

Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

March 31, 2024

First Reading: Acts 10: 34-43

Responsive Reading: Psalm 118: 14-24

Epistle Reading: 1 Corinthians 15: 1-11

Gospel Reading: John 20: 1-18

Sermon: The Rest of the Story

By Rev. Jim Gardner

Summary: He died, He was buried, and He rose again according to the scriptures. Film at eleven.

And Paul said in Galatians, “As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let them be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a bondservant of Christ. But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

The story of Jesus Christ started long before His birth in a manger. The entire theme of the Old Testament is that mankind left to his own devices could never get it right. The Old Testament prophets told of the necessity of and the sure promise that a new order with a new hero/messiah would arrive on the scene to restore God's creation. Isaiah said, "And in this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees...He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces; the rebuke of His people He will take away from all the earth. For the Lord has spoken. And it will be said in that day: 'Behold, this is our God; We have waited for Him, and He will save us,'"

The story of Jesus was a plan, announced in advance by prophets, then lived out in the life of Jesus and culminated in His triumphant entry on Palm Sunday proclaiming His identity as the predicted new King of Kings. Then His rejection by the people and by the authorities, His crucifixion, His verified death and burial, and finally His conquering death and damnation with that empty tomb. This is His story and recorded for all posterity to be made aware of. This story is not a tale of Paul Bunyon or Robinhood, this is the gospel (pun intended). This is verified, and as much as some detractors would like to dismiss it, it is un-dismissible and un-deniable. Jesus Christ lived and

reigned and lives still and always will, even to the end of the age.

In our lesson from Acts, Peter, a dyed-in-the-wool Jew, has just had a vision where God instructed him to kill and eat “unclean” animals. When Peter complained to God, God told Peter not to call anything made by God as “common” or “unclean”.

Anything that God creates is good. God does not make mistakes and God does not make junk. To Peter’s great shock this not only meant food but also people. What!?! Gentiles are as loved in God’s eyes as Jews, ouch!

This might have shocked Peter, but he took it to heart and went to Gentiles that sent for him to help them in their faith. Peter said to them, “In truth I perceive that God shows no partiality. But in every nation whoever fears Him and works righteousness is accepted by Him,” Peter then went on to explain the events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and just how it could be verified by witnesses, of which he was one. This was the story they needed to hear. The same is true for us today.

In our lesson from Corinthians, Paul not only reiterates the story of Jesus, but he expounds on the scope of Jesus and how Jesus can take the worst of the worst, i.e. a persecutor of the church and turn him into the most prolific evangelist ever. If Jesus could use Paul, and He certainly did, just think what He can do with you and me. Paul says, “But by the grace of God I

am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God that was in me,” Paul did not take credit for what he was able to do but rather he gave God the credit.

Our gospel from John is the beloved story of the open tomb and the different reactions of the participants. The two disciples raced to the tomb with who we assume to be John out running Peter but did not go in and then Katy-bar-the-door Peter running in and then John, “who believed”. Next Mary looked into the eyes of Jesus but did not recognize Him until He said her name. How many of us miss the message until Jesus says our name?

Just before this scene was the recounting of the burial by the rich man Joseph of Arimathea, and Nicodemus a pharisee. I saw something on Facebook although not true it was cute. It seemed that Pilot was talking to Joseph of Arimathea and asked, “Joe, you are of a rich family, and you spent a lot of money on carving out a tomb for your family. Why would you give it to this guy named Jesus?” To which Joe answered, “No big deal, it is only for the weekend.” OK, not true but cute.

That tomb only held the body of Christ the weekend, but that weekend holds mankind for all eternity.

All right, that is the story, but the rest of the story is revealed in the life of Paul. If Jesus could use Paul, a self-confessed murder

of Christians. How much more can He use us? We are the rest of the story.

When this story is finally over and we live in a new Heaven and a new Earth and they roll the credits on the large screen, will you be able to find your name there? I think you just might. God is holding auditions right now.

Hallelujah and Amen!