

Todd R. Allen
2017
Interim Pastor
Sunday of Easter

April 23,
First

“Forever Easter”
“*The Story*”: Chapter 28

Scripture: Selections from Acts, Chapter 1-10

Reader One:

In my former book, *Theophilus*, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and to teach ² until the day he was taken up to heaven—about how³ after his suffering, he presented himself to them and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

⁴ On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: “Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with^[a] water, but in a few days you will be baptized with^[b] the Holy Spirit.” Then they gathered around him and asked him, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”

⁷ He said to them: “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

⁹ After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight.

Reader Two:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place.² Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. ³ They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated

and came to rest on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues^[a] as the Spirit enabled them.

⁵ Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. ⁶ When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken.⁷ Utterly amazed, they asked: “Aren’t all these who are speaking Galileans?”⁸ Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?⁹ Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia,^[b] ¹⁰ Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome ¹¹ (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!”

¹² Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?”

Reader Three:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord’s disciples. He went to the high priest ² and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

³ As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?”

⁵ “Who are you, Lord?” Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. ⁶ “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

Reader Four:

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds. ¹³ Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

¹⁴ “Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.”

¹⁶ This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Opening Prayer: Grant, Lord God, that the words of my mouth, and the meditations of our hearts, would alike be acceptable in your sight, for You remain our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Let me start today with a proposition: Last Sunday—Easter Sunday--is the most important Sunday of the year. In support of this proposition, I lift up the higher attendance—the extra energy—not to mention the marvelous music—that filled this space, last Sunday.

What do we think?

If you ask me, friends, I would say that today—this Sunday--is a more important Sunday because not only are you back here—but —hopefully—we also see new faces in our midst and faces we saw last Sunday: Individuals who have been made curious by the message of a new life made possible through the resurrection of Jesus—by the declaration I made, last Sunday, that while there are plenty of reasons not to dance—plenty of reasons to be fearful, as well—there is also the supreme reason for us to dance because God keeps God’s word. *Because the tomb is empty. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, just as He said.*

Now, do any of us know what the future holds? No, we do not. And are there things to be afraid of? Well, of course, there are! Fear—and joy—come together, as I suggested last Sunday, but here’s the difference: *In the face of fear—anxiety—we now have someone we can cling to—someone—more to the point--who has overcome the very worst that life can throw at any human being and someone who has emerged victorious: Our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Is this ALL there is to Easter?

You know, there are some wags who call this Sunday—the first Sunday after Easter —“Low Sunday”, and they do so—as you may guess—because there are fewer of us,

here today--because while the music today is lovely, it is not quite as un-buttoned as last week, if truth be told. *Yes, they call it "Low Sunday" because today seems anti-climatic and can even feel like it. I mean where can one go--but down--after Easter Sunday, right?*

A story for you--a true story....

Several years ago, I was traveling with my wife and daughter, and we caught a flight from London to Paris. Over the English Channel we flew, as dusk fell. Ahead lay the excitement of arriving in the City of Light--the first time for my daughter, and, naturally, I was excited along with her. And then, my mind turned to the date: It was June the 5th.

It was hard--at least for me--not to travel back--to consider the momentous events that unfolded over that same very part of the globe, many years earlier. It must have been an unforgettable sight--I reminded myself--to see not just the hundreds of aircraft in the skies, but to behold the armada below--and this force had the same goal: To land an Allied army on the coast of Nazi-occupied France...

I am speaking, of course, to D-Day, as it became known. For the better part of five years--as we'll remember--the world's democracies had been fighting the heinous ambitions of Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan--and the stakes could not have been higher, for if the invasion force I've just described failed in its goal, well, this great threat to democracy--not to mention human decency--would keep its tentacles lodged in the heart of Europe...

It was not to be, of course. Although the cost was horribly high--that landing was made--a beachhead secured, and--from that point onward--I think you could say--there was no doubt that Hitler's Germany would be defeated, even if--even if--and here's my point: *That defeat would take many more days beyond D-Day itself...*

Why are we here?

Could it be that Easter--while a world-changing day--is only the beginning? Could it be that last Sunday, while a special Sunday, is nevertheless a springboard to something beyond itself--to something even greater?

As we turn to Chapter 28 in "The Story" today, it is hard not to see Easter as a kick-off event, friends. Yes, how instructive is it for us that the events after Easter as

part of the larger, unfolding plan—as the start of yet another chapter in the journey of God’s people. How so? Well, consider that the disciples, first, are directed to make their way to Galilee. Here, they see Jesus there, but this event is not the end of their journey, for—later--we see them gathered in Jerusalem—and it will be in the Holy City —and during the Festival of Pentecost—that Jesus will further grace their journey as people of faith. Their story. God’s story. “The Story.” None of them is over. These stories continue—the days roll on, but they can roll on, friends, with a new confidence—an inevitability, even-- because Christ is Risen—He is Risen, indeed!

Easter is more than one day—is a springboard to many more days....

But there is more--which brings us the high mountain, where Jesus calls his disciples to join him—and to do so 40 days after His resurrection. Ahead in time lies the rendezvous in Jerusalem, just mentioned, but—on this day—there is yet another event that takes place...

This event is Jesus’ departure from the disciples. It is a highly charged moment, for sure, but I point us to the details Luke shares with us: He reports that those present worship Jesus—and that some present also “doubt” him, quote, unquote.

Why the doubt?

I’ve often wondered about this—is Luke suggesting, for instance, that some of Jesus’ disciples still wonder if He—that is, Jesus—is really risen from the dead? This could be a possibility, but—in all honesty—what basis would they still have for feeling this way? Has not Jesus—over the past 40 days-- revealed himself over and over again to them, in groups, and individually—has he not let them touch the wounds—his hands, his side? There is every indication, let me suggest, that our Lord has addressed any doubts that Easter is somehow “fake news”—to make use of a loaded expression. And so, what basis is there for doubt, then?

Here’s one: There is doubt-among Jesus’ followers—as to the wisdom of this departure...

Think about this for a moment. True, Jesus has risen from the grave, but this resurrection has not changed the political—and social landscape. True, it has sent shock waves through the religious establishment, but for the vast majority of Jews the world they see around them has not changed, friends: The Romans are still in power, and they—that is, the Jews—still live in a land filled with turmoil and uncertainty. The hunger—the desire—for a change to this has not left them, and—much more to the

point—this expectation is still placed upon Jesus. Yes, think back to Palm Sunday-- think back to the meaning of the word “hosanna”—ya—sha—naw—in Hebrew—“save us, we pray!” For many on the hillside, on this day, Jesus is still their hope for the future —but—now--he is leaving them. This makes no sense: Who will save them—now?

“Then they gathered around him—that is Jesus—and asked him, ‘Lord, are at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’” A heartfelt question....

And the answer?

“No—but you will”

“No—but you will”

“YOU will....”

Here is the hand-off of a grand—and a glorious--responsibility...

Again, how hard this must have been for them to hear—indeed, how hard it is for us to hear the same from someone we love, and for someone we depend on, more to the point. When that someone decides to bow out. To step back. To leave the scene. It’s hard not to weep inside--but there’s the lesson Jesus is teaching them—and is teaching us: **Easter is more than one day—is a springboard to many more days...but there is more: Easter is also about what you and I—as disciples of Jesus—can do to further His work in our time—and place....**

Think about it: Did Jesus heal everyone?

No, He did not.

Did Jesus travel outside of Israel even?

Well, just a few times.

But what does Jesus say to the disciples now? Well here is it, in a nutshell:

“The world—my brothers and sisters—is now you’re playing field—not just Israel! Is up to you, now, to go the where I did not go—upon your shoulders, now, falls the grand—and glorious responsibility—to advance the Kingdom of God—“for you will to

be my witnesses to Jerusalem—and in all Judea and Samaria—and to the ends of the earth.”

What a mandate this is! A grand—and a glorious one—for sure. *And a mandate—let me suggest—that surely must have left them feeling inadequate—ill-equipped....*

Earlier, I spoke to the event of D-Day—of the landings upon the coast of Nazi-occupied France on June the 6th, 1944. It was a day that changed history, and it was a day that changed history friends due not just to the numbers of men landed—over 175,000 on the first day—but also due to the equipment they had at their disposal: An armada of over 7,000 ships and landing craft. Air cover provided by more than 12,000 planes. The availability of over 20,000 vehicles--from jeeps to Sherman tanks. And if this figure is not enough to boggle the mind, friends, by the end of August, 1944 over 2 million men had been landed on that same beach-head bringing even more supplies with them. Into the French countryside they went—pushing the Nazis out ahead of them--bringing about the liberation of a nation: The lights went on in Paris, once again, on August the 25th....

Yes, numbers the boggle the mind—but the guns, planes, tanks, bombs and bullets did not arrive there by accident, friends. The liberation of France came about—quite simply—through months—if not years—of planning—of production, shipping, and supply. It’s a reminder to us, friends that nothing great is accomplished without the means to do it....

And the same can be said—most surely—when it comes to God’s mandate—yes, years ago, on a hillside outside Galilee, it surely came as a shock that Jesus would leave our ancestors in faith—for so much work still had to be done—but far be it—far be it, friends!--for our God—for the One who has saved us through Christ—to leave us now without the tools to finish the job! No, far from it—for what do we read? Just as soon as Jesus has left them, we read that the disciples are gathered in one place, and it is in this one place that the following occurs:

“Suddenly, a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came for heaven. It filled the whole house where they were sitting, and they saw what looked like tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit—and they began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit enabled them...”

“Give us the tools—and we will finish the job!”

One of Winston Churchill's most memorable lines. On Pentecost the disciples are given the tools—indeed, the only tool they need: The Holy Spirit. A fire placed within each of them—a power—within each of them—to do the job God has called them to do—and the same is true for us, for it is as Peter says: “In the last days, God says,” I will pour my Spirit on all people”

Here is the promise made to you—to me—and it is a promise we can trust because it is made by the God who has raised Jesus from the dead. God can be trusted! You and I—therefore!--will not lack for supplies! We will not be without the means to do what God calls us to do...

Will we lay hold of this power?

You know,--in time--I will be leaving you--on the day God has pointed, in His wisdom. There will be—certainly on my end—a shedding of tears, for I am unabashedly fond of you all—but—then again—this departure must happen if you are to move forward in your journey

*But there is more I want to say: You are already moving forward—you are—and we saw it earlier today: It happened as your new peers on the Session—Karleen, David, Shelly—and Rich who has said yes again to serving you in this capacity—when each of them spoke to how the Spirit has moved them to lay hold of new areas of responsibility and service—and when each of them reflected on what they are already doing in their service as well. *Friends, they are not waiting for your next, installed pastor to arrive before they get moving—they are not! They are already doing—already being—the kind of spiritual leaders that Jesus called the likes of Peter, Paul, James and John to be, years before—and here's why: They believe Jesus has given them the tools to do their work—that the Holy Spirit resides in them! And so, they are laying hold of the future—post Easter Sunday,--knowing there are many more Sundays to the journey....**

Easter is more than a day—point one

Easter is also about what you and I—as disciples of Jesus—can do to further His work in our time—and place....point two

And—now--Easter is also about trusting the Holy Spirit to equip us—and to guide us.... Here is Point three, for today.....

Yes, a last thought for today, and let me provide some pointers not just to Rich—to Karleen, David and Shelley—to your peers on the Session—or just to your Board of Deacons—but to us all, as we journey ahead, trusting in God:

Be ready, friends—as we read here, in Chapter 28—to see outsiders—even enemies, become insiders—and allies...

Be ready, friends—as we also read here, in Chapter 28—to see what was once un-clean—even objectionable—now become clean—become acceptable....

Yes, let us be ready to think—to re-think—to even have our minds boggled—and boggled again, all as we journey on....

Yes, ready to be amazed: To see the Saul's of today—become Paul's of tomorrow. To see Gentiles—to see the most lost and even most loathed in our world today—come to share in God's favor—to even become the bedrock for the Church of Jesus Christ! Yes, be ready to be shocked, friends, **for if there is anything Chapter 28 teaches us, it is this: Our God is a God that defies our pre-conceptions—and—yes—even our time-honored traditions--our ways of doing of church--of being God's people.**

Now that I've shocked you—unsettled you--let me add this: *God is in control of all of this. God IS in control of all of this.* As much as God can—and does—shock us, our God is also the One who will be by our side—will even be the One who opens eyes, ears, lives—even prison doors—all so that the journey may go on—*that Peter—Paul—the 12—your Elders and Deacons—that all of us—may travel, further on the road.... God is in control—we are not alone, left to our own devices—we are being led—and we will be equipped.*

There is so much in this chapter—to Chapter 28 in “The Story” today; speaking personally, I wish the authors had spread it out a bit more. But let me end this message today by offering us a picture of how God—the Holy Spirit—will lead us....

It comes from Iona—a tiny island, nestled in the Scottish Hebrides. I spent the better part of three month living on this island, back in 1995, being part of a Christian community that has been a presence there for over 1500 years....I know, mind boggling already—but, and here's my point: When we gathered for worship there, the leaders always spoke to the movement of God—of the Holy Spirit--as being like that of a wild goose. A wild goose.

What, then, can we know about wild geese?

Well, for one, they are always on the move—they never stay in one place for long. So it is, we were taught on Iona, when it comes to God: God is always on the move. But there is more: Wild geese do also land, at least for a time, and when they do, friends, boy, do they also make some noise—honking away! It was a reminder to us that God is not only in our midst—in our neighborhood, for instance—but that God does not keep God's presence a secret—that God, in fact, calls us to hear Him speaking through the voices of the sick, the oppressed—the hungry and the poor... And, now, a final point about wild geese: They cannot be caught—they just can't be caught: Try as you can, any effort to catch a wild goose is, well, a "wild goose chase." Yes, just when you think you've got the bird in your grasp, it slips—it flies—away, all to land somewhere else. *God is free—God is the One who eludes our efforts to pin Him down, friends. The Spirit goes where it will—and when it wills, as Jesus teaches us; in fact, if you and I feel we have "got" God—that we have finally put our heads around who God is—and what God is about—well, you and I are no longer worshipping the God who is a wild goose: You and I are worshipping a God we have tamed—a God we have created made to suit our own desires, instead...*

And here is where I will leave us, today—on this Sunday after Easter—but hardly a Low Sunday, if truth be told, *for you and I, friends, are invited to join in a dance with our God. We are invited to live a new life, thanks to the One who has raised Jesus from the Dead. And we are called to step out in confidence, trusting in the One who—while ascended into Heaven—is also close by us. Guiding us. Always flying ahead us. Always urging us forward.*

Let us make Easter more than just one day in our lives:

Let us lay hold of the power—of the tools—God will give us to make it a new way of living, each and every day.

And let all God's people say: Amen!

Amen!