

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511



“The End of Easter”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Seventh Sunday of Easter (Year B)

May 17, 2015

Psalm 1; John 17:6–19

Today is the seventh Sunday of Easter, or the last Sunday in Eastertide,
just past the 40 days in which the disciples were
met by the resurrected Jesus and commanded to wait in Jerusalem
for the gift of the Holy Spirit, which he promised
would come soon (Acts 1:4–5).

But what if, I wonder... what if this *were* the end of Easter... period,
which I what I suspect the disciples thought as Jesus ascended
into a cloud, right before their very eyes?

What if this were the end of Easter?

What if we packed it up and put it away, as we do at the end of Christmas?

I’m getting ready to do just that at my house:

put away our glass Easter basket filled with painted glass eggs,
wrap and closet the ceramic bunnies and lambs,
sort through the plastic eggs and throw out any last sticky remnants
of chocolate bunnies, Peeps or Cadbury eggs.

What if we sang through a few of our favorite Easter hymns one last time
because they seem quite preposterous now in light of what is *really* going on
in Nepal and Chile, in Baltimore and Raleigh, in the Middle East
and around the Mediterranean basin.

Let's sing through a few, and then tuck them away until March 28, 2016.

(Sing 3 Easter hymns, one verse of each.)

What if this were the end of Easter?

What if, like Thomas Jefferson, we took our bibles and our hymnals

and cut out verses, some of which we just sang,

to create a liturgy which would be, no pun intended, much more "down to earth?"

What if we excised pericopes and selections to make sure

they contained no references

to the miracles of Jesus, to his divine nature, to the Trinity,

to the supernatural, and certainly not to the resurrection

as Jefferson did with his own personal bible.

Jefferson took a sharp instrument and cut out New Testament passages in Greek, Latin,

French and English, and then pasted them in four parallel columns,

omitting anything which he eschewed to be "contrary to reason,"

such as the feeding of the multitudes.

Yet Jefferson retained the Beatitudes and the teachings of Jesus,

and his crucifixion and entombment,

but excised Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

(*Smithsonian.com*. "How Jefferson Created His Own Bible". January 2012)

What if we, like Jefferson, reduced Jesus' life to one of a purely moral and ethical

nature to better deal with the issues of our day, and left it at that?

What if, as we do at the beginning of Lent,

we deleted the "alleluias" from our liturgy entirely, refrained from

such effusive exclamations in our worship together,

and simply said matter of factly, "Thanks be to God" in their place?

It wouldn't be bad, but it wouldn't be quite as suggestive of glory, either, would it?

What if we quit conducting funerals as Services of Witness to the Resurrection

and simply call them Celebrations of Life?

Many places do that now; it's the popular secular tendency.

Resurrection is, after all, the final wild card, the hopeful hint
that at least one unbelievable possibility still lies unplayed.

What if we were to cease considering each funeral or memorial service
to be a little Easter, or each Sunday worship service as a little Easter,
and quit looking for the risen Christ in our present context,
and quit looking forward into the future apocalyptic realm
of a coming Day of the Lord,
and simply celebrated the present blessing of our temporal existence together
and stop at that? *Carpe diem*: would that be all bad?

What if this were the end of Easter?

An interesting situation occurred at The Massanetta Springs Conference Center,
a Presbyterian facility, a few summers ago.

A well-renowned medical group had been renting the overnight campsite there
as a two-week gathering place for children battling brain disease,
which is a very worthy and wonderful cause.

But because they were a secular organization, they wanted to take down or cover
all of the crosses and Christian symbols that were scattered throughout
the campgrounds for the time they were there
because they thought it was irrelevant and detrimental to their mission.

And the Massanetta leadership fretted and struggled with their request
because they valued the ministry to the children and health care workers
who were renting their camp,
but they also valued the resurrection, that final wild card,
as a central tenant of the Christian faith,
which was why the camp had come to exist in the first place.

And, in the end, they said, "Sorry... no." The empty crosses would remain.

The renters would have to look for another site to hold their summer gathering.
For The Massanetta Springs Camp and Conference Center,

this was not the end of Easter.

Marcus Borg, a brilliant biblical scholar and theologian who recently died, made a distinction between the pre-Easter Jesus and the post-Easter Jesus that may be helpful at this point.

He defined the pre-Easter Jesus as "Jesus before his death: a Galilean Jew born around the year 4 BCE and executed by the Romans around the year 30 CE. The pre-Easter Jesus is dead and gone," Borg says.

"*He's nowhere anymore.* This statement does not deny Easter in any way, but simply recognizes that the corpuscular Jesus, the flesh and blood Jesus, is a figure of the past" and is a figure of limited geography.

(Marcus Borg. *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 82)

The post-Easter Jesus, Borg says, "is what Jesus became after his death...

By the post-Easter experience... Jesus continued to be experienced by his followers after his death as a divine reality of the present, and that such experiences continue to happen today.

The pre-Easter Jesus was fully human, but is no longer with us.

The post-Easter Jesus was *the heart of God*, the living Jesus who is still present, still here, still an experiential reality today."

(Marcus Borg. *The Heart of Christianity*, p. 83)

"After Easter," Borg says, "(Jesus') followers experienced him as a spiritual reality, no longer as a person of flesh and blood, limited in time and space as Jesus of Nazareth had been.

Rather, Jesus as the risen, living Christ could be experienced *anywhere and everywhere...*

Increasingly he was spoken of as having all the qualities of God... as the functional equivalent of God; as 'one with God.'"

(Marcus Borg. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, p. 16)

If we cut Jesus out, if we delete parts of him, if we pack him up and put him away, if we sort out any last sweet sticky remnants of him,

if we cover him up or take him down,
we lose the present and future dimensions of his presence,
as well as the geographical omnipresence of Jesus as God with us,
anytime and everywhere.

We also lose that resurrection wild card of unbelievable possibility:
that a tension-filled relationship with a spouse, sibling or friend might resolve;
that a cure for someone's stage-four cancer might be found;
that Dewey Lawson or Ed Kwon might still be with us;
that Ann Prospero might move towards interdependent living;
that we might end homelessness and poverty in Durham;
that human dignity might be determined by the quality of character,
and not by the color of skin;
that HIV/AIDS and Ebola might be eradicated worldwide;
that the mainline church might find relevance among the millennials.

I'm sure you are aware of the story in the media recently about Toya Graham,
the Baltimore single mother of six, who waded into the waters of
rioting and racial unrest after the death of Freddie Gray
to find and protect her sixteen year old son and pull him from the riot zone.

How did she find him in all of that chaos, I want to know?

What intuition led her to find her hooded teenager among the swirling masses?

What empowered her to persuade him to leave with her?

What power protected them from being hurt themselves

by the shoving, pushing, and throwing of projectiles?

Was it the risen Christ who was with her, enabling her to seek out the lost,
empowering her, protecting her and her son?

I resonate with her story, deep down inside,

having been in a similar situation myself as a teenager

growing up in the racial unrest of the South in the seventies.

We had numerous race riots at that time in our school system
that accompanied the forced integration and countywide busing there.
In one of the worst race riots, my high school was under lockdown
as unruly crowds surged around the quad, shouting demands,
throwing rocks and bricks, shattering classroom windows.
I was under my blacktop lab desk in biology class, per instruction,
aware of the police helicopter circling overhead,
and watching as an angry crowd coalesced just outside our classroom.
And, as if in slow motion, as if of one unified motion,
the crowd seemed choreographed as it swayed and slowly bent
to pick up rocks and sticks,
which were hurled in unison through both opposing casement window walls
of our classroom, raining glass shards down upon the tops of our desks.
Funny though, I don't remember being scared by the rioters; as a matter of fact,
I knew most of the rioters personally as fellow high school students.
But I do remember being terribly afraid when I saw my father emerge from the crowd
and walk towards our classroom.
It was as if he were walking on water—troubled water, unaware of danger,
unscathed by the volatility, as the teacher pulled him into the biology room.
"What are you doing here?" I asked.
You have to remember that we didn't have cell phones back then.
"How did you get through the police barrier at the school entrance?
You could have been hurt or killed... Why are you here?"
"Come on," he said. "I'm taking you home."
And with that, he waltzed me out of the classroom, down to a lower
parking lot where he had parked, and drove me safely home.
Was it the risen Christ who was with him, enabling him to seek out the lost,
empowering him, protecting him and me?
Was it the risen Christ walking the sidewalks of our troubled high school
the next day, helping us to express and hear anger and frustration,

enabling us to forgive and begin again,
bringing us back together, reconciling and recreating us as one body?

Jesus, in his high priestly prayer, addressed to the One whom he calls Holy Father,
just before the events leading to his betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and death,
prays for his followers who are in the world but not of the world,
that we might be one, that we might be unified in our joy,
that we might be protected and guarded from evil,
that we might be found by God-with-us, wherever we find ourselves to be.

I wonder if *this* is the end of Easter, the *telos*, the goal of Easter—
that Jesus as the risen, living Christ can be experienced
anywhere and everywhere as God with us,
as that resurrection wild card of possibility in every situation,
sending us out into a sometimes troubled world as agents of peace,
as advocates of justice, as ambassadors of good will,
as resources of reconciliation,
yet finding us, wherever we are, protecting us, saving us,
empowering us, leading us in our work

for green pastures and still waters. Happy Easter, still! Amen.