

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

April 11, 2010
2nd Sunday of Easter
Revelation 1:4-8

Embodying Easter's Encouragement

Some stories are just too good for one telling, or hearing. Sometimes it's a funny story that someone may have told you, and it was so good, so funny, that you ask the storyteller to recount it again for a second round of laughs. Sometimes it's a book that is so compelling, a so called page-turner, that when you get to the end, you immediately re-read it because a second time around the intricacies of the story will make more sense and lead to a more complete understanding of the tale itself. One time an English teacher told me that she had done just that with a particular book—something she said that she never does because there are way too many other unread books that need to be read. I immediately went out and bought that book because I knew it would be great—and it was. Sometimes it's a movie that is watched again—in some cases to pick up more details and in other cases to maintain the magic of the story recounted on the silver screen. A few weeks ago I finally went to see the blockbuster, "Avatar," because of all the hoopla around it. The ticket taker at the theater swooned as she said, "You're going to love it. I've screened it 33 times." By the way, I liked it alright, but for me, one viewing was sufficient—especially with the 3-D surcharge. That said, I'm in no way averse to multiple viewings. I'm one of those who grew up watching "The Wizard of Oz" every single year when it was featured on TV. It's a movie that I own today and enjoy immensely every time I watch it. In fact the whole business of selling movie copies on DVD and Blu-Ray disc is built upon the idea that watching a movie again—or even over and over—is something to be desired. We like a good story. In fact a really good story is one that changes us in one way or another. It can almost become a part of who we are.

For us as Christians the ultimate such story is that of the death and resurrection of Jesus. In the early centuries of the Christian church, the narrative of Jesus going to his death on the cross and of his rising from the dead was *the central* story upon which the church was built. The many other stories (plural) about Jesus, from his birth and through his 3-year ministry were not emphasized to the same extent. Just take a look at the 4 gospels and you'll see that each of them devote more ink and parchment to the details of Jesus' death followed by his resurrection than to any other aspect of Jesus' life. And furthermore, there is more agreement among the 4 gospel writers on the details of Jesus' passion, as it's called, than on the many other reports of events in Jesus' life and ministry prior to it. It was only later in the development of the Christian church that the teachings and actions of Jesus before his passion became important to the extent that they are important to us today. To be a Christian from the earliest days of Christianity was to affirm a solid conviction that Jesus who died on the cross is the same Jesus who was raised from the dead by God. Christian faith was principally about God's overcoming the power of death through the passion of Jesus and the resurrection of Jesus.

There's something refreshing and appealing about this simple and yet profound affirmation. Over the last 100-200 years Christian theology developed and evolved in some dramatic and impressive ways. Tens of thousands of pages have been written by theologians and scholars organizing Christian doctrine and systematizing Christian theology, drawing out the richness and fullness of the meaning of Jesus' teaching as well as

of his life story. The seeds of that development of doctrine and theology began to be sown within a few decades of Jesus' life with the likes of Paul, who became an apostle, after having been a persecutor of Christians before God changed his life. Paul took the stories and events of Jesus' life and ministry, along with that of his death and resurrection and began to draw conclusions of the meaning behind those stories and events. Others in every succeeding generation have followed suit and continued to seek a more thorough understanding of Christianity. But all of the Christian theology and doctrine that have emerged over the last 2000 years can become daunting if not overwhelming to some—particularly for those who are unfamiliar with Christianity and want to know fundamentally what it's all about. And just what is that central affirmation? That Jesus suffered and died on the cross and that three days later was raised from the dead by God. It's the story that has been told again and again, across the generations, across the centuries, right up until this moment.

Paul and others after him contributed much of the texts we have in the New Testament in addition to the 4 gospels. Many of the New Testament books are letters from the likes of Paul to Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean geographic area. There are also more stories and narratives as well as some treatises or statements. All of the New Testament literature bears witness to the this central affirmation of the story of Jesus' death and resurrection. All of them, including the last book in the Bible known as the Revelation to John, or most often simply, Revelation. This book, probably more than any other in the entire Bible, is one that can be off-putting or alarming or simply so incredibly mysterious that making any sense of it is completely elusive. But it is also a book that is full of incredible evocative imagery that inspires a whole new level of appreciation for the works of God and of Jesus, who came, who died, who rose from the dead, *and who will come again!* More on that in a minute. Revelation has provided poetic imagery that can be found in many of the hymns that we sing. Revelation is a rich resource for us who seek to deepen and enrich our worship life. There has been tremendous visual artwork that has been inspired by Revelation over the centuries. That music and art are inspired by Revelation provides a clue that this book is about much more than truth that is logical, grammatical, and reducible to mere words on a page.

As Jody and I have looked ahead to our worship and preaching emphasis during this Easter season that continues now until May 23—Pentecost Sunday, we have decided that we will focus on texts from Revelation that speak to an overall theme of embodying the encouragement we find in Easter. It is our hope and intention that as we go through this season together this year we'll be able to discover and rediscover how the Easter message that we celebrated so magnificently last Sunday is a message that has meaning and import for our daily living as followers of Christ. In other words we want to focus on how the central story of Jesus' death and Jesus' resurrection makes a difference for us as Christians.

This is essentially the message that John of Patmos knew as an early Christian pastor. He is the John that is referenced in Revelation. We don't know much more than that, except that he was speaking/preaching to Christians who were feeling discouragement and oppression. Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to Revelation, makes the point that John was a pastor who on a Sunday—the Lord's Day—while he was leading

worship had a vision in which God provided comfort and reassurance. Here's how Peterson puts it.

John of Patmos, a pastor of the late first century, has worship on his mind, is preeminently concerned with worship. The vision, which is The Revelation, comes to him while he is at worship on a certain Sunday on the Mediterranean island of Patmos. He is responsible for a circuit of churches on the mainland whose primary task is worship. Worship shapes the human community in response to the living God. If worship is neglected or perverted, our communities fall into chaos or under tyranny. (*The Message*, ©2002, NavPress, Colorado Springs. p. 2236)

How can we today embody this encouraging word that Jesus who died has been raised from the dead?

Everyone of us here today, even the very oldest in our midst, have lived our lives in what can be described as the modern scientific age. This means that in our education, in our understanding of the world around us, and in the ways we evaluate truth from untruth, we bring a scientific skepticism to everything we encounter. And until we observe and gather enough evidence to support a conclusion, we remain doubtful. We were taught that this is what it means to be intelligent and advanced as opposed to primitive and naive. While this is not news to anyone in the room today, it's important to remember that for the vast majority of humanity that has gone before us, this was not the case. So when it comes to religion in general and Christianity in particular, up until the modern scientific age, the veracity or truthfulness of the claims that Jesus died on the cross and was raised from the dead were based on personal testimony—personal testimony that began with the first eye witnesses and that was continued through the ages by the eye witness generation passing it on to the next generation who in turn passed it on to each succeeding generation to this very generation. So until the scientific era, that my forebears passed it on up until me was not just good enough, it was rock-solid in its claim to truth—a truth that must be embraced.

It has been only in the last 200 years or so that our scientific mind set has done a number on faith and the truth it contains. So throughout our lives we have seen this conundrum that has set up science and religion up against one another as if only one or the other can be true. We as intelligent and thoughtful Christians know that in our tradition we have seen religious truth as something that transcends scientific and logical truth. And in this so-called postmodern time in which we now live, even scientific truth is called into question. That's why I believe that we are well equipped to make our way through the magnificent and at times outrageous imagery portrayed in Revelation. While there are those who still today look at what Revelation has to say and they take it very literally as if it were an outline of specific events that will be happening someday—sooner than later according to many—our search for the truths contained in the words of Revelation will I believe bring us to a different conclusion—namely that our sovereign God, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, has history firmly in hand which is surely a comfort to us in these days in which we live.

As we live out our Easter faith, that Christ died and Christ rose from the dead, we discover a confidence that bolsters us as we face whatever comes down at us along the road

of life. For we affirm, as John of Patmos does, that our savior is one who is and who was and who is to come, the Alpha and the Omega, in other words, the first and the last.

You know, the Easter story that Jesus died and Jesus rose from the dead, is truly the greatest story ever told and retold a zillion times. For us believers it is much more than a story as it becomes a part of who we are in our very essence.

“To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (Rev.1:5b-6)