

Living a Story that Goes Somewhere

Easter Sunday, that other day of the year when those who come into the Lord's house only twice a year appear. That day which represents a story that the whole world knows about, whether or not they believe in its truth. That day which like Christmas has come to have a large presence in the retail world—Easter bunnies, baskets, plastic and chocolate eggs. Someone posted to my Facebook page a short video where a little girl talking to her father expressed her confusion over the things she heard and saw about Easter—she didn't understand about the Easter bunny and why a rabbit would have a basket of eggs; she asked her father if we celebrated with chocolate because Jesus loved chocolate and if Jesus and the Easter bunny were friends. My son about two years ago wrote a sermon near Christmas which he titled the "Intersection of the inane and the important. Easter and the Easter bunny seem to me to be another example of this intersection. Unfortunately it seems that the inane has come to dominate our culture so that many people view the story of Jesus' life—especially the narrative about the risen Lord—on an even par with the bunny that hides eggs. But for the faithful this is that day of unsurpassed joy; of shouting alleluia as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord; that victory which Christ won for us on the cross is celebrate now. Actually, the victory was won long ago—it was a onetime event with eternal consequences. We revisit the empty tomb each year—and the story told in the gospel accounts is read again. Annually we hear the story in one of four versions, or as in today's readings we may two. So what more is there to say about the story? What do we tell those who come into a sanctuary on this day because they want to please their mother or father? What do we say to those who enjoy the music which rings with Alleluias' and is so uplifting, but brings them no personal connection with the miracle we have been given. What do we tell ourselves about this story we have encountered so often? When we examine it, it is really a strange, improbable story—a story about a death which is not the end of a man's life but a beginning of life for many. A story about God that tells us we are so loved that God takes on our human nature and lives among us—our human nature except for that little detail that he remained sinless, as a human he remained obedient to the Father's will even though that obedience was so costly. A story that tells us that he intercedes for us, in him we are reconciled and covered with his righteousness. It really is incomprehensible under any system of logic that a man could die such a horrendous death and yet three days later emerge from the tomb and briefly walk the earth visiting with those who were his closest friends before his death on a cross. This improbable story is one which amazes me each time I reflect on it; it baffles me in many ways. There is no way I can prove it; and as one who was trained as a scientist to look for verification and proof that might seem like it would create a problem for me. I can only say that I know—deep within—that this story is true. What we can say today is that it is essential that we remember and hold fast to the truth of it; that we know that the story related to us through the gospels is true. But this particular story has a deeper meaning which is also important. We have many stories which were related to us as children and which we in turn have related to ours. For most of us, this Easter story is one of them. Yet there is something about this story which sets it apart from others. These familiar stories fall into several categories—some have a moral to them, some are just entertainment. We like stories and appreciate those storytellers who can weave an interesting one. I once

heard a story that I hope provides some insight into what I think we have to say about this Easter story that is especially important in our current culture. This story begins: "Once there was a family that like to take road trips across the country. Picture this as occurring in the days before we connected with videos and tablets and all sorts of devices. We Just have a family traveling long distances in a car together. In order to pass the time, the adults would tell stories. One storyteller told a story that began this way: It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One man said to the other, "Captain, tell us a story." So the Captain began, "It was a dark and stormy night. Three men were sitting around a campfire. One man said to the other, Captain, tell us a story, So the Captain began..." You can imagine that this story was not well received....there is something fundamental missing in it. It doesn't go anywhere. It is an unsatisfactory story, but it's exactly the kind of story that shapes much of the modern secular worldview. A great many people live today on the assumption that life is a story that doesn't go anywhere. Many people believe that there is no over arching purpose, no destination to human history or to our individual lives. This assumption that history and life aren't going anywhere can be seen in an article published in Life magazine where 49 assorted Americans were asked for a short response to the question, "What are we here for?" Most responded with a worldview of pointlessness; life has no purpose beyond just existence until death. One cab driver put it bluntly: We're here to die. This way of framing life—as a tale with no governing meaning other than grabbing all the gusto as the commercial urges us to do—is not confined to our current age. It's very old. This worldview is even present in the Bible—in the book of Ecclesiastes...What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Shakespeare's Macbeth also voices this thought: "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing." These are three examples of a worldview which sees history as a never ending cycle which just keep repeating—a rather cynical view from ancient and pagan times which is alive and well among us today. These resemble the story example I used to introduce this topic. But the worldview in most of the Bible—especially of the New Testament and most especially of the Easter story is vastly different. The Easter story gives us a worldview that is linear—human history and individual human stories have a linear direction, moving toward an ultimate purpose---both in general and individual terms, life is going somewhere. There is a destination. Holy Week, although we remember its events annually is the story of a onetime happening—the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Good Friday and Easter morning are not examples of a circular, happens-over-and-over story. We may celebrate Easter over and over, spring after spring, but it doesn't happen over and over. However you may understand the events of Good Friday and Easter morning objectively the cross and resurrection are once-in-time events. Later history may echo them; other stories may be written with the theme, but cross and resurrection are not mythical; they are historical. And because they are real and not merely symbolic, together they are for people of Christian faith, the defining destination story. Cross and resurrection define what it all means. Cross and resurrection direct where all life is going. First, the cross declares that God in Christ suffered for and with humanity. It's the sign that God has passed through human suffering and is present with us in our suffering. The cross declares, silently and insistently, that the love of God goes every bit as deep into the well of

anguish as life goes; God has taken into God's own self the whole of human brokenness. And that is what this story is all about. God has taken the story and told us that the end is not the cross but the resurrection. God's story wrenches good out of evil. It insists that history and life are not summed up by meaningless suffering but are consummate in victory. Our great story declares that the last word is not death, the last word is life. What we are called to say about our story is that a world that assumes history is going nowhere—that world has it wrong. In a world that believes our individual lives have no ultimate purpose is believing a lie. In a world that subscribes to the words of Macbeth, we can prove them wrong by living a life that does signify something—that we live a life that is going somewhere—This is the story that we celebrate today—the stubborn, insistent, against the current grain—even countercultural truth at the core of our faith that we celebrate this Easter day—this is the story that tells us and the world that my life, your life, all life is a story that is going somewhere. Live into this truth. You will find that it changes everything. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.