

EASTER: THE CONTINUING STORY!

Easter – April 12, 2009 – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Alleluia! He is Risen! The Lord is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

Here we are, gathered for the great feast of Easter! We have reached the climax of Jesus' story, the Resurrection. God has acted with a miracle to bring new life into our world and lives! Through Jesus Christ, God has overcome sin and death. Things have changed for us ... forever!

One of my favorite authors and television people when I was growing up (back when we had black and white television) was Rod Serling. He authored and introduced each week the series, "The Twilight Zone." Serling had the ability to tell a story, and put a particular twist in it that astounded the audience. He incorporated the unexpected! That is what Easter is for us, the unexpected! The twist we didn't see coming! The disciples, the religious and political leaders ... no one expected the Crucifixion of Jesus to work out this way. Everyone thought Good Friday was the end of the story ... but no ... Easter Sunday happens!

And by the way, Easter is not where the story ends. Easter may be the end of part of Jesus' story, but it is the beginning of our story! Dr. William Willimon talks about Easter being the "Never Ending Story." It reminds me of the movie that came out several years ago, of a boy, who reads a book with his grandfather ... and the story grows because of their imagination and dreams. That's what Easter is like for us ... it grows, continues and becomes even more!

Mark's Gospel for Easter is short, concise and contains no Resurrection appearances in its original form. It has a strange ending, but it contains many of the parts that are so familiar to us in the other Gospels. There are the women who come out Sunday morning, especially Mary Magdalene. They come to anoint the body of Jesus who has died. What they find is the empty tomb! There is a young man, dare we say ... angel? There is the Easter pronouncement, "He is not here!" The immediate reaction of the women is one of fear, confusion, anxiety and awe ... this is hard to grasp! And there is the command ... "Go and tell the others!"

This is the story of Easter. This is where we come in and have the invitation to become part of the story. Where is Jesus for us this Easter? How does the story connect with the root of our lives? Do we truly understand that Easter is not the ending, but the beginning?

Mark's abrupt ending doesn't have a full conclusion. It makes us a little uncomfortable. Some scholars say that other verses were added to try to round out the story ... but I like the unfinished ending. It leaves more possibilities out there for us! Mark stops at verse 8 ... there is hesitation and uncertainty. Mark wants us to see that the Resurrection is not the end of the Jesus story for us ... there is more! **WE ARE THE STORY'S CONCLUSION! We get to write part of the ending! It's not over for us, it's just beginning!**

Why is it so hard for us to live into this open ending? Maybe it's because we have been so conditioned to have endings, or conclusions, in our lives. This is not like television. Dr. House always manages to get the right diagnosis and the end of the hour and save the patient. The team at NCIS always manages to investigate the cause of the murder, come up with the right clues, solve the crime and get the criminal behind it all. This is not like American Idol, interesting name by the way, where we can count on at least

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one of the contestants being thrown off each episode and there is only one winner at the end. We like endings, especially the ones that come shortly and quickly! But that's not what we get with EASTER!

What the Gospel of Mark leaves us with is an ending that takes more from us ... it requires the leap of faith! We have to write how the story will end for us. We have to answer what we believe about finding the empty tomb ourselves! Just like the women, we may be afraid, or confused, or shocked or stunned. This is human and normal! Easter is like that ... it shakes us up ... and challenges us to believe! The young man, the angel, helps us with directions to continue the story, "Go tell others!"

What will we tell others? Will we say we went to Church, it was nicely decorated, there were a lot of people, the service was nice ... or will we say that God has acted in our lives to bring us new life ... that things have changed for us ... forever! We are people of the story, and the story continues. It's like the old movie series that ran in the 30's, like Flash Gordon. One episode ends, but stay tuned for next week ... there's more to come! We are captivated by the story ... we want to see how it will work out! What's going to happen? It will be new ... new life, new community, and new way to be with God!

Recently, several things have occurred to remind me of how this story continues. A parishioner, BJ, became sick recently. In the hospital one day we were talking. It was cancer. But she shared a back and forth that she has had with her brother since youth that helps to keep her grounded and connected to her faith. One would say, "If I don't get to finish this..." and the other would respond, "Then I'll finish it for you." The Jesus story doesn't get finished with Easter; there is more to come. The story is nearly 2,000 years old, and it keeps going on ... with each of us taking up a part to finish.

There are the Holy Baptisms of Emelia and Lily at the Easter Vigil service. Here are two new members of the Church, two new lives. Are their stories finished? Of course not! Their stories, their lives are just beginning! We keep added people and their stories to the community of faith, and I believe that is what Jesus wants. We hold out new life, to these children, and to countless others. We help them to be part of it ... and the story continues.

I received an e-mail from a friend of mine, Casey. He has recently gone through a divorce and the dissolution of his marriage. But he was able in this communication that share that the story doesn't end for him. He made the connection with his faith ... that new life is offered to us all. He sees those possibilities for himself and has a sense of peace and joy coming back into his life.

Even the Holy Scriptures points us towards the continuing story. Paul speaks in Corinthians about how he received the good news. It brought him forgiveness and new life and he passes it on to the Church. Now we are encouraged, like Paul, to seek our own experiences and moments of the Risen Jesus. We too have the opportunity to be part of the Easter story. We might ask ourselves where we have met Jesus today!

Peter speaks in Acts about how the Easter story changes his life. He thought Jesus was limited to one group of people. But then he meets Cornelius, the centurion, who desires to become part of the Church ... and the story. This early sermon of Peter's shows us how the Easter story can change us ... Peter now understands that this new life, that Jesus is available for all people! There are no limitations on the story! It is too big for any one person or any one group of people! This is new life for all!

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So here we are at Easter. Mark's Gospel leaves the ending up to us. What ending will we write as our part of the miracle of Resurrection? Easter doesn't end with us ... it begins with us! The story continues ... it goes on and on and on ... How will we be part of it? I'm having a hard time trying to end this sermon, don't worry, I will ... but it feels like it is time for us to go ... to tell ... to share ... to continue ... and to write the next chapter of this wonderful story!

Alleluia! Christ is Risen! The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!