



Sermon

starters

DANA HORRELL

April 22, 2001

2ND SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 5:27-32; Ps. 150;
Rev. 1:4-8; Jn. 20:19-31

It might seem foolhardy for Peter and the apostles, at their second trial, to speak so confrontationally to their accusers. However, in this scene as in so many others, Luke makes his point: Jesus the innocent died for the guilty.¹ Rather than addressing the question of generic guilt, Luke gets specific: the high priests, who oversaw Jesus' execution, now stand judged by the risen Lord. "God . . . raised up Jesus, whom you had killed" (Acts 5:30). In this scene Luke intends the reader to remember Jesus' trial. Now the tables have been turned.

In order to feel the full thrust of Peter's preaching, we must overcome our natural tendency to identify with the beleaguered apostles. Instead, we might try to imagine ourselves the religious authorities who hold onto power. The message to us: we are not innocent, only forgiven. For those of us who are guilty of causing others to suffer, Jesus the victim is our hope. Of course, the disciples themselves had stood by as guilty bystanders during Jesus' troubles. To everyone responsible for Jesus' death, and by extension to us who participate by reading this scripture in worship, God offers a second chance. Here we find the specific content of the Christian mes-

sage of salvation—no new set of commandments, no meditational practices for enlightenment, no abstract philosophical system—but a message of forgiveness for the guilty. That message possesses authority to which even the political powers must submit.

April 29, 2001

THIRD SUNDAY OF EASTER

Jn. 21:1-19; Acts 9:1-6;
Ps. 30; Rev. 5:11-14

In the movie, *Groundhog Day*, Bill Murray plays a character caught in a time warp on the worst day of his life. It's Groundhog Day and he, a weather broadcaster, has been assigned to cover the festivities in Puxatawny, Pennsylvania. Every time he slumps to bed at day's end, he bears the unhappy knowledge that "tomorrow," when his digital radio alarm clicks to 6:00 a.m., he will hear again the strains of Sonny and Cher's not-so-classic, "I Got You, Babe," and begin precisely the same day he has already experienced. The bad news of his life: he's living a closed loop. When Jesus appears to the disciples by the lakeshore, they have already returned to their former life as fishermen. Their lack of success at fishing should not be surprising. These guys remain stuck in their old, untransformed reality, as if Jesus had never called them to life in the kingdom. They are living a closed loop. Yet Jesus' appearance to them demonstrates that the bonds of their old life have been shattered. Something new has happened. A new history has been inaugurated. That history begins at the personal level, in the daily vocational decisions of whether to cast the net to the right side or the left, or moments of communion when we break bread and share grilled fish.

May 6, 2001

4TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Jn. 10:22-30; Acts 9:36-43;
Ps. 23; Rev. 7:9-17

Anxiety and fear of failure are widespread. In recent years I have noticed many television ads touting psychiatric drugs to overcome such fear. Why do

they always seem to accompany major televised sports events? One spot portrays a business meeting from the point of view of an individual caught by social anxiety. Without the drug, colleagues appear overbearing, yet in the next frame, apparently after proper treatment, these former ogres have morphed into congenial friends. The ad's premise might be valid. For some people, social anxiety could well be chemically induced and subject to drug therapy. Yet anxiety is so widespread that we have to ask, short of medicating the entire populace, what good news can be offered to us, the fearful?

In our anxiety we may identify with the sheep of John 10. Sheep are timid, easily panicked. Even a stray jackrabbit jumping out of a bush could stampede a whole flock. With little or no means of self-defense—no big teeth, no armor, no porcupine quills, no bark—all sheep can do effectively is run.

David Buttrick has suggested that passages like John 10 be handled by a sermon in the "reflective mode."² Rather than shaping the sermon around the movement of the passage, try using it as a lens through which to see the contemporary world and God's redemptive activity. How are individuals, corporations, or nations anxious? How and where have we heard the Shepherd's voice?

May 13, 2001

5TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Acts 11:1-18; Ps. 148;

Rev. 21:1-6; Jn. 13:31-35

What is the glue holding families together? Love? Blood relationship? Mutual guilt? A common faith? I know one family held together primarily by soccer, and another by the unwritten agreement never to disagree. ("When you come into this house, young man, I expect you to check your individuality at the door.") The early church resembled a family. The New Testament, in various places, refers to the "family of God" or the "household of God." After Pentecost, "the whole group. . . were of one heart and soul," claiming no private possessions (Acts 4:32). Their experience of the risen Lord constituted the common bond holding them together. Or were they held together by Mosaic law, with its requirement of circumcision and its dietary regulation? This question

became a source of hot dispute among the apostles soon after Peter returned to Jerusalem to report his baptism of Cornelius. Were the "Godfearers," who rejected circumcision, yet accepted Jesus as Lord, part of the family? Stepchildren, perhaps? Who gets to be part of God's family? Peter's story provides his answer: anyone who shares the experience of the risen Lord, "the same gift" of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost, or in the household of strangers, or anywhere at all (Acts 11:17).

May 20, 2001

6TH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Rev. 21:10, 22-22:5;

Jn. 14:23-29; Acts 16:9-15; Ps. 67

In 1961, at the height of the civil rights movement, the FBI came to shut down the Highlander Center in Tennessee. For sixty years the center had educated poor rural people to help themselves. Many southern activists, such as Rosa Parks, were trained there. One day, hearing rumors that Highlander constituted the "core" of the movement, the FBI came with padlocks. Myles Horton, the center's founder, stood nearby laughing. The picture made the front page of the New York Times. "Why are you laughing?" an officer asked. Horton responded, "You think Highlander is a building! Highlander is an idea!"

In John's vision of the New Jerusalem, the declaration that "the tabernacle of God is among mortals" (Rev. 21:3) recalls Israel's early days before the temple became the fixed location of the dwelling of Yahweh. "I saw no temple in the city," John writes (Rev. 21:22).

We would do well sometimes to see the church from John's perspective, as a tabernacle, a provisional structure that may not forever be needed. Rather than a fixed structure, changeless amid all change, the church might be better characterized as (to borrow Horton's language) a movement and an idea. The faithful join together in a movement toward a life before God, where God will be all in all. In the words of the hymn, "We're marching to Zion, beautiful, beautiful Zion. We're marching upward to Zion, the beautiful city of God."

May 27, 2001

ASCENSION SUNDAY

Acts 16:16-34; Ps. 47,

Eph. 1:15-23, Luke 23:44-53

An after-school program called "Odyssey of the Mind" has grown in popularity among middle and high school ages. Students, working in teams, are handed a challenge and asked to find a beautiful way to solve it, such as "Build a vehicle that is powered only by a mechanical car jack, and then write a play about it." This complex set of challenges is intended to send participants on a mental odyssey. This word conjures up images of the wanderings of Odysseus. His trip entailed adventure but required much sacrifice as well. In Acts, Jesus promises the disciples divine power. This power will enable them to be witnesses as they undertake an odyssey to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). The Ephesians text also promises power. This power within the believer is the very same power that raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection power brings a sense of hope and solidarity with the saints, but also a spiritual wisdom. "I pray that. . . the eyes of your heart [be] enlightened" (1:18). Unlike the apostle's journey in Acts, this inner journey involves growth in the knowledge of the love of God and insight into the world God has created. This is an odyssey, not across earthly geography, but an odyssey of the heart. The good news of Ephesians is that this power is available to us here and now. We can take that journey, because of the power of Christ's resurrection.

June 3, 2001

DAY OF PENTECOST

Ps. 104:24-34, 35b; Acts 2:1-21;

Rom. 8:14-17; Jn 14:8-17

Some people mistakenly think of creation as something God accomplished long ago. The scientist-priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin disagrees. He wrote, "The fact is that creation has never stopped. The creative act is one huge continual gesture, drawn out over the totality of time. It is still going on; and incessantly, even if imperceptibly, the world is constantly emerging a little far-

ther above nothingness." What if we viewed evolution—not only the evolutionary process of life on earth, but the birth and death of stars—as just one aspect of God's ongoing creative activity?

Psalms 104 upholds a dynamic view of God's creativity. Look at verses 27-30. The entire first section of the psalm has celebrated God's creativity as a past accomplishment. Now suddenly, with verse 27, the verb tense shifts to the present. Look especially at verse 30. ("When you send forth their spirit, they are created; and you renew the face of the ground.") Here God's current creative action takes place through the agency of the same divine spirit that was present at the original creation. The Hebrew verb *bara* ("created") is the same one used in other places to describe God's activity of creating. In the Hebrew, the tense refers to incomplete or continuing action, so we must use the present tense to translate. The psalmist views God's activity as creative and ongoing, as God steadfastly holds everything in being.

June 10, 2001

TRINITY SUNDAY

Rom. 5:1-5; Prov. 8:1-4, 22-31;

Ps. 8; Jn. 16:12-15

A spirit of restlessness may qualify as the chief characteristic of contemporary spirituality. Lacking inner peace, many people find themselves engaged in a spiritual search. According to Jack Miles, the author of *God: The Biography*, American culture has always encouraged tolerance and experimentalism. Miles himself exemplifies the seeker. A former Jesuit, he once considered converting to Judaism, later experimented with Buddhism, and is now a practicing Episcopalian. According to one study, 30% of Americans now switch denominations in their lifetime. The doctrine of the Trinity can itself be seen as the product of a restless theological mind. How can there be one God with three different revelations? Like mathematicians seeking to solve Fermat's Last Theorem, church thinkers wrestled for four hundred years with that question.

No wonder we try so hard. Like explorers standing at the mouth of some vast, complex, unknown river yearning to find its source, or astronomers searching the heavens for clues to invisible transmis-

sions, we cannot help but be aware that the world in which we live is mysterious, complex, and unfathomable. If the world is mysterious, how much more so is God! Yet Paul in Romans 5:1-5 offers a promise. It is easier than we ever imagined to reach God the Source through faith in Jesus Christ. Furthermore, we may overcome our restlessness through the "peace with God" which faith provides (Romans 5:1). As Augustine declared, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee."

¹*The Judgment of Judgment: Easter in Jerusalem* in Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1984): 7-28.

²David Buttrick, *Homiletic* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 365-390.



Dana Horrell is pastor of McGraw United Methodist Church in McGraw, New York.

| | |
|--|--|
| FOUNDATION HOUSE/ OXFORD (UK) <i>Graduate Theological Foundation (USA)</i> | |
| OXFORD | Research degrees by thesis and oral examination <i>Oxford Foundation Fellowships for short-term residency research</i> |
| <i>Residential Degrees by course work/thesis</i> | |
| Bachelor of Religious Education Master's Degrees Doctor of Ministry Degrees Doctor of Philosophy, Sacred Music, Education & Psychology | |
| Contact the Dean of Student's Office, Box 5, Donaldson, IN 46513-0005 | |
| Telephone 1-800-423-5983 Fax 219-935-8480 E-mail gtf@skyyenet.net | |

One-week intensive courses available

Spiritual leadership

... it's your call

A ministry capable of leading the church in the present must be faithful to Scripture, formed by historic wisdom, forged in theological reflection, familiar with contemporary culture, and fashioned through spiritual discipline.

Garrett-Evangelical's
Doctor of Ministry

degree
will prepare
you for
dynamic ministry
and spiritual
leadership in
the church



Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary
2121 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60201

**Inquiries: Barbara Bright
847.866.3936**

Barbara.Bright@nwu.edu

<http://www.garrett.nwu.edu/academics/dmin.html>

a graduate school
of the United Methodist Church

located on the campus
of Northwestern University