

CIRCUITRIDER

SERMON STARTERS

April 4 – May 9, 2010

Easter

by Lori Broschat

April 4

Acts 10:34-43; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24;
1 Corinthians 15:19-26; John 20:1-18

You have to hand it to God. If Hollywood wanted a movie about the greatest event in human history, it probably would not culminate in the hero's violent death with the climactic scene set in a cemetery. Only God could pull that off. No one involved really saw it coming. What we celebrate was not a reason to rejoice for those first witnesses. It was outside the realm of normal thinking for everyone involved. Jesus gave away the ending on more than one occasion, but no one at the tomb that day was prepared for what they found – or didn't find.

That's what makes it so frustrating! They expected to find a body. They didn't get it. Notice the overwhelming emotion was not joy and elation. The initial reaction was not "Oh thank God—Jesus is gone!" This was a scene of sadness, shock, and fear. The benefit for the disciples was that they would eventually get it. They would understand everything soon. Well, as much as anyone can truly understand the resurrection, anyway.

I realize the nature of the crucifixion and the resurrection makes belief difficult, but that's what makes it so powerful. It's too good not to be true! Jesus was crucified, died, and placed in a tomb. That tomb wasn't enough to hold Him. If death can't keep a person down, what else is there? Is it harder for us to accept that God died a human death or to believe that God walked out of the grave to the other side of life?

Belief is indeed a tenuous thing. Just look at those present. Mary was there to do a kindness

for her Lord. In the midst of her grief she encountered an empty tomb, and she was shocked and afraid by His absence. Needing comfort or confirmation or seeking to make sense, she sought out two of the disciples; John, the beloved disciple, and Peter, who had denied that he ever knew Jesus. Love and devotion accompanied denial and fear to the tomb of their dear departed Lord.

John barely stuck his head in the door. He saw the burial clothes, but did not go in. Peter entered and saw the linen strips and also the cloth that had covered his head. John then went into the tomb and in his own gospel account reported that he believed. Not that Christ had risen—not yet, for he added a footnote—they did not yet understand that Jesus must rise from the dead.

What if those disciples had returned to the tomb every day, looking for Jesus? His death would have continued to hold them captive, as the death of those we love often continues to hold us captive, even when we know there will be life after death. If they had repeatedly gone to the place where they had last seen Him, if He had not appeared to them, they would have remained lost.

April 11

Acts 4:27-32; Psalm 150;
Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31

Poor Thomas. Stuck forever with the misnomer of a doubter, and yet this was the man most willing to go to Jerusalem and die with Jesus. Hardly a skeptic of the plan. What was wrong with Thomas needing proof? On the one hand we

too may require confirmation in order to believe. We want to touch, view, or otherwise experience what we are called on to accept. Then there is the notion that true belief relies on faith. Jesus says it is this kind of faith that carries a greater blessing.

Barring any personal experiences of theophany, we who came to faith based on the witness of other believers are included in that “more blessed” category to which Jesus referred. We are doubly blessed because we believe without sight.

I have often wondered what it must be like for the visually impaired to let go of all human suspicion and trust that they are not being made fools of by those with whom they interact. Does our belief not require that same ability to let go of suspicion? Faith in itself is that strength given to us by God alone to give sight to the “sightless” aspect of the message. If we require actual visual proof, we will never completely become believers. We will merely be hoping that what we claim as belief will come true.

This need for proof makes for a very poor testimony of faith. But we are not salespersons, we are disciples. We are representatives of Christ on earth. We show people who Christ is, just as he showed people who God is. If we ourselves hold out until we have proof, we will have a difficult time convincing anyone else. Peter said we must always have our testimony ready to go for anyone who asks us about our faith. As a man who learned his lesson about losing his faith when it counted, his seems to be expert advice worth following.

 April 18

Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30;
Revelation 5:1-14; John 21:1-19

A charcoal fire. A meal of bread and fish. A miraculous catch. There must have been a tremendous sense of familiarity that morning for the disciples present on the shore of Galilee. It surely

brought back some memories. The elements of this story cannot be considered coincidental, nor are they a literary gesture on the part of John to tie in previous events from his story. This was a breakfast with a purpose for Peter—to bring back the lost sheep and make him a shepherd.

Peter was a lost, scattered, and broken sheep. How do we know this? Simple. Peter’s own words: “I’m going fishing.” Some of you would say those are the sweetest words in the English language! Coming from Peter, they were an admission of defeat. “That’s it—it’s over. I blew it. I tried, I couldn’t do it, I quit! Might as well pretend the whole thing never happened.” The others said, “We will come with you.” Six of them simultaneously gave up hope.

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the ultimate fresh start.
That’s what grace is:
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What was going on in their minds that morning? At first they did not recognize Jesus. It wasn’t until the great catch that they saw Him clearly. He was sitting by a charcoal fire, serving bread and fish. The last time Peter saw Him near a charcoal fire was the night he lied about their relationship. Do you imagine this early morning encounter was a bit unsettling for Peter? Perhaps he jumped into the water to cool his emotions. Did the bread and fish remind them of the day they witnessed a miracle? Did they remember their last meal together?

After breakfast Jesus got right to the point. He had some unfinished business. He set about to recapture Peter’s love and loyalty. The relationship was not over. Despite Peter’s promise, he had not followed Jesus to the point of death. When questioned about Jesus, Peter went for 3 in his chances to tell the truth. He did exactly

what Jesus said he would, and now he was living with the shame. But you see—you can't walk out on Jesus.

Our faith is based on second chances. The Resurrection was the ultimate fresh start. That's what grace is—a place to start again. So let's not say to Jesus, "I'll try." There is no such thing as trying to be a Christian. Jesus takes our failures and makes them into successes. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. How many times? How often has Jesus come to find you on the shore?

Our guilt can easily become an excuse to quit—to go fishing, to walk away when we let Jesus down. Peter didn't just walk away. He became tangled up in his failure, caught in his own nets. They did not offer him freedom and independence as he supposed they would. They would drag him down into perpetual regret. Why would we want to live that way when instead we could be in service to Christ?

April 25

Acts 9:36-43; Psalm 23;
Revelation 7:9-17; John 10:22-30

Everyone likes a good secret. A good bit of gossip can keep everyone buzzing, which is why this scene in John's gospel has such a familiar feeling to it. They buzzed around him like flies, chattering like schoolgirls: "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly."

How much more plainly could he have made it? He performed miracles, he healed the sick, and he raised the dead. How much more proof did they need? Probably no more than we would. The problem was not in the proof. The problem was in the state of their hearts. They were ill prepared to accept him.

We did not see the proof they saw. We did not hear the teachings they heard. Yet we have the testimony of his life, death, and resurrection that brings us into the place of belief. In order for that

belief to take root, according to Jesus, we have to be part of the flock.

We are part of that inner circle. We are privy to the information, the secret that wasn't really a secret. The Jews clamoring around Jesus didn't know what we know, no matter how plainly he might have made it for them. How amazing to realize that we are a part of something so wonderful that will never be taken away from us.

There falls to us a responsibility not to keep silent. We are no longer in the days of those twelve disciples, sworn to keep what they saw to themselves. We must be like the leper, and the blind man, and the centurion whose slave was healed. We have the greatest news the world needs. Especially now in the world where many have heard yet do not understand, we are messengers of healing, wholeness and hope. Spread the word!

May 2

Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148;
Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35

I have always found it strange that we use Revelation 21:1-6 as a funeral text and at the very moment we speak of God one day wiping all our tears away there are family members sitting right in front of us weeping. I guess that's because we believe this passage to be a happily-ever-after type of promise. It's a someday-but-not-yet event.

Why then does it appear in our lectionary during the season of Easter? Isn't the resurrection of Jesus the answer to the question of the Incarnation? Does God not dwell with us mortals even now? Yes, there is in John's vision the picture of all things made new, of the end of death, sorrow, and pain, and we do tend to associate those things with a future reality. Who is to say we cannot experience that in the here and now? We are all new creations in Christ and for that we do not wait.

Jesus told his disciples that as a mark of their identity love for each other would be of

utmost importance. Therefore, we need to be newly made in order for the love enabled only by God to be visible within us. If Jesus was glorified by the exit of his betrayer, then we certainly must be able to glorify him through our obedience to his command to love one another.

Too often that love is shown in ways that may dishonor Christ. When we show favoritism in our churches, give more voice to one member over another, or try to hold the church hostage through our giving, we are really the cause of tears and sorrow for some.

Maybe some think that making all things new is all up to God. Perhaps there are those who do not see their duty to restore God's people through kindness and Christian love. If that is true of your faith community, speak Christ's command again to them. Model for them the behavior that glorifies God rather than humankind.

May 9

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5; John 14:23-29

Here we go again—another funeral text. This one seems perfect for comforting those who grieve. It's a promise of peace so profound that the world can neither take away nor surpass. That is a comfort and a wonderful promise, but just how many of us focus on the second half of this passage and glance right over the first half?

Jesus gave final instructions to his remaining disciples. He was leaving them temporarily and made them a promise to send a helper. Then in words very similar to the passage of the previous week, Jesus returned to the subject of love. This time the context was not one of love as identity, but love as obedience.

Those who love him will do as he taught. Those who don't love him wouldn't listen in the first place, so naturally they would not obey. Then Holy Spirit's task would be to reinforce Christ's teachings to those who love him, those

who were really listening.

I do not think that most of us who follow Christ actually forget his teachings anymore than we stop loving him. I do think we forget what we have on our side. We have the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, our comforter, advocate, and coach. We also have that wonderful gift of peace that no one can take from us, yet we neglect to use.

We are too often arrogant enough to believe that our own methods of obedience and memory are enough. We are confident enough in our own ability to seek peace that we rob ourselves of it entirely. That is why I often wonder why we overlook the early part of this passage when we are marking the end of a life.

If we really wanted comfort for our loved ones, we would pay more attention to the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We would take hold of that incredible power that has been given to us for the work of the kingdom. There is an obligation for us to obey, certainly, and to love, most definitely. Beyond that there is a freedom we have to keep peace in our hearts through our relationship with Christ. That freedom is something we have that others do not have, and it is peace that makes us truly free.

May 16

Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21; John 17:20-26

How many of us in the hours before our death would spend our time in prayer for others? One whole chapter in the gospel of John is devoted to Jesus praying for his disciples, and for those who would follow after. For me, this is the real Lord's Prayer. It is a warm, loving conversation between Father and Son.

This particular passage deals with those believers yet to come, which of course includes all Christians who have ever lived. The prayer was

for those who would come to saving faith based on the testimony of the eleven remaining disciples. Or at least we seem to think the testimony stopped with those eleven.

In reality, we are all bearers of the story, the disciples' testimony. Their belief became our belief, and our belief may, God willing, become the belief of those who witness our faith. Jesus revealed himself to the disciples. He showed them who God was, and he would continue to show them in order to share God's love with them.

Through God's relationship to his son and the son's relationship to his followers the world has come to know God. What if they had remained silent about what they had experienced? How would God's love have been made complete without the sharing of their testimony?

Jesus shared his glory with us so that we could experience the same level of unity and harmony and perfect love that he shared with God. This is how the world comes to know and acknowledge and understand who God is and how much he loves us.

We speak of the ministry (or "priesthood") of all believers—well, this is it. Our ministry is to all those who know nothing of glory or love in their own lives. We are their only link to a life that can be free from fear, free from hopelessness, and filled with eternal love of God. We are the ones who carry the message of God to the world. If our love is incomplete, our ministry is incomplete.



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