

Of Rabbits and Resurrection

COLOSSIANS 3:1-4 (NRSV) *So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.*

Many people—maybe most—want to move directly from Palm Sunday to Easter. Maundy Thursday services are poorly attended in most churches; and Good Friday services are all but extinct in mainline Protestant churches.

The music of Good Friday is dark; heavy with minor keys. While serving the church in Pine Bluff, Jo Lynn chose Dale Woods' "Service of Darkness" in place of an Easter cantata. It's a Good Friday service, and at first our choir really didn't like it. In the first place, it's extremely difficult; in the second place it's not bouncy, bubbly, happy music. It's not Easter music; it's about the crucifixion of our Lord.

But as the choir labored under the heavy hand of our director, the music began to come alive. It has rich, beautiful harmonies, and when we worked on one of those difficult passages and it finally came together and resolved into one of those wonderful chords, you could hear, "Ooooh..." from choir members.

I still believe it was Jo Lynn's greatest accomplishment as a choir director.

That choir's experience may be the best expression of what I want to say this morning: "Easter is a 'Fairy Tale' without Good Friday."

People want to move directly from Palm Sunday to Easter—stay in the sunlight and avoid the shadows of Holy Week: the confrontation with the merchants who had commercialized the Temple, the controversies with the religious leaders of the city, the open criticism and plotting against Jesus, the agony of Gethsemane, the betrayal of Judas, the arrest and trial... the crucifixion...

The loud "Hosannas" of Palm Sunday and the excited "He is risen!" of Easter are separated by the cries of the rabble in the streets: "Crucify him!" Between the Palm Branches and the lilies are the thorns. The praises and cheers of the crowd give way to the mockery of concocted charges; and the cloaks thrown in his pathway are replaced by the sting of the whip, the burden of the cross, and nails and a spear.

We'd rather avoid the darkness. In fact, we've organized our lives around the avoidance of unpleasantness.

Non-committal relationships are easier than working through problems; job-hopping is easier than sticking through hard times that accompany *every* occupation; and virtually every family has someone who's escaping into substance abuse. Video games, ear buds, Soap Operas, sleeping until noon (health issues and work schedules aside) can be ways of avoiding unpleasantness—and our generation is characterized, not so much as seeking pleasure as avoiding unpleasantness.

We're not so much moving toward Easter as we are bypassing Good Friday.

Through Christ and through the Church God offers "LIFE"—abundant and abiding—but it must be on God's terms.

God says, "I offer life." We say, "Bless the life I've already chosen, and make my chosen path fruitful and full and lasting."

God says, "I give you life." We say, "God, here's what I want from you."

God says, "I gave you my Son." We say, "God, I'd rather have financial security and lots of time for recreation and travel and kids who are good athletes and good students and popular in school."

God says, "What I offer is infinitely better." We say, "Yeah, but I don't have time; I've got to go here and do that and take the kids there and just look at my calendar, God. I don't have time."

It's not so much that we're undercommitted—in fact, many of us (probably most of us) are overcommitted.

The tee shirt said, "I want it all; and I want it now!" I know that what I need to do is set priorities and eliminate some of the lower ones; but I want it all! I don't want to choose between that banana split and the strawberry shortcake! I want them both! I know that if I eat both I'll end up with a stomach ache; but, knowing me, I'm probably going to eat both of them, anyway. And then I'll whine and complain that life isn't fair because I have a stomach ache!

The ability to set priorities and make choices is a beautiful gift—just having that ability. But to choose "A" is to not choose "B"; and that's unpleasant. Never mind that the result of having both probably also will be unpleasant.

We have choices. And every choice carries a consequence.

We want Easter. But without Good Friday, Easter is just a "fairy tale"—a shallow celebration of rabbits and fuzzy chicks and colored eggs. Resurrection means nothing unless someone dies.

And therein lies the "Good News". Someone already has died.

New life is costly. And in Christ, the cost already is covered, like a father giving a child money so the child can buy the father a birthday present. The cost still must be paid; but it doesn't come "out of our pocket." It's called "grace."

The World promises acceptance, fulfillment, and excitement, if we'll use this toothpaste or drive that car or wear those jeans or join this club or listen to that music. But if that's the Gospel you're trusting, how's that working out for you?

We run from unpleasantness, only to find ourselves enslaved and trapped in short-term, shallow obligations that deliver neither abundant nor abiding life. They deliver only full schedules and stress and burnout.

"Father, forgive them. They don't understand what they are doing.' Those words, uttered by Jesus on the cross, seem timely as we continue to divide, conquer, and defend our right to be our own private little tyrants when we could choose to do the hard but more joyful work of building a beloved community." ~ Bill Rose-Heim.

In the words, commitment and priorities, we hear heavy burden, dreary obligation. And on the surface, the lectionary reading from Colossians seems to attach no promise beyond pie-in-the-sky-when-I-die-by-and-bye: "*When Christ ... is revealed,*

... you also will be revealed with him in glory.”

But, the good news is that Christ already has been revealed! And he has said, *“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”*
(MATTHEW 11:28-30 NRSV)

He said, *“But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”* (MATTHEW 6:33 NRSV)

The promise is there. “...I will give you rest.” “...you will find rest for your souls.” “...all these things will be given to you as well.”

The difference between this promise and a fairy tale is this: in a fairy tale, we wake up on Easter morning to find the Easter Bunny has left pretty baskets and eggs and candy. In this promise, we get to participate—to experience the fulfilment and the excitement and the joy of being a part of something wonderful and creative.

Before rest comes the yoke; but it's not a burden. It's easy. It's light. And without it, rest is a fairy tale. Before all these things that are added comes the striving for the kingdom.

Good Friday is the price of Resurrection; and the price already is paid. Commitment to God is never a burden; it is the doorway to the promise of abundant life.

We proclaim, “Christ is risen!” The only cost to us is to believe it, and then to live as if we truly believe it.