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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, April 4, 2010

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

How True It Is

Acts 10:23-43

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Easter is an explosion of joy, a celebration of hope. Such was the case for Humaira. Humaira was a Muslim who converted to Christianity. Someone told her the story of Jesus in her debilitated state of being crippled and voiceless. God awakened her from a coma of eight months following an accident. Her family laughed at her healing and conversion. Others mocked her experience as phony and insincere. Humaira discovered who she was and where life was found. Humaira began to live with hope.¹

Following the resurrection, Peter ended up in a village on the Mediterranean Coast called Joppa. He stayed at the home of Simon, a new believer who was a tanner. An orthodox Jew was not permitted to have any dealings with anyone who worked with dead animals. That is the reason tanners lived fifty cubits (a cubit being the distance between the elbow and finger tips, approximately eighteen inches and in this case 900 inches or seventy-five feet) outside a village.² When Peter went to the roof, the question of the Gentiles was on his mind. Did a Gentile convert have to become a proselyte of Judaism prior to becoming a follower of Jesus Christ?

The vision that Peter received was a sheet being lowered from heaven with all kinds of animals, reptiles, and birds of which he was not permitted to consume based on Jewish food regulations.³ The sheet was lowered from the four corners of the earth. Peter was commanded three times to rise and eat. And each time, Peter responded no, because he had never eaten of anything that was common or unclean. God spoke to Peter and told him that what he had made clean must not be called unclean. God wanted no

¹Keith Miller, a Vice-President at Christianity Today International, witnessed Humaira's testimony at his church.

²See the book of Numbers

³See Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14

confusion about that message. There is unity in and through Jesus Christ.

Followers of Jesus have a story to tell the world. But we must address people's greatest questions which deal with their greatest needs. Our greatest needs revolve around two questions: Who am I? and Where is life found?

There are two story lines that answer those questions. The first is counterfeit and tells us that we are worthless and unlovable. It tells us to find worth and love in all the wrong places. The other story tells us that we are the crowning act of God's creation. God loves us so much that he gave his only Son for us that by believing in Jesus we would know who we are and where true life can be found.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?"⁴ Thus did the two men at the tomb ask the women who went there seeking Jesus. Luke preserved this question for Theophilus and so poses it even to us yet today, challenging the age old faith of humanity that death is final, that death has the last word and that the dead stay dead. "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

The stated assumption of the question, the major affirmation to which it leads us, is none other than the good news of Easter. Jesus Christ, who had been crucified, dead and buried on Friday, is here and now on the following Sunday morning referred to as "the living." "The living" usually applies to people before they are crucified, dead and buried. Here, "the living" is applied to Jesus Christ after he was crucified, dead and buried. The tomb was empty. The stone was rolled away. The women did not find the body. He was not there. He was not among the dead. He was, instead, again among the living. Indeed, the two men at the tomb affirmed the same, explicitly: "He is not here, but has risen."⁵

"He is not here, but has risen." This is the good news of Easter that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the very content of the gospel that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the major affirmation of the Christian faith that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the great hope of all humanity that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Indeed, this is more than we have dared to hope that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is what we need more than we

⁴Luke 24:5

need anything else that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is what we cannot do for ourselves that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is more than we have been bold to imagine that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. This is the courage, by which alone we live that God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead.

The facts of the situation were simple, in a way: the tomb was open and empty, and the body was nowhere to be found. What is the great truth of Easter? “He is not here, but has risen.” Jesus Christ, who was crucified, dead and buried, is now alive! This is the most important truth of the universe: Jesus Christ is alive!

This great truth of Easter, that Jesus has risen from the dead, means that death has been defeated. Our old enemy, the end of all life as we know it, the destroyer of all dreams, the breaker of all hopes, the crushing burden of all life, the end of all breath, the loss of all love, the fear of all hearts, the way of all flesh, the abyss into which all fall, death itself has now been defeated. Its power has been broken. Its reign has been taken away. Its terror has been removed. God alone is God! Death is not God.

One of the consequences of the resurrection was the empty tomb. That by itself is not sufficient for faith, but the empty tomb is necessary to the faith. Without it there would be no resurrection, no faith and no Christianity. Though the world cast him aside, God lifted him up. Though the world buried him in the ground, God raised him to heaven. And by raising him from the dead, God vindicated everything Jesus did, everything Jesus said, everything that Jesus was about. God refused to let death hold any of it. Where does that leave us? We are to bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus Christ and share the good news of the gospel with all people.

That witnessing started in today’s Gospel reading: the two men at the tomb bore witness to the women and the women bore witness to the apostles. The apostles have borne witness to us. Now it is our turn. We are responsible for bearing witness. We are called to share the great truth of the universe, that Jesus is alive. There is no one in the world who does not need to hear the good news of the resurrection of

⁵Luke 24:6

Jesus Christ. We need to take the initiative to tell others about Jesus' love for them. Remember, there is a counterfeit story. It is a lie. Followers of Jesus know the real story. We can tell people who they are and where life is found.

What is that story? Our reading in Acts makes four points: First, Jesus is the Lord of all. When God undertook to send a message of amnesty to his rebel subjects, he did not send an errand-boy. God sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God, with the good news of reconciliation. By believing in Jesus Christ people would not perish, but find eternal life. Jesus is Lord of all; fully God and fully man.⁶ Not just Lord of the Jews, but Lord of the Gentiles like Cornelius and his family and not just Lord of the Gentiles, but Lord of all angels and all demons. Jesus is not a local prophet or a tribal deity or a Jewish teacher. He is Lord of the universe and everything in it.⁷

Second, Jesus rescues those who are oppressed by sin and death. He is stronger than sin and death. Jesus went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by sin and death, for God was with him.⁸ Jesus walked with God his Father. When Jesus acted, the Father acted.

Third, Jesus is the final judge of all people.⁹ Every one of us will stand before Jesus Christ as your judge, just as surely as I am standing before you right now. And Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, will decide where we will spend eternity. We will either be condemned justly for all of our sins and sent to everlasting torment¹⁰ or we will be acquitted and pardoned.

And fourth, Jesus is the source of our forgiveness.¹¹ If you believe in Jesus, you will receive forgiveness of sins through his name and be pardoned when you stand before him as judge; if you believe in him. And that means trust him with your life as the Lord of all; trust him with your life as your rescuer from sin and death; trust him with your life as the one who will judge the living and the dead; and trust him with your life as the forgiver of sins.

⁶Acts 10:36

⁷Revelation 4

⁸Acts 10:38b

⁹Acts 10:42

¹⁰Revelation 14:11

What significance do Isaiah 53:10, Luke 24:1-12 and Acts 10:23-43 have for us today? The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the basic and central content of the Christian faith. God has raised him from the dead. Without it we would have nothing, but with it we have everything. The resurrection demonstrates the power of God. It establishes the veracity of the scriptures. It confirms the identity of Jesus as the Christ. It shows that the power of God, who created the world, is greater than the power of death, which can only take away life. God, who made us, has saved us for himself and reclaimed us as his very own.

The very real tears of life blur our vision. The tough stuff causes us to believe that Jesus is dead, so we go to places of death, hoping to find life. The tough stuff, like Jesus' death was to Mary, causes us, like Mary, to look for Jesus in dead places. Jesus cannot be found in fame, pleasure and false securities. We look in all the wrong places for things only Jesus can provide. We look to infidelities, getting a new job, building a bigger house, getting into that selective university, pledging that exclusive fraternity, having the correct political party in power, creating more government entitlements and the like.

On Thursday evening, Jesus was betrayed and arrested. During the night, he was tried. On Friday, he was crucified. Given that all this came true, why, on Sunday morning, do we expect to find him still in the grave? Why, on Sunday, are we perplexed by the empty tomb? Why do we seek the living among the dead? Why? We do not remember what Jesus told us. Such faithlessness is a result of not remembering the Word. Not remembering the Word comes from not hearing it. Not hearing the Word comes from a paucity of reading and preaching the Word. But on that day, when the women went to the tomb, they "remembered Jesus' words." So on that day, they believed in the resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ constitutes the defeat of death once and for all and so is the promise of resurrection life for us. In Jesus' resurrection the power of death is broken, death is robbed of its false appearance of being absolute and we are given the promise and good hope of life with God beyond life and death on this earth. Because God raised Jesus from the dead and made him alive again, so

¹¹Acts 10:43

shall God raise us from the dead and make us alive again. In his resurrection God has defeated death, so his victory is the promise of our own resurrection.

How true it is. In Jesus Christ there is new life. This is the Jesus of Easter. May God awaken you to Jesus, who is infinitely more than a sermon. Let us pray!

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