

Easter 2007

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Text of Luke 24:1-10

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Before I get into the joy of Easter, and I do want to get into the joy of Easter, I have something to confess. It is not something salacious but probably more along the lines of pathetic. A few weeks ago, I told this story to the 6th, 7th, and 8th Grade Group on a Sunday morning. For some reason, as I kept thinking about what I wanted to say on Easter morning, which I have to say is no small task for an aspiring, first Holy Week here, preacher, I kept coming back to this event from my life. So, my apologies to those of you who are listening to recycled goods. It is perhaps, a bit tacky if not pathetic. In the spirit of Easter, perhaps, I will be forgiven.

While I was in college, I was a camp counselor at the Episcopal Summer Camp in Oklahoma. And the last week of camp was always the most difficult. It was not difficult because we were tired, although we were after several months of CAMP. It was also not only that we as counselors had gotten into trouble for being naughty, though we most certainly did. The last week was difficult because it was a camp for children of state prisoners, called Camp New Hope. After working for 8 weeks with mostly WASPy Oklahoma Episcopalians, suddenly we were thrown into another world. In fact, the first year that I worked at Camp New Hope, there was even an attempted coup by the campers. On that fated night, the kids had been expected to attend and participate in a talent show for about an hour and a half. For some of the kids, the Talent Show was about an hour and fifteen minutes too long. Energy burst forth, and suddenly children were scaling the pool fence and running to the highway for freedom. One even climbed on the roof of my cabin, along with my undergarments as a flag, to stake the cabin as his own territory. Neil Armstrong he was not! And did I mention that we got paid less for this week than the others? One could never know what to expect at Camp New Hope, except for the fact that many of the children were crying out for help and we were desperately trying to answer that call.

On better days, we would begin the morning with a church service. It was basically 15 minutes or so of talking about God in an outdoor pavilion. One morning, during chapel time, I noticed that a particular boy, whom I will call Dwayne, seemed upset. For some reason, he was reacting very negatively to what our chaplain was saying. The love of God, the subject, somehow did not appeal. I was scanning the entire group, but my eyes kept coming back to him. Eventually, I began to detect something. Dwayne was slowly, softly, shifting and scooting himself outside of the group and outside of the pavilion. Once he was completely removed, thinking that no one had seen him, he crawled away and began to run. One other counselor, Jackie, who was a tough parole officer in her normal life, saw him too. Jackie and I got up and followed Dwayne, running as fast as we could, trying to catch our runaway. I caught up to Dwayne before Jackie. I did not know what to do, but Jackie yelled out, "Hug him, and don't let him go." That is exactly what I did. I held Dwayne's small figure in my arms, refusing to let go. Dwayne squirmed, but my arms held tight. Dwayne used his elbows, pushing them into my stomach with force, but I would not let go. Jackie caught up and deliberately said, "Keep hugging him." Despite my scrawny, skinny self, I kept my arms wrapped tight. He was too close to do real damage. Dwayne sensed this and

tried another tack. He yelled at me, as loud as he could, calling me names and summoning an extensive array of four letter words. He attacked my “race,” “my class,” “my parents,” “my mama,” I still did not let go. Jackie kept saying, “Just keep holding him.”

Confession time again, I wanted Jackie to take over. I felt out of my element and out of control. Never had I seen a child with such rage. But I did listen to her, and I did not let go. After what seemed like an eternity, but was probably only a few minutes, Dwayne melted. He did not so much hug me back, but he stopped refusing my arms. His muscles relaxed. He felt safe, and he began to cry. Through his tears he honestly asked if I was going to beat him like his Grandmother did? He talked about his Mother in prison. Dwayne could not see hope, but for some reason, in that moment, he let go of all the tension that children should never have to hold but sometimes do. And he eventually hugged me back. For the rest of the week, Dwayne was like a different person. Holding him helped him want to be better. It helped him not be frightened by the love of God.

Today is the feast of Easter, the most important holiday of the Church Year. And I want to say that Easter is like God giving us a huge hug hold, telling us not to be frightened by the love of God. Like Dwayne, humanity tried to push God away. On Good Friday, we stomach punched God by forming a mob and killing God’s Son. We hurled words at God, mocking God, saying that if God was really God, then Jesus could never be harmed. We walked away from Jesus’ teachings of loving others and loving our enemies. And God kept holding us. God kept saying through the actions of Jesus that no matter what we do, God is keeping us close. Easter is like a huge hug hold. And because Jesus keeps coming back to us in peace, even after his violent death, we are being shown that we will be held until we can release our tensions, relax our muscles, and remember that we are in God’s hands.

There has sometimes been a movement within liberal protestant churches to think of Easter as either simply a Rite of Spring, “Look at the pretty flowers,” or a primal myth that we somehow need to exorcise from our Bibles, just one of those ancient stories that is really meaningless. But I want to say that the miracle of Easter is central to being a Christian. In the Easter story, God reveals how God cares for us in a new and wonderful way. For thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of years, people have believed that God is a wrathful being, a two-faced bludgeon bearer who would smite us if we were bad and kill us if we did wrong. God seemed like Dwayne’s Grandmother, or at least we expected a beating. God knew that God was not after vengeance, but for some reason, humankind did not. And so God sent God’s son. 2000 years ago, Jesus came and lived with us. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” And Jesus talked about a God who was only concerned with loving us, and not only about loving a certain group of people, but about loving each and every person, even and especially the most undesirable, the most damaged and in pain. Jesus hoped that if we could see that God loves us in that way, that we would love one another as we have been held.

People, quite understandably, could not comprehend this new message of Grace. They could not realize that this enemy-loving, peace-giving Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life. He was

too good to be true. And so Jesus was killed. And what is amazing, what is miraculous, and what is astounding is that God comes back. And it is not only that Jesus comes back to life. If it were only that, the whole thing would simply be a myth. Instead, what is miraculous. What is a breakthrough in the path of human history. What is the reason that we all come out for this celebration is HOW Jesus comes back. Jesus does not come back in vengeance like a bad zombie movie. Jesus comes back to those who abandoned and killed him and says, "Peace".... because Easter is about showing us how tight the cosmic arms of God are wrapped around us. The fact that Jesus comes back in peace even to those who abandoned him proves it. God knows that the only way our world will be better is to never let go. And God will never let go until we are safe.

You might think it odd that on this most Holy morning that I preach not only with recycled goods but also about a child of a state prisoner for whom life will always be a challenge. But the fact is, our world is like Dwayne. It has been beaten, hurt, pained, and problem-ed. We are a world at war, contemplating more war. And if we are going to truly celebrate this most Holy Day. If we are going to feel and share the hug hold of God, which I believe that we should do with every fiber of our being, we better learn how to do it in the midst of our world, our real world, just as Dwayne must. Otherwise, this is a meaningless ritual. And so I want to propose that our celebration this morning does not occur outside of the realm of our world, sheltered by brick and mortar. Our celebration occurs in the middle of life as we know it. That is where Jesus walked and where God's arms are. In the middle of the pain and chaos in our lives, we celebrate that there is something bigger, brighter, and fuller in our hearts and on the horizon. We celebrate that though the world is in pain, we know how the story will end. It ends in resurrection.

My Friend, Brothers and Sisters, we are being held by God in bonds of love. It is a bond that is never ending and cannot be contained. And we proclaim it in this place by saying that Christ is risen, and we proclaim it in the world by using our arms to be the arms of God. Happy Easter.