

God's Big Easter Story

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1 Corinthians 15:3-8

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

“What does the Easter bunny... have to do with Easter?”

“Absolutely nothing!”

The abbot of a monastery called a novice brother into his office and told him he would be giving the homily at the next three chapel services. The prospect of delivering the homily for three mornings filled this young brother with fear and trepidation. The following day, with the brothers assembled for worship, the young novice went to the pulpit to deliver the homily with knees knocking and hands trembling. “Do you know what I’m going to say?” Since the brothers had no idea, they shook their heads no. “Neither do I,” the novice said, “let’s stand for the benediction.”

The next morning the brothers assembled for chapel and again the young novice asked, “Do you know what I’m going to say?” After the previous day’s experience, they had a pretty good idea, so they nodded yes. “Well then,” he said, “there’s no need for me to tell you. Let’s stand for the benediction.”

The abbot was furious with this young novice, so he told the young brother, “If you ever do that again, I’m going to have you defrocked. Tomorrow morning when you give the homily—do it right!”

Attendance in chapel the third day was at an all-time high. Everyone gathered to see what this novice would say next. Like the

previous days, he asked, “Do you know what I’m going to say?” Half of them had a pretty good idea, so they nodded yes. The other half was unsure, so they shook their heads no. The novice surveyed the results and announced, “Let those who know tell those who don’t. Let’s stand for the benediction.”

Do you know what I’m going to say today? Some of you think you know and others don’t have a clue. I could let those who know tell those who don’t and stand us for the benediction. That would make some people very happy!

I met visitors last Sunday new to our American culture as well as the Christian church. They asked, “What does the Easter bunny and Easter eggs have to do with Easter?” “Absolutely nothing!” I told them. They looked surprised. As near as I can tell, the Easter Bunny made his debut in 17th century Germany.

What does Easter mean? Easter commemorates Jesus’ resurrection, but so what? What difference does Jesus’ resurrection make in my life?

Paul utilizes three short phrases in 1st Corinthians 15 to describe matters of primary importance. “Jesus died for our sins...and he was buried (that is, he really died!) and he was raised...” (1Corinthians 1:3-4).

John Calvin called Jesus’ death for our sins “the great exchange.” Jesus exchanged his life for our sins.

Disordered love makes a good thing into an ultimate thing.

We need to unpack the word sin, given that our therapeutic culture has a negative, visceral reaction to the word. We prefer softer words like failure or weakness. When the gospel was first explained to me, the hardest thing to grasp was that I was a sinner in need of a Savior. I had always regarded myself as a “good person.” Good compared to whom; Fido or Mother Theresa? How good does one have to be? I stayed away from the really big sins. If God grades on a curve, I’ve got a fighting chance.

To prepare for this sermon, I reread St. Augustine’s Confessions. Augustine had trouble with two things: food and sex. I thought as I’m reading this book, nobody in DC will be able to relate to these attractions, but I decided to proceed anyway.

Augustine shocked his 4th century readers with his candor. He writes famously in his Confessions, “I prayed, give me chastity and continence, but not yet. For I was afraid that you would answer my prayer at once and cure me too soon of the disease of lust, which I wanted satisfied, not quelled.”

Augustine’s problem was he couldn’t get enough of beautiful things, whether it was beautiful bodies or exquisite tastes. Augustine discovered his drive for beauty left him empty and unsatisfied. It caused him to do things he didn’t want to do and led to the ruin of countless failed relationships.

Augustine had a name for this malady. He called it disordered love. If you put money and possessions over human relationships, that’s disordered love. If you love people as if they were God, that’s disordered love. Augustine describes how stealing pears was actually a misguided and disordered attempt at loving and being loved. Even murder originates from disordered love. A man will commit murder because he loves another man’s wife or estate.

Disordered love makes a good thing into an ultimate thing. That’s why it cannot satisfy. Disordered love attempts to find happiness and satisfaction in things that, in their very nature, cannot possibly satisfy or make us happy.

The seven deadly sins, identified by the 5th century church to be especially lethal to Christians, serve as examples of disordered love. Anger is the disordered love of justice. Envy is the disordered love of what belongs to our neighbors. Gluttony is the disordered love of food. Greed is the disordered love of possessions. Lust is the disordered love of sex. Pride is the disordered love of self. Sloth is the disordered love of rest.

Sin, it turns out, is not doing bad things. It elevates good things to supreme importance. The problem of sin is that we love the wrong things too much.

So what is God to do about sin? Why doesn’t He simply wave it off? Why doesn’t God, with an act of executive privilege, just forgive sin? For God to wave off sin abrogates

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- Walter Wink

the moral law God established in the world. Justice requires punishment for wrong. That’s why judges and juries mete out punishment in the court. That’s why we discipline children. Justice demands punishment.

This puts God in something of a bind. God’s justice demands punishment for sin, but God’s mercy seeks pardon. St. Anselm addresses the dilemma well in his 11th century classic work *Why God Became Man*. How can God satisfy the demands of divine justice while simultaneously fulfilling the imperative of divine mercy? That’s why God became human in Jesus Christ and died on the cross. Jesus Christ satisfies God’s justice by taking into himself the punishment for sin and simultaneously extending God’s mercy in forgiveness to us.

It’s as if God, as Judge, renders a guilty verdict and then comes around to the other side of the desk as defendant to take our punishment. God both levies the fine and then proceeds to pay it!

People will tell me, as they face their mortality, “I’ve made my peace with God.” You can’t make your peace with God, I feel like screaming. God has already made peace with you through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.

Paul writes in Corinthians, “Christ died for our sins...and he was buried and he was raised.” These first two phrases “Christ died and was buried” are written in past tense, but the third phrase, “He was raised” appears in perfect tense. He was buried and is alive.

His resurrection validates Jesus’ claim to divinity.

Death has never been God’s intention for people. God’s specialty is creating life. Death is a consequence of human sin. “The wages of sin is death,” Paul writes (Romans 3:23). Death in the Bible is considered a curse.

Jesus Christ defeats death. Our ultimate enemy has been vanquished. Jesus’ resurrection is a glorious, new form of existence—an existence in which death no longer exercises dominion. Christians still die. No one, not the most devout Christian who ever lived, has ever cheated death. But death is now disabled; a broken power. Like Christ, we shall be raised to new life.

If the Roman government could impose death on Jesus, he could not be Lord. But death is not lord. Jesus is Lord! “Killing Jesus,” in the words of Walter Wink, “is like trying to destroy a dandelion seed-head by blowing on it!”

We’ve been preaching this year on God’s Big Story. Have you ever noticed every good story follows pretty much the same story line? Once upon a time, life was good. Then something awful or dramatic happens. As a result, a climatic battle must be fought or a decisive journey taken. Then, at the right time, often at the last possible moment, a hero appears to set things right again. Virtually every good story has a good beginning, a villain and a rescue.

Have you ever wondered why so many stories follow the same story line? Could it be that our stories borrow from God’s Big Story of

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creation, fall and redemption! God's Big Story has a good beginning. We call it creation. We have been created to live in relationship with God. But something awful happens. Our acts of disordered love cause us to fall out of relationship with God. But God's Big Easter Story also has a rescue.

If every good story has a good beginning, a villain and a rescue, why doesn't it necessarily follow that everyone lives happily ever after? Some people don't want to be rescued or don't think they need to be rescued or don't know they need to be rescued. Some people are running from their own rescue.

The week after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, 10,000 New Orleans residents refused to leave their homes. Despite the pollution, inadequate drinking water and shortage of food, hurricane victims refused to leave. Helicopter pilot Iain McConnell was summoned from a nearby Coast Guard station in Mobile, Alabama to rescue people stranded by the storm. McConnell maneuvered his helicopter to rescue stranded people from their rooftops. On his first three missions, he and his crew saved 89 people, three dogs and a cat. But on their fourth mission, they saved no one—but it wasn't for lack of trying. The people they tried to rescue refused pickup. The rescuers warned them they were living in unhealthy conditions and the water would remain at flood stage for the foreseeable future. Still, they refused. His crew felt frustrated and angry, since they had consumed precious time and

fuel as well as put themselves at risk. The people who refused rescue didn't realize their desperate predicament.

Maybe you came here today not wanting to be rescued or thinking you needed to be rescued or even knowing there was such a thing as a rescue. But now you realize, in God's Big Easter Story, what God in Christ offers you is a rescue. I'm standing here today to extend Jesus' invitation to open your heart to the one who offers us rescue from our disordered loves.

