

Thinking About Easter

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Acts 2:14a, 22-32

“This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses.”

Do you have something to say? I think that one time or another, everyone has something to say. Everyone is a messenger to one degree or another. Either we have our own story or someone else's message; we carry something that we can share with others. It may be something appropriate, or inappropriate, or just that you have nothing to say – but that still is something. We all have thoughts, our own or others, ideas, our own or others, and things we would like to share. Do you have something to say?

What is important is the way we tell our stories, and what it is that we are sharing. The communication theorists Morris and Carnap, along with others, claim that human communication consists of syntactics, (the way the message is portrayed) semantics, (the meaning of the message) and pragmatics (the way the message affects our behavior). What are you saying, how are you saying it, and how will I (the listener) be affected? There is a story of a pastor who was preaching a sermon with a lot of energy. He was shouting at points, he was hitting the pulpit at other points. His sermons were powerful to listen to. Yet one look at his manuscript would show bright red ink saying, “Weak point – hit pulpit.” The content was weak so the pastor had to spice up the way he told his message. He favored syntactics over semantics. Yet what we are saying is important – the content matters. I could read a telephone book to you with a lot of energy and life, but I would still be reading a telephone book. Some of the music played today – rap, rock, punk, pop, or whatever- has some great tracks. The groove is strong, the tunes are catchy, but the words may be lacking depth and thought. The words may not match the quality of the music – the message may be lacking. Everyone has something to say, but not everyone has something good to say – the content is in question.

Or, on the other hand, the message may be interesting, but the method may be lacking. A clever bit on Comedy Central's *The Daily Show* with John Stewart consists of having children around 7 or 10 years old read debates of pundits and politicians. The content is interesting, and maybe worthwhile, but when a 10 year old calls another 10 year old a large government, socialist liberal wanting to spend, spend, spend, the message changes. The way the message is shared affects the message itself. We could share the message with a lot of energy, or we could share our message with a Ben Stein type of voice; dull and drone. Everyone has something to say, but either the content, or the method can be lacking.

Now think about the church. Are we clear about our message, the way we want to share it and how the message will affect our behavior? I know of churches, which favor one aspect of communication over another. Churches, which offer only the surface of the Gospel, the bare minimum, but wrap it in glitz and sparkle so that the message seems powerful. Or churches, which offer a deep view of the Gospel message, but offer it in such a dry manner that no amount of baptismal water can ease it down our throats. Are we guilty of favoring one method of communication over the other? So do you have something to say? Everyone has something to say, but it may not be well said, or it may not be worth listening to. I'll ask again, do you have something to say?

Peter had something to say, and it was based upon the resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Christians, we all have something very specific to say. Remember last week? Remember the power of the story we all lived through – the story of the resurrection, the story of Easter? Peter was there, he saw the tomb, he even denied Christ, and then experienced forgiveness. Peter had something to say.

Have you been thinking about Easter this week, or have you just been trying to relax and return to

daily life after a time of liturgical overload? Well I would encourage you to think about Easter, the story, and the message of the story, which I believe we are to tell to the world. Remember that Christ did die on the cross. Remember that humanity did reject our Lord and Savior. Remember that we buried Christ in the tomb, and remember that on Sunday, just one week ago, the tomb, the very tomb where Christ's body was placed was empty. Keep thinking about Easter; because we have something very specific to say, we have a story to tell.

We have a story of salvation, of forgiveness, and of triumph over death and despair. We have a story to tell! We have a story of hope eternal, of a God who saves us and delivers us, and we have a story of the impossible. We have a story to tell! This is an exciting story, a powerful story that we lived through last week – it is the story of our salvation, of our life. This is the story that we have to tell to the world – of God's all-inclusive and all-redeeming love. It is the story that has gathered us together and keeps us united. And it is a powerful, and moving story that makes us excited, that gives us energy. Imagine it like this – you are playing the game of telephone and you are the second one in line. The first person reaches over and whispers in your ear, "Christ has risen." And because you know the story, you respond, "HE HAS RISEN INDEED" you respond with strength, excitement, and joy. Well, why not? The story of Christ's resurrection is that powerful, that hopeful and that exciting. Why not stand up and shout to the world the story of Easter. Why not spread the word of redemption, of hope, and of love. As Christians we do have something very specific to say – and it is the story of Easter. With Peter, we have a story to tell.

But sometimes the story is so fresh, that we have a difficult time-sharing it. Sometimes we just blurt out the message that Christ has risen, not considering what that may mean, how our lives may change and be effected because of this powerful message. Sometimes we don't even take the time to think about how this message will be heard by others. This truth, this story may be new to us – it may be so fresh on our hearts that we may not yet be able to share the story in a clear and coherent manner. Maybe we need to spend some more time thinking about Easter. Look at many of the churches Paul worked with in his ministry. They were neophytes as Christians, they were beginners – and often they got it wrong. Those in Corinth heard that Christ died for their sins, and believed that they could now live in any manner they wanted. They believed that because salvation was granted they could live a hedonistic life of excess at every corner. Or look at the Galatians. They heard that Christ was a Jew as were many of the disciples, and were convinced that they would have to become Jewish to follow Christ. Both of these churches overemphasized one aspect of the story, and the same could happen to us. It is like when you hear a new song, one that is really catchy, really well written, but unless you hear it a number of times, and really commit to learning the song you will not be able to teach others the melody. The freshness of the story has to settle in our hearts.

The disciples had to go through a similar difficulty. When they were hiding in fear, locked away in a room, they were still trying to figure out what it meant that Christ had risen. Thomas would not even believe 10 eyewitness accounts – the story was still that unbelievable. And when Christ does appear to Thomas, all he can say is, "My Lord and My God." The story was that fresh on his heart. The two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus were trying to understand the events of Easter, and it took Christ's presence and wisdom to open their eyes to the depth of the resurrection. The story was that fresh on their hearts.

We are all at this point in our Christian journey at one time or another. One time or another, we are all like a child with big, big news: we know that we are supposed to be excited, we are excited, but we have a difficult time sharing why it is we are excited. The story is that fresh, the story is still overwhelming us, challenging us, and transforming us. We are still learning the details, the specifics, and what it means for the long haul. After all, it was only just one week ago that Christ rose from the tomb, and perhaps our minds are still spinning from the sight of the empty grave. After all, this is no small thing, this salvation that we find in Christ, and perhaps our hearts are still spinning from the power of that revelation. With such a strong story, fresh on our minds and hearts, we may find it difficult to convincingly share the truth and power of our risen Lord because we still understand it.

So let's take the time to really think about Easter. Let's take the time to pray, study, learn, and incorporate the Easter story into our own lives. We are all called to hear, read, learn, and become a part of the story. We are not to just hear it once, nod our heads in acceptance, and then go on with our lives. Learn the story, and make it a part of your life. Look at Peter today standing before a gathered group of Israelites. Peter now knows the story. He knows who Christ is, what it means that Christ has died and came back, and how that can affect our lives. Peter has thought about Easter, and is now ready to share

that story. We are called to do the same. We are called to gather with other groups of Christians and share how the Easter story has changed our lives.

When I felt the call to enter into the ordained ministry, I went to seminary. I did not go in order to become a Christian, to begin a relationship with Christ, or to discern my call. I went to seminary to learn the story, to deepen my understanding of my call, and to be able to articulate what it means to be a Christian. To one degree or another, we all have to do the same thing. We need to think about Easter, learn the story and then live the story. Let the resurrection change, shape and direct your life. The great social activist Dorothy Day was raised as an atheist. Later in her life she converted to Christianity, and began to think about what it meant to be a Christian. The more she learned the Christian story, the story of Easter, the more she allowed that story to shape her life, and she devoted the rest of her life working for the poor and with the poor because she believed that the risen Christ would be encountered with the poor. Dorothy Day thought about the Easter story, and then lived the Easter story.

Like a student learning his or her craft, we are called to learn the story of Easter. And then we are called to live it. We are called to pray, reflect, discuss and study. That is part of the reason the church is here, so we can gather with other Christians and grow as Christians, making the Easter story our story. We learn from each other. Some here are chewing on the meat of the Gospel, while others still taste the milk of God's message. So come to Bible Study, read the Secret Place, challenge each other with questions, and spend the time thinking about Easter.

And then, when you know the story, when you are a fully a part of the story, when you are living Easter, then you have something to say, and you are ready to share the story. But, think about whom you may be talking to. With whom are you going to share the story? Look at the passage in Acts. Peter knew his audience; he knew who he was speaking to – Israelites. So Peter reached into the Jewish heritage, the scriptures of the past and showed how those scriptures were pointing to Christ. He took the figure of David, someone held up and cherished in the Jewish heritage and connected that heritage to Christ. Peter told the Easter story in a way that those listening would be able to understand the power of the resurrection. The same message would not make any sense to a Gentile community. The way Peter told the story made a difference for those listening.

We know this, don't we? We don't talk to adults the same way we talk children, it is the same when we share our story. How are we going to share our story – with whom are we sharing it? When you walk outside this church, look around and ask, "who needs to hear our story, and what part of the story do they need to hear." If you are a single mother with four children, don't you think you want to know that God will be a source of strength, and that Christ is with you in your struggles? If you are a migrant worker in the United States, struggling to live and support your family, wouldn't you want to know that as you suffer, Christ suffers with you on the cross, and that suffering is redeemed through the resurrection? If you are lost in the hustle and bustle of our increasingly hectic lives, losing your own sense of self, wouldn't you want to know that God loves you as a person, forgives you, and calls you to be a part of a community where you will be known and valued? There are different facets of the story, which will speak to different people. The Evangelist Professor Robert Tuttle claims that the message of Christ is universal, but the language we use to convey the message may not be. We need to know to whom we are speaking so we can share the story of Christ in an effective and life changing way. It is like Paul says; we are to be all things to all people, as long as we are staying true to the story. This week look around you, and ask yourself, who needs to hear this story, and how can they hear it. So we must learn the Easter story before we tell it, and then learn whom we are telling the story to so that we can share it in a way that makes sense.

Then we will be ready to go and tell the story. We will be ready to go and share with others the message of Easter. But here is the catch – we will no longer be thinking of Easter, instead we will be living Easter. How else can we share the story but by living the story? How else can we be a witness to the message of Jesus Christ but by living the power of Jesus Christ in our lives? We are to live the Easter story. Now this doesn't mean that I am expecting or asking for you to live a life of moral purity separated from every part of society. If you separate yourself, then you are not a witness. No, living the Easter story is not easy. You have to really go deep and allow the story to change your life, and then show others how your life has been changed. This is an honest, authentic struggling that we are all to share. When I was working at an AIDS shelter more than once someone asked why God would give him or her their disease. How do I share the Easter story with such a question? All I could do was to show them the hope and the love I felt from Easter, and let them know that God had not left them. I tried to live the Easter story.

It is as Phillip Brooks says, “meet them where they are and lead them to the foot of the cross.” And we do this through our own living witness to the cross.

We have just lost a great individual in the Christian story – Pope John Paul II. A man who devoted his life to the church, and even further, devoted his life to living the Easter story to the point of great suffering and holding onto hope in that great suffering, that redemption will be found. How else can you live and display the Easter story?

Today we gather around the table. We live, as a community, one part of Easter as we remember that final supper of Christ. As a church, let us think about Easter, let us live Easter as individuals, as a church in the community, so that others will hear and experience the Easter story. We have something to say – let us share it.

AMEN