

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
April 4, 2010

The Community Faces Pain and Joy

John 16:16-24; John 20:11-16

Key verse: “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me” (John 16:16)

Jerry Blacklaw, pastor of Gulf Breeze Presbyterian Church, near Pensacola, shared the following experience. He said: “I went horse-back riding. Everything was going fine until the horse started bouncing out of control. I tried with all my might to hang on, but I was thrown off. Just when things could not possibly get any worse, my foot got caught in the stirrup. When that happened, I fell head first to the ground. My head continued to bounce harder as the horse did not stop or even slow down....”

(Now listen carefully to this last sentence.) “Just as I was giving up hope and losing consciousness... *the Wal-Mart manager came and unplugged the horse!*”

That last sentence really changes the story, doesn't it? It's always important to get the rest of the story! In a sense, the meaning of Easter is that *God has the last word in each of our life stories.*

In John 16:16-24, Jesus is preparing his disciples for his approaching suffering and death. He tells them, “A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me” (16:16).

The disciples are puzzled by this statement, so Jesus elaborates: “Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labor, she has pain, because her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your heart will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you” (16:20-22).

The disciples would soon witness Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. They would soon face grief, loss, shame, broken dreams, and a seemingly hopeless future. But Jesus is preparing them in advance by saying, in effect: “When you are hurting, helpless, and hopeless—don't give up! Hold on. Have faith. ‘You will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy.’ You haven't yet read *the rest of the story.*”

The same could be said for us today. We all face times of grief, of loss, of helplessness and hopelessness. God's word to us is: "Don't give up. Hold on. Have faith. Wait till you read the rest of the story!"

Jesus compared this "holding on faith" to a woman in labor. She goes through tremendous pain. But once she holds her beautiful baby in her arms, the pain of childbirth is forgotten. When that mother is in the throes of painful labor, all seems bleak, even hopeless. But things change dramatically when she comes to "the rest of the story"—her baby's birth.

The disciples' dark night of pain, doubt, and hopelessness ended on a glorious Easter morning. Easter means that *God will have the last word in each of our life stories.*

Mary Magdalene brought her own painful story to Jesus' tomb that first Easter (John 20). We don't know a great deal about Mary. She was from Magdala, a town along the coast of Galilee. Luke's gospel tells us that it was out of Mary Magdalene that Jesus "cast out seven devils." Whatever the exact nature of Mary's problem, Jesus had confronted the demons that tormented her and commanded them to be gone. In their place came peace—and a love like Mary had never known. She became a devoted follower of Jesus. Then, suddenly, He was dead.

Now, on Sunday morning before dawn, it is Mary who returns to the tomb. But she discovers that the tomb is already open! Afraid that the body of her Lord has been stolen, Mary runs to tell Peter and John what has happened. She returns with them to the tomb, and lingers behind after they leave (John 20:1-10).

She is weeping...sitting alone...crying over all that she has lost (John 20:11-16). When Jesus first appears to her, Mary does not recognize him. Bible scholar William Barclay says about this part of the story: "There is no need to seek for elaborate reasons why Mary did not recognize Jesus. The simple and the poignant fact is that she could not see Him through her tears."

I believe, then, that the story Mary Magdalene brings to the tomb that morning is a story of *grief and loss*. Mary's is the story of anyone who ever lost something or someone they loved—through break-up or divorce or through death.

As Mary weeps by the tomb, her life story is suddenly about to change.

"Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?"

Thinking it must be the gardener, Mary answers: "Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away."

Jesus said to her, "Mary!"

Now there is no mistaking his familiar voice! Mary turns to Jesus, as tears of grief melt into tears of joy. "Rabbouni!" she says lovingly.... Master!

Easter means that *God has the last word in each of our life stories.*

Barclay also observes that the language Jesus uses in John 16 would have been understood as referring to the Messiah's coming to usher in *the new age of God's*

kingdom. So, Barclay says, Jesus was saying to his disciples: “I am leaving you; but I am coming back; the day will come when my reign will begin and my kingdom will come; but before that, you will have to go through terrible things, with pain like birth-pangs upon you. But, if you faithfully endure, and go through that terrible time, the blessings will be very precious.” (William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible Series*)

The Resurrection of Christ means, then, that God has the last word in each of our life stories. But, as a sure sign of Jesus’ coming kingdom, His resurrection also means that *God will have the last word in all of human history!*

Greg Fisher, a missionary, was teaching Bible class to his African college students, when one of them asked: “Teacher, 1 Thessalonians 4:16 says that when Christ comes again He will ‘descend from heaven with a loud shout.’ I would like to know, what will Jesus say when He shouts?”

Greg said he wanted to just tell the student that the Bible doesn’t give the answer to his question and move on with the lecture. But somehow Greg’s mind wandered, at that moment, to an experience he had earlier in the day with a refugee from the Liberian Civil War.

The man, who was a high school principle, had told Greg how he had been apprehended by a two-man death squad. After several hours of terror, in which the two men described how they intended to torture and kill him, the principle managed to escape. After hiding out for two days, he was able to find his family and escape to a neighboring country. But the escape cost him dearly. Two of his children lost their lives. The terrible cruelty and inhumanity of that civil war had touched Greg deeply.

As he pondered his student’s question, another flashback came to mind. Greg thought of the beggars that he passed each morning on his way to work. Every day, he saw how poverty destroys human dignity, robs people of the best of what it means to be human.

It was then that the student spoke again: “Teacher, you have not given me an answer. What will Christ say?”

Almost without realizing it, the missionary answered with one word: “Enough.”

“Enough. I believe that when Christ returns, He will shout for all the world to hear, ‘Enough!’”

“What do you mean ‘enough’?” asked the student.

“I mean enough,” said Greg, “enough suffering, enough poverty, enough war, enough death..... enough!”

The good news of Easter is this: through the risen Christ, our God will have the last word—the last word in each of our life stories, and the last word in all of human history!

Thanks be to God.

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