

NOW OUR EYES ARE OPENED

John 20:1-18

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Why is it so hard to believe good news and so easy to believe bad news? Plenty of people struggle with the Easter story, trying to make sense of it. I've had dozens, if not hundreds of people tell me that they have trouble believing in Easter. No one has ever said to me, "I just don't believe in Good Friday. I can't believe that a good person like Jesus would be put to death. How is it possible that people were so cruel to someone like Jesus with his gifts of teaching and healing?"

Why is it that we are quick to believe bad news and resist believing the good?

I realize it's not a fair question. After all, in Jesus' time, as in our own, we see all too many examples of good people whose lives end too soon and far too many instances of violence. It doesn't take any imagination whatsoever to believe that Jesus was killed at the hands of the state, with cheering bystanders. Yet something that was dead coming back to life? That's new, and different, and hard to wrap our minds around. It's understandable that it's harder to believe that kind of amazing good news.

There is almost a default mechanism within us that resists good news. Maybe we don't want to be disappointed. Perhaps we keep our expectations low intentionally. As I pay attention to the news media and to social media and to the conversations around me, the language I hear most often is the language of despair and blame and complaint. Do you notice it too? It is almost a constant murmur, a chorus that says, over and over again, "Things are bad...and getting worse..." And it's accompanied by a

rush to blame someone - usually someone in the opposite political party. That's what I mean by the language of despair and blame and complaint.

On this Easter Sunday, on this day which is our highest of all holy days, my question is this, "Is our response to the problems of the world a faithful response, or is something else called for?"

When I turn my attention away from our current situation and focus instead on Jesus, here is what I notice. Jesus did not speak the language of despair and complaint and blame. Oh, he was aware of the problems caused by the oppressive Roman Empire. He was keenly attuned to the practices that led to widespread poverty among his people. He did not wear rose-colored glasses nor bury his head in the desert sand, nor did he act as if he were too holy to be involved in the nitty-gritty politics of his day. When he confronted an abuse of power, he named it. But most of the time, he was preaching the good news. He was lifting people up, restoring them to wholeness, helping them imagine a better way of life. He was calling people by name, and reminding them that they were God's beloved children, no matter where they were born, what race, what gender, what their abilities or disabilities were...no matter what they looked like, Jesus called them by name.

What would happen in our world if we were to speak the language of hope instead of despair? What if we were to talk about the solutions that are making a difference for good instead of complaining about what's not working? What, do you suppose, would the result be if we were to look for common ground rather than standing across the chasms from one another, shouting insults?

We have just completed a six week parenting class here at the church. We called it Parenting 911, because we really believe that there is a crisis. Our youth are experiencing anxiety and depression, sometimes self-medicating with drugs and alcohol, sometimes harming themselves. It was a wonderful class, which culminated this past Wednesday with six high school students from our church talking very honestly about what adolescence is like from their perspectives.

We talked about solutions. There are solutions, and I can't help but think that one of them starts with all of the adults in this room. If we are Easter people, we are people of hope. We believe that the spirit of God is alive! So let's put away the language of despair. Let's give one another and the next generation reason after reason for hope. If we are Easter people, we don't just believe that a better world is possible, we proclaim it, we live it, we embody it, we work towards it.

Our Easter offering this year will be used to build a house in Elyria, a house that will become a home for a family that otherwise would never have been able to own one. Habitat for Humanity was born in a unique Christian community, a community founded by a man named Clarence Jordan.

In the 1940's, after he received his Ph.D in Greek New Testament, Clarence Jordan moved to southwest Georgia, near where he'd been raised, to form an experiment in Christian community. He didn't set out to make a political statement; rather, he thought of himself as a missionary. He was a passionate, optimistic, faith-driven person. He believed he had a calling to demonstrate a different way of living. He established a working farm, called Koinonia Farm - koinonia is the biblical Greek word which

means “community.” Jordan didn’t believe in segregation and discrimination, so his community was integrated. As a result, they were threatened and bombed and were the victims of arson.

One day, members of the Ku Klux Klan paid a visit to Koinonia Farm. They said to the residents, “You can leave now, or we will kill you.” Clarence Jordan and the others said, “We won’t be the first Christians to die for what we believe. We’re not leaving.” When the threat of violence died down, the Koinonia community was able to turn its attention to the issue of affordable housing. A man named Millard Fuller, who was living at Koinonia, transformed their local housing project into an organization called Habitat for Humanity International. Since 1976, it has helped 9.8 million people become adequately housed.

It all started with one person who believed in the power of hope and positive action. Here’s how a biographer describes him: “Clarence Jordan was a strange phenomenon in the history of North American Christianity. Hewn from the massive Baptist denomination, known primarily for its conformity to culture, Clarence stressed the anti-cultural, the Christ-transcending and the Christ-transforming, aspects of the gospel.” If you are ever in southern Georgia, perhaps to visit Plains - the home of Jimmy Carter - I encourage you to visit Koinonia Farm. It is an inspiring place, still doing good work. And here is my favorite Clarence Jordan quote for Easter: “The proof of Easter is not a rolled away stone but a carried away church.”

Friends, it is still happening that things which were once dead come back to life. Hope is reborn. People who are deep in the tomb of grief start to gradually walk to-

wards the light, and eventually, step by step, they find themselves experiencing joy and new life and helping others to do the same. This is why I believe in the good news. I see it. This past November, I officiated at a wedding for two people, both of them 70 years old. They stood on our chancel, surrounded by their loved ones and spoke marriage vows to each other, their eyes glowing with love. They were two friends who knew each other a long time ago and met again, one after a divorce and one after the tragic death of a spouse. I'm telling you, I've seen it with my own eyes. New life is powerful.

Are we telling the stories of new life? Parents worry when their children express doubts. It doesn't happen frequently, but it's happened a couple of times here that a student goes all the way through Confirmation class, and then chooses not to be confirmed, not to join the church with the others. And the parents worry and are sometimes embarrassed. And I say to them, "Just wait. If your child is taking the decision that seriously, she's really thinking about it. It's not a bad sign." And this fall, one of those students is going to seminary, sponsored by this church. Another one, still in high school, has decided for herself that she needs and wants God in her life. New life is real and it's not to be taken lightly.

Mary is quick to believe the bad news. In fact, she jumps right to a negative conclusion. She arrives at the tomb to prepare Jesus' body for final burial. When she sees the empty tomb, she immediately believes that Jesus' body had been stolen. And why not? The authorities had tortured Jesus mercilessly. She'd watched him suffer and die. Now they're denying him even a proper burial. It makes perfect sense. One more piece of bad news that's easy to believe.

She weeps, and she sees two angels, and then she sees a man she assumes is the gardener, and through it all, she is filled with grief and despair. And then, the word that opens her eyes to the new reality. Jesus speaks her name. Her eyes open, and she rushes back to the other disciples and says, "I have seen the Lord." She tells the good news, and she's believed, and the word spreads, and here we are today.

The good news is this. Death does not have the last word. There is a love that is greater, that binds us to God and to one another, even beyond death. Fear does not have the last word. When Jesus calls us by name, we realize that we are not alone. Easter opens our eyes to the good news, and we see moments of resurrection and possibility and new life in all kinds of people who are transforming the world by their kindness, their acts of justice, their generosity towards each other, their willingness to speak up for those who are afraid. We hear Easter sermons coming out of the mouths of high school students. They witnessed the terror of gunshots in their schools, and they could have crouched the rest of their lives in despair - who would have blamed them? They had every right to complain and so many choices of who to blame, but instead they are preaching that death and evil and sin and fear and terror will not have the last word.

Tell the story of Habitat for Humanity. Be inspired by a life like Clarence Jordan's. Tell people about the Good Neighbor Thrift Shop, where shirts sell for \$1.50 and the store isn't even open in the evenings but somehow it makes enough profit to support the mission work of this church and provide a welcome to people who need a kind word...tell about Stephen Ministers who meet with those who are experiencing a life crisis and through the simple but sacred acts of listening and prayer find people coming

through on the other side feeling loved and accepted and full of hope. Tell about our mission trips where there is always at least one kid who goes with a bad attitude, thinking the whole idea is stupid, or one who goes just because it will look good on a college application, and that is the student who experiences a transformation, new meaning and purpose and faith...if you don't want to tell the story of a rolled away stone, then tell about a carried away church. Tell the good news...Jesus calls us by name and opens our eyes to a new way of life. Christ is risen indeed! Let us pray.

Holy God, on this Easter Sunday, let us each hear you call us by name. Reassure us of your love and acceptance and then put new words in our mouths, words of hope, stories that about the way the world is being transformed from a Good Friday world to an Easter world. In the name of the risen Christ we pray and live. Amen.