman year doing well, but by her junior year she was struggling in every aspect of her life. Jones called her into his office and made it clear to Maya how much people were rooting for her. He also told her she was on the verge of blowing a big opportunity - to graduate from a good high school and go to college. The message worked. Maya says she was ready to hear it. “The path I was on - I really didn’t like it. I got tired of being in the office, I got tired of getting in trouble, I got tired of having a bad reputation.” She also got tired of hanging out with people who cared mostly about where the coming weekend’s parties would be. “I feel like, if you’re the smartest of all of your friends, you need more friends,” she said. This year Maya made honor roll. She is playing third base on the softball team. She is on comfortably on track to graduate.

If that’s not a resurrection story, I don’t know what is. So much good news.

And it's not isolated. Throughout Chicago, the high school graduation rate is climbing, as are the numbers of students heading to college.

Do we live in frightening, dangerous times? We undoubtedly do. But we also live in an era that has seen, worldwide, the decline in numbers of people living in extreme poverty, a decline in childhood mortality rates, and a decline in world hunger. Easter people are not naive, nor do they close their eyes to the suffering around them. Rather, Easter people look for the signs of where God is at work in the world, and jump in to help, with both feet. Easter people don't just notice that there's a lack of affordable housing in our county, they donate to Habitat for Humanity. The goal for our Easter offering to Habitat for Humanity from this church is \$10,000. People who believe in the good news will be here next week, providing hospitality to families who will make this church building their home for a week. We can complain that our world leaders aren't making the right decisions, and that congress is incompetent, but are we getting involved? Are we writing letters, are we making phone calls, advocating for what we believe? Are we a part of the solution?

When Mary saw that the tomb was empty, she assumed the worst. She assumed that the same people who had executed Jesus had now tampered with his body. Then, the story says, the risen Christ appeared before her and said, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She didn't recognize him until he called her by name. "Mary, do not hold on to me. Go. Share the good news." Mary became the first Easter person, the first person to be moved from the cynicism of Good Friday to the joy of Easter morning.

Jesus calls each us by name and says, "The time for weeping is over. There will always be something to cry about, but now is the time to go. Share the good news." So much good news. Lives are being transformed, lonely people have been invited to Easter dinner, those who were lost in the morass of addiction are receiving treatment, those stuck in dead-end jobs are courageously reinventing their lives, relationships are being born. Easter is happening all around us. Thanks be to God.