

EASTER AS HOMECOMING II

JOHN 20:19-31

APRIL 18, 2004 – EASTERTIDE I

THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

We talked last week about Easter as homecoming. We said that much of the Bible is one long story of our homelessness: leaving the garden of paradise, wandering forty years in the wilderness, forgetting God's calling to serve the poor when we were a powerful nation, longing for our homeland when we were in exile.

And we said that the joy of Easter is the joy of homecoming – the rejoining of a beloved, a parent to a child, a land to its rightful owner or ruler. Homecoming is putting things aright after some tragedy has put them asunder. Mary recognizing Jesus, whom she never expected to see again and thought to be the gardener that first Easter at the tomb, sums up Easter as homecoming. The restoration of relationships. When relationships are made right again Christ is present.

Mary's recognition of Christ transformed her grief into resurrection joy.

In today's story the same restoring of the disciples' relationship to Jesus takes place. Good Friday sorrow is transformed into Easter hope.

I want to continue this theme of homecoming today because I believe it is the core of the Easter message. So many of you told me last week talking about home and homecoming brought back a flood of deep feelings of longing, of sorrow, of joy.

For many of us life is a quest to find that special and unique place that is home.

The place of belonging, of reunion, of acceptance.

Even though many of us are fortunate to have wonderful homes, none of us I dare say have the perfect home. And that is the longing or emptiness Easter addresses. Easter offers us, in the Risen Christ, the healing and completeness we long for in this life and in the life to come.

For three years, Jesus and his followers were a family. In fact, one of the signs that he was the Messiah – is that those who lived 24/7 with him still claimed he was God's long awaited one. This is as good confirmation as we can have that Jesus was the Messiah.

You get to see the dark side, the weaknesses and quirks of a person when you live with them around the clock. I remember my first roommate in college. He seemed like a pretty good guy when we corresponded once over the summer before freshman year. But a few weeks into the semester I knew it was going to be a tough ride. Who knows what he is saying about me today?

The point is the disciples, even after going through thick and thin with Jesus, still thought he was God's chosen one. They loved Jesus and so Good Friday obliterated their little family. When you lose a family member like that it can shake the foundations of even the strongest member of the family. Peter, the rock, was reduced to embarrassment and shame Good Friday after Jesus' death. That little band of disciples scattered in fear of the authorities. So the story today is a story of Jesus' homecoming, the reunion of that first church family if you will. Restoring their broken identities and relationships with each other and with Jesus.

But if Easter was just a family reunion and nothing else, you and I wouldn't be here this morning. What I'd like to consider today is how Easter's homecoming is followed by Easter's sending forth.

The scene is the upper room Easter evening. The disciples are huddled together in fear. The door is closed if not locked against the authorities. Jesus was a criminal of the state. Who knows perhaps the temple police were searching for them now?

When Jesus appears through closed doors and says, "Peace be with you," the saying is filled with meaning. Peace be with you in the midst of your grief. Peace be with you in the midst of your fear. Peace be with you, Peter, in the midst of your guilt.

Then the very next words out of the Risen Christ's mouth are these, "As the Father has sent me, so I send you." Here is one of those biblical moments that is easy to overlook but crucial to understanding our faith.

Jesus' agenda for his followers is not that they would all just feel better knowing he was raised again. He was not interested in seeing them get rich and retire by selling their memoirs or granting interviews as his intimate circle who once knew this interesting, controversial figure. No, Jesus had work for them to do. His work. And it could not be delayed.

"Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven, if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." You see, Jesus gives his followers the power of the Spirit. This is a mini-Pentecost before Pentecost. Not only is Jesus sending his followers out – to do the work that his Father sent him to do – he is equipping the disciples with the same authority and power he had to accomplish this work.

Maybe you have heard about the purpose-driven movement. Pastor Rick Warren leads a 20,000 member congregation in California. He has written two books both of which are best sellers – major best sellers. *The Purpose-Driven Life* has sold about ten million copies and *The Purpose-Driven Church* has been translated into 20 languages and sold millions as well.

I mention Warren's books because I am intrigued with them and the response they have received. To be sure these books fall into that category of popular religious marketing that sometimes makes me cringe. *The Christian Century* – a progressive journal I rely on for opinion and commentary – says some positive things about Warren's best sellers but also that the books are short on social justice and long on measuring success in ministry by numbers – which if you are a 20,000 member congregation is a little self-serving.

Nevertheless, there is a valuable message in Warren's purpose-driven strategy for living the faith and it is this: you and I were made to serve God. Warren's point is that as we learn to open the God-shaped space in our hearts that only God can fill but that we try to fill with everything else, as we open ourselves and let God's presence fill us our lives then take on a discernable shape and purpose. We become a combination of Christ's life and our own unique talents and experiences and personality.

But in order to serve Warren urges that we start thinking in new ways. We have to shift from self-centered thinking to other-centered thinking. We have to shift from local thinking to global thinking. We have to shift from thinking of excuses to thinking of creative ways to fulfill our mission.

People who think and act accordingly, says Warren, continue Jesus' mission. This mission is a wonderful privilege. Telling others how they can find ultimate purpose for their own lives is the greatest thing you can do for someone. This is work that matters ultimately, has eternal significance and fulfills God's purpose for creation.

Now Rick Warren hasn't said anything here that John Calvin or Jesus didn't say before him – in fact he quotes Jesus quite liberally. So what's all the fuss about, why the millions of books? Because, I believe, lots of people today are starved for two things: the restoration of relationships that the Easter homecoming can provide and secondly, ultimate meaning and purpose in day to day living, that being sent forth by the Risen Christ can offer. Warren's genius is that he tells people how to meet these two needs with a simple, cookbook approach to discipleship.

My purpose today is not to increase the sales of Rick Warren's books. Rather I want to say that I think the appeal of his book is for real and that his book goes a long ways in helping people find deeper meaning in life.

Somewhere along the line the progressive, mainline church got off track. After the tough political work of the 60s and 70s, we pulled back – just at the time when conservative churches were beginning to jump into the fray of political action. And we lost a certain amount of confidence. The war ended, civil rights started making progress, the nuclear threat lessened. In other words, we met many of the objectives of our social agenda and we were tired. The explosion of awareness and visibility of other religions, especially after 9/11, has also caused many churches to question their place in the public square of American religion.

Regrettably one of the casualties of the liberal/progressive malaise has been a loss of a sense of direction for personal, day to day living of our faith. Enter Rick Warren with his purpose driven message.

But I believe we are at an important crossroads in the progressive church. You can see signs of new life everywhere. We have learned a lot from our political activism of a generation ago. We have also learned that folks want more than a political agenda to sink their lives into.

The times have changed. I think we can steal a page from the mega-church. I think we would do well to reclaim our biblical theological heritage and talk more about the priesthood of all believers. How each of us is called by God for a special purpose and ministry. Reading Rick Warren's book might not even hurt.

We need to challenge one another and anyone who participates in our church life – being active at Westminster is about embracing not just half of the Easter message but all of it. Not just the homecoming part of joyful reunion and restoration of relationships but also part two, the sending out part to go into the world to build the kingdom of God like Jesus.

When someone walks through our doors asking the question, “what on earth am I here for?” we ought to be able to help that person get a timely answer. It’s not a theoretical question and it’s not like the answer to that question is something we should shy away from – as if we have no right to help each other discern our purpose in life.

No. The reason we are here is to figure out how God wants us to use this incredible pool of human and material resources. The journey is demanding. The least we can do is to make sure each of us is on it. As much as our time it requires deep trust and honesty and risk-taking. Those are areas where staff and elders ought to lead the way.

Truth be told: we are not quite that focussed here at Westminster...yet. But we are more focussed than we were three years ago and we are more focussed than many, many congregations. If we are serious about being sent forth by the Risen Christ, it’s time for us to hold the bar a little higher for each other. Amen.

Note: the “packaging” of Rick Warren’s books can be off-putting to some. His position on some social issues are not what I would consider progressive/liberal. The affect of the book can seem formulaic – ‘follow these steps and life will be rosy’. Nevertheless, if you can set such objections aside his message is, I believe, relevant to any church whatever its position on political issues. Let me know what you think of the books if you read them.