

## THE MIRACULOUS STORY

Easter – April 4, 2010 – Grace Episcopal Church, Haddonfield, NJ

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Do you like a good story? I do. That may be why I love books and movies so much. I especially like movies that touch my heart, or make me think, or have an unexpected twist. I like Alfred Hitchcock and the way he created suspense. I like Rod Serling and “The Twilight Zone” with its unexpected twists. A good story, whether it’s a book or a movie, can move us to some place else.

One of my Easter traditions is to watch Ben Hur. I never tire the movie and the story. I watch how lives are intertwined, how what may seem like simple decisions result in disaster and unforeseen suffering. As the movie unfolds, you see a man stripped of everything: family, freedom, wealth, friends, status ... everything. But the unexpected happens, and the main character finds himself propelled back to face his main antagonist. A thread that runs through the movie is Jesus’ life and ministry. He is there, but only on the edges of the story.

It’s not till the end of the movie that Ben Hur and Jesus’ stories finally merge. It’s then that new life; transformation, redemption and hope are rush up to the top. Wouldn’t it be great if our stories all could end this way? Well, maybe they can. What do we think Easter is all about?

Easter is here! It is the story of God’s miracle in the story of Jesus Christ. Easter is God saying to us that the ending of our stories will not be death! I like the way Pastor Anthony Talton of Mt. Olivet spoke about it during the Lenten preaching series. He said that through Jesus, God changed death ... no longer would it be death with a period ... now it is death with a comma! There is something else waiting for us and that is the promise of Easter. We call it resurrection!

Luke’s Gospel speaks to us about the women who find an empty tomb. Something has happened! The tomb is empty ... where is Jesus’ body? The women watched him die on Good Friday, now what has happened? The story continues to unfold, two angels speak to the women ... “What are you looking for?” It’s a powerful question. In the empty tomb times of our lives, what are we looking for? Is it life? Is it rescue? What do we find when we stare into the empty tomb?

The angels say, “He’s not here ... He is risen!” The end of Jesus’ story is a new beginning, a new start. Death is not the last word. The story of Jesus continues even after his death! Isn’t that what we want to find when we face our empty tombs? Isn’t that our hope and prayer, that our stories ... our lives ... will find a new beginning?

Maybe the challenge for us every Easter is to understand this great mystery of the Christian faith. Herbert O’Driscoll says in “Four Days in Spring” that the best way is through story. The best way we might come to understand the story of Jesus, the story of Easter is to look at how he affected others. So let’s look at the story again.

Maybe it would help if we started ... “Once upon a time ...” this kind of start invites us into someplace familiar. Once upon a time there was a young woman. She had many ups and downs in her life. There were too many tough times and too many failed relationships. Her story was a sad one.

Then one day, she met an unusual man and her life was changed! He said things, he treated her with kindness and compassion and she felt life slowly ebbing back into her life. She loved him, not in a passionate way, but in a deep and respectful way. The woman experienced healing. But what did this man give to her? He gave her a vision of a new world that she could be part of now. Her

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life and relationships were different. The more time she spent with this man, the more she shared his vision. She found herself part of new community attracted to this man and his vision.

Her name was Mary and she came from a town called Magdala. His name was Jesus. The coming together of these two people created a familiar story. New life came to Mary. Things went well, at first. His healing, preaching and teaching attracted many people who followed him.

But then, the disagreements and arguments began. The story changed. Then came the insults and challenges. Mary saw a dark side to people. The religious and political authorities were taking interest in him. She began to see that people did not understand what he offered, and rejection of him started to grow.

Now the story became dangerous. The dream started to become a nightmare. There was more confrontation and anger. Misunderstandings started to become fights and more threats. Mary began to worry. Jesus talks about going to Jerusalem. She has a deep foreboding sense that this will be a mistake. There is something special about this man ... why is it so hard for others to see?

In Jerusalem, the story goes from bad to worse. The crowds that first welcomed him become ugly. One of his own disciples betrays him. There is an arrest, a trial and the story begins to unravel. Where are the hope and the new life that Mary felt before? Through it all, she remains as close as she can to him. But the humiliation grows; Jesus is flogged, beaten, and then crucified. The story is ending. The hope has turned to tragedy. Death comes to close the story. All Mary can do is watch and weep. The story ends.

The next morning, early at dawn, Mary goes in grief to anoint Jesus' body. Through her grief she desires to carry out the practice of her culture. It's a familiar story ... the death of someone we love ... all hope disappears ... and deep sadness takes over. Mary goes through the motions as best as she can in an effort to cope with his death. Sometimes, in our own stories, the only thing we can do is to struggle through the daily routine.

But now the story takes an unexpected twist! She approached the tomb but something is not right. The stone has been rolled back! A sinking feeling comes over her that slowly turns to terror. She looks into the tomb ... and it's empty! Mary is overcome with disbelief! Where is Jesus' body? The story takes another twist. There are two angels, shock of shocks! She speak, "What are you looking for?" Isn't that the ultimate question for most of us? What are we looking for?

The angels speak again, "He is not here! He is risen!" Mary knows this sounds familiar. Didn't Jesus say something about three days, something about creating a new temple? The words come flooding back and she is confused, overwhelmed by what she has encountered. The story begins to take on a new life. She runs to tell the others! The story has not ended ... its just beginning!

Now the story takes on a bigger than life dimension! Mary and the disciples' lives are transformed ... changed forever! Now there is resurrection, now there is new life, now there is a new story! Now the Easter story is a miracle, and the story moves out beyond itself!

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**Now the story takes hold of Peter. He is changed. It will help him to create a new community that we will later call the church. Peter will come to understand that he is part of the Jesus story and that it is up to him to carry out Jesus' vision of a new world, a new life.**

**Now the story takes hold of Paul. The risen Jesus will transform him. He will share the story with others, form churches and speaks about Jesus' dream for a new world, of which they are part! He talks about how Jesus' life, death and Resurrection open the way for us to participate in the new story and new life with God!**

**So Mary's story becomes the disciples' story ... and the disciples' stories become the story of Christians for nearly 2,000 years. Now that's some story isn't it? Now here we are at Easter ... and the story becomes ours. Is there any among us that would welcome a new story? Are there any among us that could stand healing, or better relationships, or hope for life or the promise that the best is yet to come? Are there any of us looking into the tomb and wondering what we will see?**

**I can think of many of us that are in this place. There is the woman diagnosed with cancer, there is the little girl wrestling with a terrible childhood disease, there is the young man who is struggling over a broken relationship, there is the older man who has been without work for almost a year. There is the older person struggling with health issues, the grad looking for their first job, the couple facing the financial uncertainty of retirement. We all face tombs in our lives. What will our stories be?**

**It is into our world that Jesus comes. He comes as God's sign of hope. This isn't just a good story; this is a miraculous and great story! Mary's story now becomes ours. Now there is the hope that every story will end, "And they lived happily ever after!" The difference is that now our story ends, "He is risen!" Easter is our story, our hope and our vision of a new world, a new life and a new beginning!**