

“The Never Ending Story”
A Sermon by Rev. Victoria ByRode
Easter Sunday
The Resurrection of Our Lord
April 12, 2009
Scripture: John 20:1-18

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION: *Glorious Lord of life, as we hear and think about your Word to us today, grant that as we celebrate with joy Christ’s rising from the dead, we may be encouraged to live the way you would have us live. Amen.*

Don’t you just love Easter morning? There is a note of jubilation in the air which simply can’t be beat. Easter proclaims that all the tenderness and love of Christ, which on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we saw scorned and mocked and stretched out on a cross – all that beauty and goodness are alive again. Here we are in this beautiful place, filled with the beauty and sweet aroma of Easter lilies, and surrounded with the grand Easter music. Some of us are here every week and some of us only come on Easter morning – but regardless of how often we are here, today we are *all* here – and everybody is all dressed in their Easter finery. We began our worship time together, not with our usual “Good morning”, but instead with “Christ is risen...He is risen, indeed! And we sang “Jesus Christ is Risen Today”, even raising our voices a bit above the accepted level for Presbyterians at worship. What could be better than this?

And what makes Easter so good is that – rather than it being the ending of *a* story – Easter is the beginning of *THE* story – a story which never ends!

Some of you have heard me say that, for me, the hardest part of writing a sermon is the beginning. While there are times when the middle gets tricky, you all have taught me, in these past almost 10 years, what pleases most of you most of the time in a sermon. And then

comes the ending. Usually, if I can get a sermon started, I can figure out how to end it and sort of “tie a bow around the package.” Sometimes, though, there is no ending to be had. And that, my friends is where I find myself this morning.

Will Willimon in his commentary on this passage from John’s gospel, tells the story about his cousin Barrett the day he preached his very first sermon. He wasn’t just preaching for the first time for his new church, but it was also the first time his mother-in-law heard him. Now, his mother-in-law, Mary, was a woman about whom some would say, “was a woman of ‘few words’”. However, you and I both know that what that means is that Mary was sort of blunt.

So, after the sermon was over, during Sunday dinner, Barrett asked Mary what she thought of the sermon. To which Mary replied, “Well, I thought you had a good sermon. In fact, I thought you had a number of good sermons. In fact, I thought that you missed about three good stopping places in your sermon.”

As much as a preacher would like to tie things together, to sum things up, to put a bow around it and present a nice package to the congregation, the trouble is that so many stories in the Bible are open-ended. The prodigal son, for instance, does not end by saying, “They lived happily ever after.” We don’t know what happened to the man after the Good Samaritan reached out and helped him so valiantly. Life itself doesn’t have that many satisfactory completions or final endings.

The other thing about sermon endings, is that we preachers really don’t want to present you with such a good ending that you will then be able to say, “I’m glad that’s over. We’re now done with our spiritual moment for the week and can move on to thinking about something else.”

We want the sermon to continue, to bear fruit in the lives of the listeners, to keep going, never to be done. So sermons are hard to end.

Now this Sunday Easter Sunday, ought to be the happiest of happy endings. Jesus, who has suffered such rejection through his ministry – all culminating in a cataclysm of horrible bloodshed and destruction at his crucifixion – this Jesus has been resurrected from the dead. Jesus has triumphed over death and the grave. He has been vindicated. The doubters and the critics have been addressed. What a wonderful time now to say, “The End.” Let’s all stand and sing the “Hallelujah Chorus,” ending with the resounding “Twelvefold Amen,” and while we will, indeed, be doing that at the end of the service, I am not sure I will be ready to do that at the end of my sermon.

Curiously, modern day preachers are not the only ones knowing how to end their Easter sermons. Each and every one of the Gospel writers seem to have had difficulty knowing how to end the stories in their gospels, particularly when it came to the story of Easter. Mark has a notorious sort of “non-ending” in which he never actually reports that the disciples saw the Risen Christ. An angel at the tomb tells the three women who have come to anoint Jesus’ body that Jesus will meet the disciples back in Galilee. He tells them to tell people about the Risen Christ. But then Mark says they didn’t tell anybody!

Matthew does a little bit more, but when the Risen Christ appears to his disciples, he commands them to, “Go, make disciples of all nations...” In other words, the Risen Christ doesn’t say much of anything to the disciples except, “Get out of here, stop standing around looking at me, and get to work, making disciples!”

The gospel of Luke is part of a two-volume work – Luke/Acts. So the book of Acts might be seen as one long extended ending of the gospel of Luke. After Easter, Luke tells the glorious story of the church in the Acts of the Apostles. But in that glorious first chapter of

Acts, church history is, in many ways, not all that glorious. It is the story which begins with the stoning of Steven, the first martyr of the church, followed by the beheading of James, and the book of Acts ends with Paul sitting in a jail cell in Rome awaiting his imminent execution.

And then comes the ending of the gospel of John which we heard this morning. O. Wesley Allen, Jr. in *Preaching Resurrection*, notes that the gospel of John seems to have trouble ending. After Jesus' Resurrection, the next scene is back with the disciples at work, doing what they know how to do best, doing what they did before they met Jesus – fishing. They are back in the familiar, work-a-day world of routine.

This is what people often do when they have suffered a great trauma. When you have lost a loved one – when your world seems to have collapsed before your eyes – well-meaning friends often tell you that you should, “Get back to work. Get busy,” and this will help you “get over it.” Perhaps this is what these disciples were doing. The Jesus Movement was a good thing while it lasted, but eventually all good things must come to an end, even the life as good as that of Jesus, so now it's back to work. Back to the familiar and the routine – the story of Jesus has now ended.

And to these people who were adjusting themselves to the trauma of loss and grief, the Risen Christ appears. And what he says to them is this, “It's not over. It is just getting started. Do you love me? Then get out of here and go feed my sheep.”

And then Jesus says to Peter, “Follow me, “ as though he were speaking to Peter for the very first time. Follow me? That's what he said to his disciples when he first met them. But now he is saying, “Follow me” again, as if for the first time. It seems to me that John wants us – all of us – to know that we are not at an ending, but at a beginning.

It isn't easy to start over. Maybe we never start over unless we are pushed or pulled into the next chapter. Peter was quite happy to go back to fishing. Life was safer there hunched down in the boat pulling in the nets. And yet here the Risen Christ came out and got him, called him, pushed or pulled him, whichever you please, back, into discipleship. The story wasn't over. The story was just beginning, again.

Peter had to go back into the world, but it was a new world. It was a world where the Risen Christ was loose and there was the ever-present possibility of surprise and newness. It was also a world full of peril, in fact, even more peril than before. Peter knew first-hand that it wasn't easy following Jesus before the resurrection. But in a way, it would be more perilous after the resurrection. Peter would pay for his discipleship with his life, martyred in Rome.

What Jesus was about now was larger – larger than Galilee. He was out to take back the whole world. And now Peter was a part of it. It wasn't the end – it was just the beginning.

The message I want you to take home with you this morning, my friends, is the story isn't over until God says it's over. And, my friends, in the resurrection the story continues. And this sermon continues, not just here in church on Easter, but in your life, for the rest of your life. God is not finished with us yet. This is not the last chapter – it is only the first. God's story with us is never-ending, and our story with God is one which will go on and on. May it be so for you and for me.

Christ is Risen!

He is risen, indeed. Amen.

Thanks to William H. Willimon for his sermon, “The Never-ending Story”.

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