

The Bethel Pulpit — Pastor William R. White

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April 4, 2010 – Easter Sunday

Bethel Lutheran Church, 312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703



The Sermon Text — Luke 24:1-12

But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they went in, they did not find the body. While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, ‘Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.’ Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles. But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them. But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

SERMON – And God Said, “YES”

This is a tough time to be an American. So many things appear to say NO these days. We think of ourselves as the leader of the free world and yet our confidence in our government – particularly the congress -- is at an all-time low. Our two major political parties can’t even spell bipartisan, say nothing of act that way. Our confidence in business – the banking system, the insurance industry, the investment world – has sunk. We appear to be able to educate one segment of our population, but we are failures with our poorer children. Across the country our inner city schools are struggling. Milwaukee, for example, has the lowest test scores for fourth graders in the nation. It is bad enough to be the lowest, but when you know that means that they are lower than Newark, lower than East St. Louis, and lower than Detroit, where the governor declared the public schools so bad that he made a serious attempt to take them over, that is really bad.

And then there is the church. When a part of the church suffers the entire church suffers. What is happening in the Catholic Church is a blot on all of us. Remember Roman Catholics are our first cousins. About 500 hundred years ago we had a major family argument, but we still hold them as dear friends, and when they stumble, none of us stands tall. The conclusion we must reach is that there are so many things in our world today that say, NO.

That is why this Easter day is so special. That is why this celebration is so important. Though many things say no, Easter says YES.

Let’s do a quick review. We believe that God created the heavens and the earth. We don’t know how God did it, but we see the fingerprints of God all over this creation. God created it, and it was good. Very good.

And God loved the world, and everything and everyone in it. God’s prize possession was human beings. We humans, Genesis declares, have a double nature. We are both creatures and creators. We were created out of the dust of the earth, but also in the image of God. We are limited in time and space, but we can shape our environment. We are able to do wonderful and beautiful things, but we are capable of unbelievable atrocity. We bless God our Father and we can curse our brothers and sisters. We can write great music, create breathtaking art, and we be cruel and nasty. We have been known to destroy nature and each other. We were created to walk with God, but too often we have decided to walk alone, to ignore God.

When we turn our backs on God we often turn our backs on that which defines God. By turning our backs on God we too often turn our backs on beauty, on the joy of human relations (we were created to live in communities, small and large) and we have turned our backs on justice. And yet our desire for beauty, our need for intimate and loving relations and our hunger for justice are implanted in our DNA. It is a part of what we have been created to be, and in our best moments those aspects come shining through.

Though we turned our backs on God, God did not turn his back on us. There have been many ways that God has attempted to make connections, but his finest, most profound, is celebrated at Christmas. It was then that God decided not to stand far off from this world, but to enter into it and participate fully in it. God became a human, a baby! Amazing. The one who transcends time and space chose to be limited within the realm of time and space. That is an enormous change. C.S. Lewis says it is like a human being deciding to become a slug in order to share in their world.

We believe that In Jesus of Nazareth the distance between heaven and earth have come together once and for all. The place where God’s space and our space intersect and interlock is not in a temple, not in nature, but in a man, Jesus of Nazareth. He both taught and displayed how to relate to each other. His love crossed every boundary that humans erected – race, gender, nationality. Most important, he taught us how to forgive one another.

Unfortunately, not everyone was thrilled with what Jesus brought to this world. The people who had developed the finest government and the finest technology, the Romans, and the people who had developed the finest in religion, the Jews, joined forces to hang Jesus on a cross to

die. It appeared that even the best this world had to offer said no.

Though the world said NO to Jesus, God said yes to the world. Easter was God's yes. At Easter God declared that the way of Jesus, the way of peace, the way of forgiveness, the way of love, was God's way. And God reversed the NO of the world, by raising Jesus to life. Easter brought the gifts of heaven to earth. Easter means heaven and earth are not a long way removed from one another, but they overlap and interlock in a number of ways, and the God who made both heaven and earth is at work from within the world as well as outside. God shares in the pain of the world, suffers when the world says no, but is not content to let no be the final word. God is the final word. Hope is the final word. Life is the final word.

While I was preparing for this sermon I did something I don't usually do. I went back and read past Easter sermons, hoping there was an idea I could rework. Some of what I read was not bad. Some of what I read was not good. All I can say is, "Thank you for staying with me all these years." I've been doing this for about 45 Easters.

But here is what I discovered. When I preached my first Easter sermon I had never suffered through a serious death in my life. Oh, people had died, two grandmothers, and my pet dog, but no parents, no siblings, none of my best friends. 45 years later that has changed. Both my parents have died, and some of my dearest friends.

And, I have had several near death experiences, that have given me a taste of God's 'yes. 'First, my own health, but also those of friends and family. Barely over a year ago my good friend and yours, Pastor Curt Everson, was at death's door. The doctors told us to prepare for his funeral. They said no, but God said YES, and we are blessed by his presence.

In the early 70's my son Scott was a very little boy. We were inside the house of a friend celebrating a baptism, Scott wandered outside and, began to play near their above ground pool. At some point he leaned over to reach a toy and fell in. A woman who had never met him, had been watching from about 60 yards away, and when she no longer saw him insisted that her husband go look and see. It was no small task, he had to jump two fences, but he did, and when he got to the pool he found our son face down in the water. He pulled him out and began to push on his back, the oldest form of artificial respiration. About that time I wandered out, and immediately began to administer mouth to mouth...and the boy who wasn't breathing took a gasp, threw up and is alive today. The doctor said something like, "He is a very lucky boy." The truth was, we all were. Though all the conditions said no, God said yes. It was a foretaste of Easter.

We gather here today celebrating the mystery of life and the mystery of God. There is far more we don't know than that we know. We don't know how resurrection takes place, but we believe it with all our heart and soul. We don't know what is on the other side of death, but we know who is there.

A doctor told one of his patients that he was a very sick man. I don't know how long you have to live, the doctor said. The man sat stunned and then said, "Doctor, I am afraid to die. Tell me what lies on the other side."

The doctor shook his head and said, "I don't know." "You don't know? I thought you were a Christian, and you don't know what's on the other side?"

The doctor said, "I brought my dog to work this week for the first time. I'm keeping him in a small room down the hall. I'd like to have you meet him." The sick man thought it strange that instead of answering his question the doctor talked about his dog. A moment later he entered the room, without the dog.

"Where is your dog?" The man asked. "He is outside," the doctor said. "Listen." They heard the quiet sound of scratching and whining. "He's never been in this room," the doctor said as he opened the door. A young Labrador sprang into the room, wagging his tail and licking the doctor's hand.

The doctor began to pet his dog while turning to the man. "As I said, my dog has never been in this room before, yet he was anxious to come into this strange place. All he knew was that I, his master was here. It is the same for me and death. I don't know what lies ahead except that I will be with my Master."

We don't know what the future holds, but because of Easter, we know who holds the future.

Years ago Norman Habel wrote this poem:

And God said, Yes! Yes! Yes!
Yes to His broken son!
Yes to His open wound!
Yes to the empty tomb.
He said Yes! Yes! Yes!

So much in this world says no, but Easter says YES! Amen.

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