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EASTER

The national Presbyterian Church

Christ Alive! Unconquered!

1 Corinthians 15:1-6, 51-57; Luke 24:1-12

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At one point in his book, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoevsky describes two brothers, Ivan and Alyosha discussing the existence and nature of God. And in this discussion, Ivan says this:

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for. That in the world's finale, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed.

That it will not only become possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.”

To put it simply Ivan tells his brother, that it in the grandest sense, in the end God will sort everything out; that all will be well that the story-line of the earth as we know it, with so much pain sorrow; and evil tragedy -- that seem to have no resolution, will one day be over, and another story -- a wonderful story, the story behind the present story, the story that undergirds and underlies our human story -- will win the day!

This is something, I believe, that we sometimes can catch a glimpse of within human history, in smaller stories -- that point us precisely in this direction. The story of Louie Zamperini is one of those stories for me -- a story that provides “a divine hint” of what is to come.

Some of you may have read the book by Laura Hillenbrand, or seen the movie, about his remarkable life. It's called called “Unbroken.”

Louie was an Olympic athlete for the United States in 1936 in Berlin, finishing eighth in the 5,000 meters, and actually meeting Hitler!

But in 1941, with the outbreak of war, he left running behind to join the air force as a bombardier. In 1943, on a search and rescue mission his B-24 bomber had mechanical difficulties and went down in the Pacific. And for the next eight weeks, Zamperini and one other crew member miraculously survived on a raft at sea, only to find themselves rescued and becoming prisoners of war! For the next 2 years, Louie was repeatedly tormented, abused tortured by his guards, but nevertheless, survived.

In and of itself, this part of the story is quite remarkable (and this is the part told in the movie)

But what the movie omits is equally remarkable -- if not more so.

Following the war -- like many who have been through war to this day - Louie found it hard to not to forget the hell that he'd experienced, he couldn't escape filling up with anger at his

treatment; he couldn't escape the nightmares that came pretty much every night. More than that, he couldn't escape the addictive power of alcohol that was taking over his life, and destroying him in a way that the ocean and prison had not been able to do during the war itself.

And this went on for 4 years, until in 1949 things changed. Billy Graham came to Los Angeles where Louie lived; and his wife, Cynthia, dragged him to the meetings, where finally after resenting even being there, Louie **DELIBERATELY AND SPECIFICALLY MADE A DECISION** – to give his life back to God, and to ask Jesus -- by the Spirit -- to come in to his life!

And then something even more remarkable happened. The HELL that had begun to control his life began to lose its grip. The nightmares stopped. The need for alcohol began to disappear. And within a year, he realized that his anger had been replaced with a sense of love and forgiveness for his abusers many of whom he visited deliberately remarkably, in the years ahead.

So here's this person in a really dark long painful tunnel which he had done nothing to deserve for years there's no end in sight. And from a human perspective he has every reason to believe that there never would be an end -- no light at the end of the tunnel. But against all the odds in the end he comes out the other side; and all is well.

And surely that's how we all want it to be. That's the story we hunger for -- for ourselves.

But of course, it doesn't always turn out that way. For All the Great Stories about suffering and evil, and transformation of evil-into-good, there are countless other stories which head in a completely different direction: stories of human suffering and enormous evil that seem to have no rhyme or reason, or silver lining, or end, at all. Stories

- of refugees fleeing for their lives
- of babies drowning at sea
- of bombs falling on the innocent
- of women children starving to death
- of accidents and injustices, and tragedies
- alongside all the minor struggles set-backs of ordinary every-day life.

All of which can leave us wondering about the truth:

- Which of these stories, if any, tells us the ultimate truth about good, and evil, and God, and about life itself
- Which story wins the day?

Is it the realistic down-to-earth story?

- That suffering is meaningless and arbitrary?
- That this is a world with-out a God: – or worse:
- a world with-a-God -- but only a God who is weak or loveless?

Is this the true story?

Or is the story we hope for, like Louie Zameprini's story, the one that is fundamentally true? Telling us that suffering evil, even suffering that seems endless, and evil that has no apparent rhyme or reason, can and will be redeemed in the end? All suffering, of any kind, made sense of?

What Christians believe, and have always believed is that the answer to this question lies within the story that brings us together today: the story of Good Friday and Easter; the story of the Life-

Death-and-Resurrection of Jesus. Not as a fairy tale, or myth. Not as fiction, but as fact! A story that takes place in real history. A series of historical events, occurring somewhere between AD 26 and AD36, when a man – known to us not only from the Bible, but in Roman History, as Pontius Pilate, was the Roman governor of Judea.

What Christians believe, is that (1) this is the story that God has given us to be the filter and lens through which the Truthfulness of ALL the other stories of history must be seen measured. And (2) that Christ's is the life to which we must cling, if his wonderful story is to become our story too.

This is the story told for us in the 4 Biblical accounts of Jesus' life and that is summarized for us not only in The Apostles' Creed (probably the most widely used early summary of Christian faith), but in our Scripture passage in 1 Corinthians 15.

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul tells the Good Friday Easter story like this – he says:

I handed over to you as of first importance

- *That Christ died! – that Christ died for our sins -- in accordance with the Scripture;*
- *And that he was buried,*
- *AND (not only that but) that he was raised on the third day -- in accordance with the Scripture*
- *And that he appeared to more than 500 people at one time*

In other words – what Paul is saying, what the Bible is saying, what God is saying I the Bible through Paul, is that this is the story, above all other stories, that must never forget. It's of primary importance for our lives! The story is this: ***that God the creator entered the world as one of us and experienced death! A despicable injustice, with excruciating pain.***

It's a tragic story; it's a terrible story; it's an awful story, it's an indictment against humankind! Especially if that's all there is -- if that's where it ends. But St. Paul tells us that this is not the end! The story doesn't end there, but goes on to say something else:

That even though Jesus really died and was buried, YET on the third day he rose from the dead – came back to life again.

And in that moment demonstrated, that even when the very worst that could ever happen in the world *actually happened* (human beings putting to death their creator redeemer); even at the moment of the greatest evil in human history -- YET at *that* moment, the power of evil and death and suffering wielded no ultimate power over him whatsoever.

IT WAS AS IF in the act of the resurrection -- on that 1st Easter morning -- that God was boldly shouting out from heaven, to all who would hear: . . . Something like this:

- "FRIENDS: WHEN YOU SIN -- KNOW THIS! -- I have suffered for your sins. Whatever price needs to be paid to redeem your life and free you from guilt, so that evil doesn't triumph over you personally -- I've paid it! Fully! Finally! Forever!"

IT WAS AS IF in the act of the resurrection -- on that 1st Easter morning -- that God was boldly shouting out from heaven and from the cross, to all who would hear:

- "AND WHEN YOU SUFFER -- KNOW THIS TOO: that I would never have made you just to abandon you. I know what it's like to be in the darkest place of

all -- I have suffered too! Not merely in theory, but in fact! Of my own free choice; out of love for you. Facing the pain of indescribable alienation between God the father and God the Son, in addition to sheer torture at the hands of men."

IT WAS AS IF -- in the act of the resurrection -- on that 1st Easter morning, that God was boldly shouting out from heaven and the empty tomb, to all who would hear:

- "FRIENDS! WHEN THERE'S NO LIGHT TO BE SEEN AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL -- KNOW THIS TOO: that the resurrection of Jesus, is my declaration to the whole world, that I will have the last word! That "The last word will never belong to evil and suffering, but only to my redeeming power."

But here's the thing. For this to be true for us too. We have to hitch our wagon to the Risen Son! Remember, Paul begins his great chapter on the resurrection like this (1 Cor.15:1-2):

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you.

Like Louie Zamperini, we have a choice to make

- We can hold on to our lives, to the stories the world tells, to the stories we tell ourselves about who we are
- OR we can let go, and make Jesus' story the central story in our lives -- the story of his life, his death, his resurrection, allowing it to function as the filter lens through which we see ourselves understand the world.

Or, to put it in terms of Louie Zamperini's story: like the B-24 Bomber that he climbed into one day and that faced enemy fire time and again, only to let him down, we need to take a step of faith and climb inside Jesus, as it were, and let him carry us wherever he wishes, knowing -- because of Good Friday and Easter -- that his life and power will never let us down! That no matter what flack we face, even if it feels like hell itself, he'll give us the ride of our lives, and make sure we get safely to the right destination

In real life, I our time, Christians in Egypt are doing this as I speak today. Last week, after the bombings of 2 Christian churches in Egypt, the president of the Evangelical Seminary in Cairo, Dr. Atef Gendy, who preached here at National couple of years ago, sent out this message: from a very, very dark and uncertain place:

As many of you are no doubt aware, our Palm Sunday celebrations were sadly shaken by bombs exploding at the Orthodox churches in Tanta and in Alexandria, causing many casualties. (DR: this comment is highly understated -- at least 27 are dead from the attacks).

The Egyptian nation and the Christian community specifically, have been deeply shocked by what has happened.

However, as we recall in Holy Week (DR: the “story behind the story”!), all the sufferings and humiliation Jesus Christ endured for our sakes, the voice of the Egyptian Church in return is clearly heard through such incidents:

We thank God that death was not the last word, and evil did not prevail.

We are an Easter people and rejoice in the fact that Jesus rose from the tomb, conquering death and opening up the way to everlasting life.

As an Easter people, we will not give in.

Says Ivan to Alyosha

I believe like a child that suffering will be healed and made up for. That in the world's finale, something so precious will come to pass that it will suffice for all hearts, for the comforting of all resentments, for the atonement of all the crimes of humanity, for all the blood that they've shed. That it will not only become possible to forgive but to justify all that has happened.”

As Christians, we do not merely speculate about the hope described in Alyosha’s faith. This is not mere “wishful thinking.” But in the resurrection of Jesus on the first Easter Sunday, in his absolute victory over suffering and death, we claim that God has given us an eternal story by which He lets us know what it is true!

May you know this truth personally today by placing your faith, and life into the hands of the Risen Jesus, so that his story becomes your story – forever.

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