

## WHY IS EASTER SO IMPORTANT?

John 20:1-18

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

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It was Easter morning and the pastor called the usual suspects to the front of the sanctuary for the children's sermon.

He began with a question. "Who can tell me, why is Easter so important?"

A little girl, unaware she was mixing her metaphors, was sure she had the answer. "Because," she said, "On Easter morning if Jesus steps out of his tomb and sees his shadow, that means we have six more weeks of Lent."

Though we'd have to give that little girl an "A" for effort and creativity, her answer of course is wrong. But there are a lot of other people who also mix their metaphors and don't quite get the real meaning of Easter either.

For many people, Easter is all about springtime and new life. Creation is reborn and the circle of life continues.

Last month in the *BellTower* I wrote an article on the origins of the word Easter, a word which is not found anywhere in the Bible. So where did Easter come from? Two thousand years ago the Germanic tribes in northern Europe celebrated the return of spring with festivals honoring Eastre, the goddess of springtime and new life. Since the pagan festival of Eastre coincided with the Christian celebration of Christ's resurrection, it made sense for Christian missionaries to use the Pagan springtime festival celebrating new life to help their new converts grasp the significance of the new life Christ shares with us through his resurrection.

By the way, just in case you're interested; those pre Christian Germanic pagans believed their goddess Eastre took the form of a rabbit. So the Easter bunny is not a creation of Madison Avenue. German immigrants who brought the Christmas tree to America also brought the Easter bunny and the pre Christian custom of exchanging colored eggs in springtime.

Unfortunately these popular, deeply engrained cultural traditions only muddy the waters. The Easter Bunny presents and candy, along with the notion that Easter is all about springtime and new life diverts peoples' attention from the real purpose of this important holy day: celebrating God's rescue mission to save planet earth.

If you really want to summarize the contents of all the 66 books of the Bible into one easily remembered sentence it would be just that: "The Bible tells the complete story of God's rescue mission to save planet earth."

What did the Apostle Paul write in his Letter to the Romans, "The proof of God's amazing love is this, God sent Jesus into the world to rescue sinners."

You may ask, "Rescue from what?" and then before you know it you catch yourself answering your own question because you already know what the world needs to be rescued from: violence, poverty, ignorance and bigotry, not to mention all the "isms," including fanaticism, communism, fascism, and materialism. But most of all our world needs to be rescued from sin and death.

In the Genesis creation story after God created the earth he said, “Behold it is very good.” So then, if the world is “good” why does it need rescuing? Two words: “sin and death.”

Adam and Eve, representing humanity, were created to be in perfect harmony with God and his creation. But something terrible happened. They did the one thing God told them not to do; they ate the forbidden fruit from the tree of life. Why? Because the tempter lied, telling them they would become like God know the difference between good and evil. Ironically by disobeying God just the opposite happened. Now they couldn't tell the difference between good and evil. The consequence: without God's guidance right became wrong and good became evil. The result: Adam and Eve were driven out of the Garden of Eden.

These stories explaining how we got ourselves into the mess we find ourselves in are found in the first two chapters of the Bible. The rest of the Bible tells the rest of the story: God working hard to win us back.

It begins with God choosing an old man named Abraham to be the Father of a great nation. Abraham was promised his descendants would be God's Chosen People and given the Promised Land, their base of operations from which they would become a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

Unfortunately, God's chosen people chose the dysfunctional pattern set by Adam and Eve. Time and again they disobeyed and sabotaged God's rescue plans for planet earth. Instead of being part of the solution, they became the problem, just like their pagan neighbors, corrupt, violent, and materialistic. To call them back to sanity, God sent one prophet after another to remind them they were the Chosen People, but always the prophets' message was rejected and God's people would again go back to take still another bite from the forbidden fruit.

Almost hidden in the prophets' writings were occasional passages foretelling the coming of the Messiah emerging from obscurity to establish and rule God's eternal kingdom. Finally there would be peace and justice. The lion would lie down with the lamb, in other words distinctions between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the weak would melt away. Through his Messiah God would finally accomplish his plan to rescue the world from sin and death.

Last Sunday and during Holy Week the scriptures and sermons recalled how Jesus finally accomplished God's plan to rescue the world in a totally unexpected way, by sacrificing himself on the cross Jesus became the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Through his crucifixion our sins were crucified with him. Only his death could satisfy Divine justice and only Jesus who was completely innocent and without sin could take on the sins of the world.

But on that first Good Friday the news went out to his enemies and disciples alike: Jesus was roundly defeated. His mission to planet earth failed.

In 1815 Napoleon, the Emperor of the French faced the Duke of Wellington at Waterloo, in a battle that would decide the fate of Europe.

In those days, before radio or even the telegraph, news was carried by riders on horses who'd gallop short distances at breakneck speed to the next rider who'd carry the news to the next until the last rider got to the English Channel. Then the Royal Navy took over. Signal ships were strategically placed across the channel from the coast of

Belgium to the White Cliffs of Dover, England. The first ship would signal the next until it got to the last ship off the English coast.

Just before the last signal ship received the news of the battle's outcome a sudden fog rolled in making it impossible for the naval officer on the beach to read the signal flags through his telescope. Finally the fog lifted some and revealed the heart breaking news: "Wellington Defeated."

However, just as quickly as it came the fog suddenly lifted. Looking again through his telescope the officer realized the original message was not completely received. Now the signal flags read, "Welling Defeated Napoleon."

That brave pastor asked the children, "Why is Easter so important?" because Easter is so important. What happened that first Easter morning has consequences for the world God so loved. On Good Friday when his body was placed in his tomb it seemed Jesus was defeated. But on Easter morning Jesus when rose from the dead and stepped out of that tomb death was defeated and all of creation was raised up to new life. The Good News Christ is risen means we are now free from the power of sin and death for Jesus promised, "I am the resurrection and the life. If you believe in me though you are dead, yet shall you live. If you believe in me you will not perish, but have eternal life."

Question, Why is Easter so important to you? I'm sure you realize Easter is not just a spring festival celebrating the cycle of life. Christianity is not just another nature religion. Instead Christianity celebrates the supernatural mystery of God enveloping creation with power and love, bringing life to what was once dead, buried and mourned.

Certainly Christ's resurrection guarantees that we will not perish, but have eternal life. The kingdom of heaven is waiting for all who believe and trust in Christ.

But what about the here and now? Does Easter impact your life, in your home, school, work place and community? Is your life Exhibit A that Christ is risen? Have you denied yourself, picked up your cross and followed Jesus? Are you living up to your potential as a child of God and disciple of Christ, sacrificing your time, talent and energy and being a blessing to your neighbor in need? Do you struggle daily to put yourself under God and bring peace and justice to a world that needs both? Do you love to tell the story of Jesus and his love to anyone who'll listen?

Two thousand years ago there was a cosmic earthquake, the stone rolled away and Jesus stepped out of his tomb and into our lives. He is Risen, He is risen indeed. Welcome him into your life and let him raise you up as well. You don't need to die first. Resurrection is especially for the living. Are you among the living? Then live knowing you are given the new life only Jesus can give.