

SERMON

STARTERS

Pamela Lightsey

April 15, 2007 **Second Sunday of Easter**

**Acts 5:27-32; Psalm 150;
Revelation 1:4-8; John 20:19-31**

“Life goes on.” This is what we often say in response to death. “Life goes on.” It is our way of coping with the painful realities that death ushers in: the “end” of a relationship, the loss of support, the fear of facing the days ahead without a loved one’s presence.

“Life goes on.” Tell that to the disciples right after Jesus’ crucifixion! How can life go on? The Son of God has died on a humiliating cross and is buried in a borrowed tomb. Surely the same conspirators of his death will come to kill us too. Get to the house! Lock the doors! Run and hide for fear of your life—your one life that must go on!

Now imagine the thoughts of the disciples, not only as they react to Jesus’ appearances among them but also as Jesus commissions them. He commands them not to protect their lives but to go out beyond the security of their familiar community to begin a new way of living, into a life that must go on without fear of death. “Peace be with you,” Jesus declares. Then he shows them his tortured body and declares once again, “Peace be with you.” Declarations of peace surround the signs of the pain he suffered. Jesus

declares peace and then breathes into their lives the Spirit of Peace.

“Receive the Holy Spirit because life must go on. New life in Christ Jesus! New life, not in contrast to death, not in spite of death, but as a testimony to victory over death!

April 22, 2007 **Third Sunday of Easter**

**Acts 9:1-20; Psalm 30; Revelation
5:11-14; John 21:1-19**

Threats, especially those from terrorists, have unfortunately become a constant reality in our global world. Threats are particularly unnerving when they take on a religious dimension, when the motive involves hatred against the religious practices of another. Saul, in this way, terrorized the early Christian believers. Saul was much more than a bully; Saul was a terrorist. His life, his hatred, and his conversion—The ministry of Saul, who was later named Paul, often reminds me of an old saying: “Never count a person out because you never know who God will use.”

Ananias, the reluctant host, tells God, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man.” It’s often hard to put aside the pain of the past, even when God is revealing a bolder vision for the future. Vision is something that God uses in significant ways not only for

Saul but also for Ananias. Where can a vision from God take you? Saul’s vision brought conversion, Ananias’ vision brought conviction, and both visions resulted in transformation.

You never know whom God will use . . . once that person embraces the vision. It seems to me that vision is not dependent on what we can see but whether we are willing to receive beyond our limitations, convictions, biases, and ideologies. Vision is a gift from God; don’t confuse it with the familiar activity of brainstorming. I imagine neither Saul nor Ananias felt much comfort as they began to perceive God’s vision. Vision is often challenging: “Get up, Saul!” “Go, Ananias!”

What about you? Where can a God-given vision—believed and received—take you? Isn’t it time to find out?

April 29, 2007 **Fourth Sunday of Easter**

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

Have you ever read scriptures that just really trouble your sense of logic? This is the challenge of this text from Revelation. When have you ever seen blood turn anything white? Who would ever think to use blood as a cleanser? And, by the way, have you ever heard of a lamb taking over the

Stressed or Burned Out?

If you're feeling overwhelmed by the stresses of ministry, **you are not alone.** Many clergy feel that there's not enough time for family, let alone themselves, and the strain can begin to take its toll. Our **Clergy in Crisis program** provides clergy (and spouses if requested) with a week of counseling and consultation in a relaxed setting where emotional, relational and spiritual health can be restored.

D.A. & ELIZABETH TURNER
 **MINISTRY
RESOURCE
CENTER**
OF THE PASTORAL INSTITUTE

Crisis takes many forms
and support is available.
Call us at 1-800-649-6446, ext. 207
for more information.

2022 Fifteenth Avenue
Columbus, Georgia 31901
www.pilink.org

job of the shepherd? Hmph! Yet this passage, filled with paradoxical language and wondrous visions, challenges us to think in new ways. It asks us to consider blood, which supports life, as a cleansing agent that brings new life—salvation. It asks us to reconsider our popular images of a meek, mild, and subordinate animal, and see, instead, a lamb transformed and established as the leader of a great, uncountable multitude that is able to overcome a catastrophic ordeal.

Perhaps the greatest accomplishment of this text is that it asks us to look, to look as John looked. Look beyond logic, beyond realism, and beyond ideology, and see with new imagination what great possibilities can be accomplished through the Lamb that was slain—Jesus Christ the righteous. This text asks us to see the possibility of a place of vast diversity, a place where poverty does not exist, a place to worship God in peace.

Yes, sometimes the text really is a stretch of the imagination. But isn't that how great things have come into being? Let us imagine what God has in store for us, and let us work toward those heavenly possibilities—"and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes." Yes, every uncountable tear!

May 6, 2007 Fifth Sunday of Easter

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

El Niño. Global warming. Scientists, lobbyists, and politicians discuss the fate of our world with pressing concern. Our world is changing in troubling ecological ways. Even if we have yet to agree on the reasons, we are witnessing record-setting environmental events: record high temperatures, longer Fall-like days, and warmer temperatures in historically frigid areas.

This very earth that we pollute daily was the subject of the psalmist's call to praise. This world was called to praise

the Lord who created it. Everything, all of it—earth, mountains, trees, animals, and sea life—must praise the Lord! Everything, and everyone—kings and rulers, young and old, men and women—must praise the Lord! Glorify God who created this great planet. Exalt God who "commanded and they were created." Praise God who made all things good.

But how are we in the twenty-first century called to praise God? We must praise God as we have been exhorted: with all that we have, with all of our resources, let us praise our Creator God! Now is the time that we should praise God not with perfunctory words and rituals but with actions that respect and preserve what God has given. The psalmist requires all of earth's participation. No one is exempt from the responsibility to praise God—not kings, not governments, not communities, not big business. We are all responsible for praising God by caring for the good world that God created, and none of our names or our plans for this world is worthy of being exalted above God's.

Praise the Lord and let us consider our ways!

May 13, 2007 Sixth Sunday of Easter

Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67;
Revelation 21:10, 22:1-5; John
14:23-29 (or John 5:1-9)

One of the first lessons on manners that many of us learn is how to stand and wait in line. I have watched many mothers scold children for not obeying the cultural rule known as "waiting for your turn." Have you overheard mothers reminding children to remain attentive to line etiquette? "Don't step on their heels." "Be still or you'll bump into them!" "Never cut in line."

Our understanding of good manners leads us to wonder as we hear the story in John 5:1-9 of the man at Beth-zatha, "Where were their manners?" How could they ignore and, literally, step over a sick man?

The story of this man, who was sick for thirty-eight years, patiently and persistently making his way toward his miracle is heart wrenching by itself. It is made more painful by the community's reaction (or lack thereof) to his condition. No one helps him; many step out of their place in line from behind him to get to the water once it is stirred. How in the world can he ever hope to get to the healing waters in such a community?

Thanks be to God for Jesus who is the "living water"! What the man could not gain from natural waters, even those divinely stirred, he gets through the Living Water, divinely sent.

Thirty-eight years of sickness and untold years of pain at the hands of community intolerance meet Jesus on that day. If you want to be made well, "Stand up, take your mat and walk." Stand up and walk, and take your mat with you!

Now that's deliverance! Take what you sat on and walk around. Let the community know it's a new day in your life!

May 20, 2007 Seventh Sunday of Easter

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

The closest many of us have ever gotten to prison is passing by the building. One can only imagine, even with the advantage of media reports, that prison is not a reality we normally want to become acquainted with.

Paul and Silas understood and addressed two forms of prison: the spiritual bondage of both the slave-girl and the jailer, and the physical bondage Paul and Silas endured at the hands of the slave-girl's greedy owners and the

magistrates of the city. Paul and Silas understood both kinds of bondage as realities that are not in keeping with God's desire for humanity. We get a sense of that from Paul's annoyance with the spirit of divination's possession and use of the slave-girl, as well as Paul's response to the magistrates' callous way of resolving unjust treatment and imprisonment.

The joy of this passage is that the apostles are not silent. They speak to need, they witness to God's love, and they hold fast to their convictions. Even at midnight, a time when many have grown weary and are fast asleep, Paul and Silas engage the issue of bondage. They pray and sing and the prisoners listen to them.


How can we as Christians address the painful reality of overcrowded prisons, the substantially higher numbers of minority persons incarcerated, and marked disparities in sentencing between so called blue-

PROPHETIC PREACHING

COMPELLING QUESTIONS DESERVE PROFOUND ANSWERS...

*What is prophetic preaching for the 21st Century?
How can preachers offer a prophetic word that is authentic for contemporary culture and also a proclamation of the Good News?*

Join the legendary **Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.**,
who will help participants find answers to their pulpit challenges.



Styberg Preaching Institute, April 10-11


Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary • Evanston, Illinois

Wright is senior pastor at Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. The congregation has grown to more than 8,000 during his 33-year pastorate. He holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary, master's

degrees from Howard University and The University of Chicago Divinity School, and seven honorary doctorate degrees. Widely respected as a preacher and theologian, he has published four books and numerous articles, and lectured around the world.

Workshop limited to 75. Registration fee — \$125.
Those registering before March 15 get a \$25 discount.

For more information about registration and accommodations, please contact
Dr. Gennifer Brooks, assistant professor of homiletics and director of
the Styberg Preaching Institute: **847-866-3888**



Garrett-Evangelical
Theological Seminary

Garrett

Bold leaders for the Church and the World

collar and white-collar crimes? Have we given careful consideration to the plight of persons held but not charged because of alleged terrorist activities? How often do we pray, and speak, and work against spiritual bondage?

As with Paul and Silas, the prisoners are listening to us.

May 27, 2007 Pentecost

Acts 2:1-21; Psalm 104:24-34, 35b;
Romans 8:14-19; John 14:8-17,
(25-27)

Receive the Spirit and be led by it! In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul takes up the promise Jesus gave the disciples: that those who accept, love, and obey Jesus' commandments will not walk in this world alone but will be accompanied, directed, and

empowered by "a spirit of adoption." Paul insists that those "who are in Christ Jesus" are "children of God." This spirit of adoption—the Holy Spirit—not only assures us that we are heirs of God's great kingdom, it also helps us to pray as Jesus prayed, "Abba! Father!"

The Holy Spirit's presence and assistance during prayer is the most wondrous gift! It is the fulfillment of Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would "teach us everything" even—as Paul would also say—"how to pray as we ought." Now that's a Pentecost moment! Not praying selfishly or blindly, but praying as the Spirit "bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God," and in so doing proclaiming our obedience to God's will for our lives. It is praying even for what we know not, and at times it is even prayerful surrender of our will, "Thy will be done."

As children need direction so, too, we who are God's children need direction. So, receive the Spirit; be led by the Spirit! It is the gracious gift of our loving God and certainly our remarkable witness to the world as we face suffering and persecution for the cause of Christ. We will not walk in fear. We will walk accompanied, empowered, and directed by the Holy Spirit. Rejoice! □



**Pamela Lightsey is
Dean of Students at
Garrett-Evangelical
Theological Seminary
in Evanston, Illinois.**

Plan for Today. Plan for the Future. Plan for your Ministry.

A constant in the life of the church is the need to be financially stable and able to plan for the future of the congregation's ministry. Whether it is planning the annual stewardship campaign or helping the community understand an endowment program, Discipleship Resources offers products that feed the needs of the entire church community. Check out our **NEW** stewardship resource, *Let the Children Give*, a resource for including children in the church's program of giving. Find the resource perfect for your ministry at Discipleship Resources!

Purchase a new title today.

Available at your local Cokesbury bookstore, online at www.Cokesbury.com, or by calling 1-800-672-1789. Call 1-800-972-0433 or go online to www.UpperRoom.org/bookstore



NEW! Let the Children Give
Time, Talents,
Live, and Money
978-0-88177-501-3 \$13.00

Beyond Money
Becoming Good and
Faithful Stewards
978-0-88177-466-5 \$13.00

Stewardship in the African American Church
A New Paradigm
978-0-88177-452-8 \$12.00

Full Disclosure
Everything the Bible Says
About Financial Giving
978-0-88177-411-5 \$15.00

Creative Giving
Understanding Planned
Giving and Endowments
in Church
978-0-88177-470-2 \$15.00

Faith & Money
Understanding Annual
Giving in Church
978-0-88177-410-8 \$15.00