

Easter Sunday Message 12 April 2020

WHAT'S BEHIND THE CURTAIN? - Nothing!

John 20:1-18

1 Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.

2 So she came running to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one Jesus loved, and said, "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"

3 So Peter and the other disciple started for the tomb.

4 Both were running, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first.

5 He bent over and looked in at the strips of linen lying there but did not go in.

6 Then Simon Peter came along behind him and went straight into the tomb. He saw the strips of linen lying there,

7 as well as the cloth that had been wrapped around Jesus' head. The cloth was still lying in its place, separate from the linen.

8 Finally the other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

9 (They still did not understand from Scripture that Jesus had to rise from the dead.)

10 Then the disciples went back to where they were staying.

11 Now Mary stood outside the tomb crying. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb 12 and saw two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

13 They asked her, "Woman, why are you crying?" "They have taken my Lord away," she said, "and I don't know where they have put him."

14 At this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not realize that it was Jesus.

15 He asked her, "Woman, why are you crying? Who is it you are looking for?" Thinking he was the gardener, she said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have put him, and I will get him."

16 Jesus said to her, "Mary." She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, "Rabboni!" (which means "Teacher").

17 Jesus said, "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'"

18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: "I have seen the Lord!" And she told them that he had said these things to her.

Our sermon series for Eastertide, "WHAT'S BEHIND THE CURTAIN?," starts today as we join the disciples on resurrection morning, and with them, discover "Nothing!"

This is a really difficult Easter. But there have been difficult Easters before.

Easter 320 AD was a very difficult Easter. Five years before, Emperor Constantine in the West and his brother-in-law, Emperor Licinius in the East, promulgated the Edict of Milan, making Christianity a legal religion in the

empire. But Licinius had second thoughts, and in 320 ordered all Christians out of the palace, and demanded that all his soldiers worship the divine cult of the Emperor. In Sebaste, forty members of an elite guard refused the Emperor's demands. The magistrate offered them bribes to burn the incense. When they refused, the magistrate threatened them with torture. Still they refused. They had been freely worshipping as followers of our risen Lord Jesus. They were out and proud and they would not recant. They would not dishonor their Risen Saviour. It was a night like last night, freezing cold and windy. The magistrate ordered the forty soldiers onto a frozen pond, deprived them of their clothes, and when morning dawned, the forty martyrs of Sebaste were dead. Their bodies were burned to deprive members of their Christian community from giving them a Christian burial. All they could do was gather the bones, and deposit them in a church.

Holy Week 1865 began on Palm Sunday with the surrender of General Robert E. Lee to General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House. On Good Friday, President Abraham Lincoln attended a production of a play at Ford's Theatre. He was shot there by John Wilkes Booth, and the President died on Holy Saturday. April 16, 1865 was known as "Black Easter." After over four years of war our nation had been torn asunder. Between 650,000 and 850,000 men had been killed, tens of thousands of women widowed and over a hundred thousand children orphaned. Half the country lay in ruins, and now the President was dead. It was a very difficult Easter.

Easter 1919 found our nation into the second year of the Spanish Influenza. Indiana lost over 3000 people to the pandemic. The center of the outbreak in Indiana was Fort Benjamin Harrison, and the Indiana School for the Deaf. Both were troop encampments, where soldiers were housed in crowded conditions. Ft. Ben had also been converted to an Army hospital for wounded and "shell shocked" troops returning from the front in Europe. Thousands of young men and women were dying in their prime of life, and thousands of children were now orphaned.

March 1945 began with the greatest tank battle of the whole European Theatre in World War II, the Battle of Cologne. Holy Week 1945 saw the launch of the final suicide assault by Japanese troops on Northern Iwo Jima, and the needless deaths of over 50 United States Marines, with over 120 wounded. Good Friday 1945 witnessed the launching of German V2 rockets against the terrified people of London, England.

On Easter Monday 1994 someone shot down the jet carrying the President of Rwanda. Before the Genocide that was ignited was over, 800,000 innocent people had lost their lives, and perhaps the greatest tragedy was that many were killed in their churches, lured there by their pastors.

And last year, on Easter Sunday in Sri Lanka, terrorist suicide bombers killed 259 innocent people, most of them at worship.

But I'm not sure it helps to know that there have been Easters more difficult than this Easter. People are sick. People are dying. The numbers go up every day. We cannot be together. We don't know when this will end. We are scared.

One of my favorite authors, Neil Gaiman, wrote in his novel "Coraline", "When you're scared but you still do it anyway, that's brave."

I want to offer that what we need this Easter is to be brave.

The women on that first Easter were brave. As they went to the tomb early in the morning on the first day of the week, they were VERY brave. Today's Gospel comes after the account of the burial of Jesus. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus had gone to Pontius Pilate and asked for Jesus' dead body. They had taken it down from the cross and wrapped it, with 75 pounds of spices, in linen cloths. They carried his body to a borrowed tomb, owned perhaps by one of these men, and placed it there, rolling the stone over the entrance, and hurried away, because it was almost sundown on the day of preparation for the Passover. It was almost the Sabbath.

Jesus' body was in the tomb Friday, the first day, Saturday the second, and early on the third day the women braved all manner of social and legal taboos, but they were brave and went to the tomb anyway. Social taboo forbade women from preparing the body of a man for burial. Jewish law forb the touching of a dead body. To do so rendered the person who touched the body ritually unclean for at least a week. The women braved it anyway, and when they got there, the tomb was empty. So they ran to tell the disciples.

The disciples weren't brave. In Luke's account, in Chapter 24, the disciples do not believe the women, saying that what the women told them was foolish women's talk. In today's account from John, Peter and the beloved disciple ran to see for themselves. Peter even went in and looked around. But neither of them touched. They were scared of the Jewish Law prohibiting anyone from touching anything to do with a corpse, and incurring the "father of all uncleanness."

When the disciples left, Mary stood weeping. As she wept she talked to two angels in the tomb. They asked her why she was weeping, and she told them it was because the Lord's body was missing and she didn't know where it had gone. Her grief made her very brave. She just wanted the only Jesus she had ever known, the flesh and blood Jesus, back.

She turned around and there he was, Jesus, risen from the dead, but she thought he might be the gardener. All it took was for Jesus to say her name, "Mary," and everything was different. She said, "Rabboni," which means teacher, and she reached out to him. He said, "Don't hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended."

Why did Jesus say, "Don't touch me"? In the Matthew account of the resurrection, it says the women grabbed his feet. It says in John's Gospel that eight days later Jesus told Thomas to "put your hands in my side. Touch my hands and my feet." So why did Jesus tell Mary, "Don't touch me"?

I think Jesus wanted brave Mary to get beyond her desire to go back, back to the only Jesus she had known before, before he died on the cross.

Jesus told her to get going, go forward, to start telling the good news that Jesus is alive. And so brave Mary did. She ran and told the disciples, "I have seen the Lord."

Easter 354 AD witnessed a twenty year old young man named Gregory, from Nyssa, in Asia Minor, praying in a church, asking God what he should do with his life. Nearby were the bones of the forty Martyrs of Sebaste, interred there before Gregory was born. That day, inspired by the witness of those forty souls, young Gregory said "yes" to God, became a priest, then a Bishop, and now is known as one of the four Capadocian Fathers, who defended the Trinitarian faith against all opponents, giving us our faith of today.

Easter 1866 saw an Indianapolis philanthropist named George Merritt offering up his own money to establish a shelter for orphaned children of Civil War soldiers from Indiana. In 1867, the Indiana Legislature approved the establishing of the Indiana Soldiers and Sailors Orphans Home at Knightstown, and for the next 130 years this home gave orphaned and troubled children the only real home they'd known.

By Easter 1919, some of the more than 3000 children orphaned by the Spanish Flu were in residence at the Indiana Methodist Episcopal Children's Home in Greencastle, Indiana. A brave single woman with a heart for orphaned children, Methodist Deaconess Angie Godwin had opened the home, with her own funds, just four years before. The Northwest Indiana Conference supported the home, helped move it to Lebanon, Indiana, and to this day the Indiana United Methodist Children's Home offers help and hope to the least and lost children of Indiana.

Easter Day 1945, after one of the most perilous months of World War II, dawned with US armed forces triumphantly occupying the German heartland city of Frankfurt on Main. The European front was nearly won.

Lowell and Claudia Wertz had opened a branch mission, "Joy in the Harvest", in Kigoma, Tanzania. They had been driven out of the Congo by the Civil War there. They had escaped only with their small plane, their passports, and their lives. As the tragedies in Rwanda unfolded, and tens of thousands of refugees flooded into their new adopted city, the Wertz's, bravely continuing a mission they had thought was ended, were there every single day to feed the huddled masses at their doorstep.

Each of these Easter miracles happened when a scared follower of Jesus stepped out and did what they could do. And they were brave.

We've watched a lot of movies during these days of staying home. One that I have especially liked is called "Feast of Love," a 2007 movie starring Morgan Freeman and Greg Kinnear. In one of the closing scenes, Freeman, playing Harry Stehenson, a college professor, is sitting on a bench talking with Bradley Smith, played by Kinnear. That day they had buried their young friend Oscar. He had suffered a massive heart attack catching the winning pass in a game of touch football. He left behind his young wife, Chloe, expecting their first child.

The scene begins with Harry saying, "God is either dead or he despises us." Bradley says, "You don't really believe that."

Harry says, "I saw the most remarkable thing just now. I wandered into the stadium, I thought I was alone but down on the 50-yard line there was a couple "romantically entangled" . . . I was envious. And then I felt sorry for them. There's so much they don't know. Heartbreak they can't even imagine.

Bradley sighs, "Well, even if they knew, it wouldn't change anything."

Harry, "How so?"

Bradley, "Well, Chloe knew what was gonna happen to Oscar."

Harry, "What do you mean she knew?"

Bradley, "She did. She went to some psychic lady who predicted the whole thing."

Harry, "She believed her?"

Bradley, "Yes, Harry. She did. And she didn't run away. She didn't crawl into a hole. She found them a house, she threw away her birth control, and she married him. **God doesn't hate us, Harry. If he did, he wouldn't have made our hearts so brave.**"

On this Easter Day I want to offer this. In spite of all the fear and uncertainty of our days, God does not despise us. God has given us Jesus, the greatest "braveheart" ever. He has been through the valley of the shadow of death. He has come through, and he's waiting on the other side for us. Because he has made it through, we can make it through, too. He knows we are scared. He was scared, too. He did it anyway, for us. He suffered and died on that cross for us. Because his heart was brave, our hearts can be brave, too, and no matter what this Easter has brought us, we will be raised with Jesus. Because there is nothing behind the curtain of uncertainty, because Jesus is alive, we shall live, too.