

Easter 2008

by Susan Brown

March 23 - May 4

March 23 - EASTER

Acts 10:34-43, Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24,
Colossians 3:1-4, John 20:1-18

In the beginning. These are, arguably, the best known words in the Bible. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (Genesis 1:1) These are the words that call all creation into reality. God creates a world, an existence, out of the chaos of nothingness. Light, dark, water, sky, plants, animals, humans—one by one, each element of creation is put into place. God declares the result “good” and begins living in relationship with creation. Within a short time, the story takes a dramatic turn and a different world comes into view. Creation is broken. The world as God intended is no more.

The tension between what is and what is intended continues for hundreds of generations as believers struggle to live faithfully in relationship with God and the world. And then the tension explodes. Mary Magdalene finds herself a front row observer to another creation-shattering event. An event that ends her world as she has come to know it. Her Messiah, Jesus Christ, is dead. The broken world has taken the life of the one who has come to restore the world.

And so, on the “first day of the week,” Mary goes to the tomb. I imagine Mary Magdalene walking, in the dark, moved not by curiosity or anticipation, but with a sense of resigned duty to the ritual that would complete the burial of the man she had come to know and love as her Lord. Her heart is a chaos of feelings brought on by a week of fear, disappointment, and confusion. Jesus is dead? Jesus is dead! Three days after the Crucifixion, Mary struggles to get her head around the horrific turn of events.

Today, though, is a new day for Mary Magdalene: the first day of a new week, a chance for her to complete her obligations and then move on with her life. She doesn't know that this day will

offer events just as unexpected as the preceding days. This first day of the week will bring indescribable joy to the friends and followers of Jesus Christ—joy that we still celebrate as we remember and honor the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the victory over death, and the promise of eternal life available to all.

The day of Jesus' resurrection is a new “in the beginning” as God begins a new creation out of the chaos of conflict and the nothingness of despair. The kingdom that Jesus had promised begins to come into view. The world as people knew it is no more. Through the Resurrection, the world begins its restoration. On this Easter morning, at this new beginning, God lovingly rebuilds the creation into its intended goodness, an act of grace that continues for us with each new day.

March 30

Acts 2:14-41, Psalm 16, 1 Peter 1:3-9,
John 20:19-31

In the virtual world of online gaming, players can fully participate in alternate realities and existences. Through the “magic” of the web, people can put themselves into almost every situation imaginable. Whether it is becoming a mythic creature or conquering another civilization, gamers can be part of any simulated world they choose. To participate in these games, people create alternate identities called “avatars.” These identities allow players to maneuver through virtual societies and have encounters that they don't have in the “real world.” As the avatars fight demons, build amusement parks, or run political campaigns, real humans gain insight into experiences they may never have in actuality.

In today's Gospel story, we find ourselves given the opportunity to participate in a reality that is not our own through an avatar – Thomas. The infamous Doubting Thomas, criticized for his disbelief, instead becomes a link across time between the Messiah

and future humans. Jesus says to Thomas, “Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe” (20:27b). Through Thomas, we get the chance to touch the scarred hands and side of our risen Savior. For that moment in time, Thomas becomes the alternate identity of every human being who won't have the chance to meet the flesh and blood Jesus. He is an avatar for every person who has ever doubted the identity of Jesus Christ.

Because of Thomas' experience of Jesus, we gain understanding about our own relationship with Christ. First of all, we learn that Jesus is not afraid to call our bluff. Thomas declares that he will only believe when he can touch the wounds of Christ himself. So Jesus appears to Thomas and invites him to touch and believe. Next we learn that Jesus understands our human doubt and will allow us the room to find our belief in our own way. Jesus will meet us in our doubt and reveal himself to us in a way that bolsters our belief. Finally, Jesus' words to Thomas help us to understand that our faith is indeed based on mysteries that may never have earthly resolutions. “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe,” Jesus says (John 20:29b). Our faith in Christ is lauded because we believe without seeing or touching the resurrected Lord.

We celebrate Easter having never physically experienced the Risen Christ. We believe without having seen the scarred hand and pierced side. We doubt and are reassured because of the loving encounter between Jesus and Thomas, an avatar for the ages.

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a new “in the beginning” as God
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April 6

Acts 2:14-41, Psalm 116, 1 Peter 1:17-23,
Luke 24:13-49

I was in line at the grocery store one day. I had just run in quickly to pick up a few items that I needed at home, but you know what happens when you try to make a quick trip to the grocery store. The grocery universe conspires against you to ensure that your shopping is neither quick nor easy. This particular errand came at the end of a trying day. I don't remember what all had gone wrong that day but I guess my face betrayed my annoyance and frustration. As I waited in the slow moving line, the elderly gentleman in front of me turned and looked at me. "Why don't you try smiling?" he said. "Your day will be better." I didn't say anything in response but I remember thinking "If you only knew the kind of day I have had!" My face must not have softened any because he turned back to his groceries and didn't say anything else. I watched him leave, glad that it was finally my turn to check out. In retrospect, I realize that my heart was so hardened by my reaction to the events of the day that I didn't even recognize a kind gesture when it came my way.

Cleopas and his friend were walking along the Emmaus Road with heavy hearts and defeated spirits. They explained their despair to the unrecognized Jesus, how their trip to Jerusalem had not gone as expected. "Does he not know the things that have taken place?" they asked. Of course, Jesus did know what happen. In fact, it was the two friends who did not know what had happened! Their hearts were so hardened by their perceptions of what had happened that they didn't recognize the Redeemer who was with them.

Life would be easier if we would read each others' minds. Everyone would know when we are having a bad day and they would, hopefully, just leave us alone. Bad days are obstacles to being in relationship. How many kind words or thoughtful gestures do we miss because our bad days fog up our thoughts and emotions? How often do we miss Jesus reaching out to us because our hearts have been hardened by the events of the day?

Unlike the nice man in the grocery store, Jesus does know "the things that have taken place" in our lives. As he did with Cleopas and his friend, Jesus listens to our story, even if we don't recognize his presence in the midst of our drama. We can feel

the softening of our hearts as we realize we are in the company of the Redeemer, and we don't let him walk away. Rather, we invite him to stay, as we smile and anticipate what a great day this will be!

April 13

Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25,
John 10:1-10

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. This is one of the most common and enduring images of Jesus Christ. Iconic pictures of Jesus gently holding baby lambs are found in Sunday school rooms and on bulletin covers in churches around the world. It is a reassuring metaphor that is easy to understand and encouraging to imagine. Jesus is the shepherd and we are the sheep. Jesus gathers us in, guides our way, and protects us. We are his flock and he promises to keep us safe in a world of thieves and wolves. The comfort we find in Jesus' role as the Good Shepherd often helps us through the challenges of life.

There is more to this story, though, than just identifying Jesus as the Good Shepherd. This metaphor only works if we also examine our role as the sheep. In today's story from the Gospel of John, we learn more about our identity as sheep, as well as our responsibilities. Jesus directs us to listen and follow only his voice. He warns us against thieves and fake shepherds who will try to lead us into situations that will harm us. Such a stern directive reveals that accountability is an important aspect of the partnership between the shepherd and the sheep.

It is also critical to understand why Jesus has entered into this relationship with us. Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus does not envision a life for us where we mindlessly follow a leader from place to place and experience to experience. Jesus wants an abundant life for each of us! How do we claim this abundant life? Jesus spells that out for us, as well: "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (10:9). We profess our faith in Jesus Christ, we enter into his teachings, and then we are sent out to share our faith with others. We find abundant life when we live out our faith in a world that needs to hear the gospel of the Good Shepherd, and life grows even more abundant when we lead others to the abundant life that they, too, can find in Jesus Christ.

April 20

Acts 7:1-60, Psalm 31, 1 Peter 2:2-10,
John 14:1-14

There are few people that can argue with the fact that technology has changed the face of contemporary society. Computers, cell phones, and other types of digital technology have had a huge impact on the way business is conducted, relationships are formed, and worship is observed. Search engines have made it simple to find nearly any piece of information that exists in the world, with just a few clicks of a mouse.

Technology has also given us a new vocabulary and a new set of operating procedures. For instance, when going to a new location for the first time, it is common practice to get directions from an online mapping service. You enter the starting address and the desired ending address, and the program will generate a list of step by step directions. As anyone who has tried this process knows, however, it does not have a foolproof accuracy rate.

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I have been at meetings or luncheons when someone has come in late, blaming their Internet directions. The directions can be unclear, outdated or simply wrong. In those cases, the user is lucky to have a cell phone with them so they can call their destination for the accurate directions!

People get used to this method of finding direction, even spiritually. They acknowledge their current location: despair, brokenness, questioning, disbelief; and they aim for their desired location: peace, harmony, enlightenment, salvation. They try following a certain path, only to find themselves spiritually traveling down dead end streets and roads blocked with construction. They can't find their true destination, and have no idea who to call for guidance.

This is why Jesus tells us that he is the way, the truth, and the life. Are you trying to find the right path for your life? Jesus is the way! Are you confused by all the differing messages of faith? Jesus is the truth! Are you simply existing but yearn to live? Jesus is the life!

Jesus offers a clear path that leads us to the assurance of salvation, the promise of the Kingdom, and the confidence of forgiveness and mercy, all destinations sought by spiritual seekers and faithful disciples alike. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life – the only directions we need.

Professing love for Jesus means professing our love for God and all of creation.

April 27

Acts 17:22-31, Psalm 66, 1 Peter 3:13-22, John 14:15-21

Love is a powerful motivator, for good and for evil. We often hear inspiring stories of how love offers people a better life, but we sometimes hear of destruction wrought in the name of love. The phrase, “If you love me,” is a particularly dangerous expression, used to manipulate others and serve one’s own self-centered needs or desires. The implication is, “If you love me... you’ll do something to prove it.” In these cases, love is rarely used to improve the lives of others.

Jesus says “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” (14:15) This is not a manipulative statement, but rather a description of our natural response. Jesus will not try to trick or guilt us into following his commandments. Jesus simply tells us that professing love for him means professing our love for God and all of creation. Out of our love for Jesus comes an undeniable desire to love others, as well. We will keep Jesus’ commandments as a matter of love, not compulsion, and actions truly born out of the love of Jesus can only build the Kingdom, not tear it down.

Jesus offers this challenge to his disciples at an especially critical time. He is leaving the earth. He is

leaving his followers. He is returning to God. Jesus is explaining to those who will be left that there is still work to be done, sharing his love with the world. Jesus dares all believers: “If you love me – prove it!” The key is that he is not asking us to prove our love to him, but to others. The love we feel for Jesus Christ must be shared so that others will come to know that love for themselves.

May 4

Acts 1:6-14, Psalm 68: 1-10, 32-35, 1 Peter 4:12 - 5:11, John 17:1-11

I imagine that one of the memories of Jesus the disciples treasured most in the days following his ascension was their last night with him, before he was arrested. He washed their feet, spoke to them of coming events, and perhaps most importantly, he prayed for them. Imagine being a disciple in the room as Jesus begins to pray to God on your behalf. What a powerful experience that would be to hear Jesus speaking to God about your faithfulness and loyalty!

It was probably quite a difficult evening for the disciples. Jesus has been talking with them for some time about the events to come, hoping they would truly understand what was going to happen and, more importantly, why it would happen. He tells them directly that he would be leaving and that their lives would be difficult after that. Jesus emphasizes how the world would not be receptive to the disciples and their ministry. I am sure that the disciples must have been anxious and fearful about the news Jesus was sharing with them. And so, realizing their concern, Jesus does what he had always told the disciples to do: he prays to God. This time, though, he didn’t go to a private place as he often had, but stays with his dear friends and prays in their presence, offering a wonderful testament to the commitment of the disciples. After their years of participation in his preaching and healing work, Jesus wants to commend them to God as they take over his earthly ministry, and to ask for God’s protection over them.

Ministry is challenging even in the best of circumstances. In contemporary society, where organized religion is suspect, pastors are often fighting an uphill battle that is taxing not just physically and mentally, but spiritually and emotionally. As we ask members to take our limited resources and spread the good news in a world of bad news, the result

can be disappointment and discouragement.

Yet, we know that Jesus is with us, in the midst of the ministry, praying, “God protect them!” Protect them from words that can wound their souls. Protect them from the false promises that seem so enticing. Protect them from the fear that can immobilize them. As the people charged with the Great Commission for this time, we can go into the world strengthened and energized by the knowledge that Jesus is covering our ministry in prayer. We are one with Jesus, sharing in one ministry to all the world. God will protect us.

Please Note: Sermon Starters is now an exclusively online feature. Sermon Starters for May 11 through June 15 will be posted to www.circuitrider.com by May 1.



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