

“The Never-Ending Story”

Matthew 28:1-10

Series: The Story Chapter 27: The Resurrection

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Høglund

The Woodside Church

October 25, 2015

Two years ago I opened an envelope to find a handwritten letter on a yellow piece of paper. It reads:

Dear Friends, Happy Easter!

I have wanted to write this letter for the past several years. I wanted you to know how your church has become a cherished part of my Easter Celebration.

I moved into the Makefield Crossing development in 1999. One Easter morning I decided to go outside to get the newspaper. I thought I would read it before attending mass at my parish St. Ignatius. The sun was just coming up and I was thinking what a beautiful Easter morning it was. The neighborhood was dark and the air was still. Suddenly, the silence was filled with the joyful strains of the hymn “Jesus Christ is Risen Today.”

I was overcome and stood transfixed on my front step. I realized the music must be coming from your church. I shared my story with family and friends that day. It was the perfect beginning of Easter.

Needless to say, I have positioned myself on that same front porch every year since at exactly 6 am. Through wind, cold, rain or spring breeze I eagerly await those first notes proclaiming the resurrection of our Lord. In my mind, Easter doesn't officially begin until I hear that hymn.

So please know that I will be sharing your joy again this year. I join you in the celebration of this great feast day and I thank you for sharing your music with your neighbors. God bless you all!

Sincerely Sonya

There were a lot of cold and cloudy, dark and dreary Sunrise services when I wasn't sure the sun would come up. Sometimes I wasn't sure if even God was up. Yet, as frigid as it gets, I agree with Sonya – Easter doesn't officially begin until I hear the trumpets sound and shout: “He is Risen! He is Risen indeed!” That news is so good it's worth waking up the neighbors. That's because Sonya and I know the story doesn't end on Friday, it doesn't end with crucifixion, death and burial. We get up in the dark and wait for the sun to rise because we know the Son rose.

The women who got up before dawn on the first Easter didn't know that. The disciples, hiding in the dark behind locked doors didn't know that. For them, the story was over. They saw the beatings and the blood, the cold and lifeless body, the linen shroud, the never-used tomb, the stone that sealed the entrance and their fate. The story comes to an abrupt and tragic end. All their hopes and dreams die with Jesus. The healings stop. The miracles cease. The adoring crowds disperse. The kingdom of God disappears. One week ago they marched like a mighty uprising of the people into the Holy City. One week ago they cheered for His revolution of

redemption. One week ago they shouted for God's kingdom to come and His will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. One week ago the story of His victory was just getting started.

Now the story is over. And if His story is over, so is ours. Prophets, priests and kings couldn't save us. Temple, Law and sacrifice all failed to defeat sin and bring us back to God. Now the last best hope we have for salvation is lost. If Jesus is powerless to stop sin, so are we. If Jesus is beaten by the devil, so are we. If Jesus' story ends in death, so does ours. From the beginning of the Story, from the Garden of Eden, God has been working to get us back. The death of God's Son means His plan failed. So our destiny is not just the grave. The death of Jesus means our stories all end in eternal separation from God.

I don't know what the women are thinking as they make their way in the dark to the tomb. I know they are not waiting like Sonya for a joyful trumpet to break the silence. They simply want to pay their dead Master one final visit, anoint his body with the customary burial spices, and quietly make their way back to Galilee. Then something shocking happens which tells them the story isn't over.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men. The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples: 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you." (Matthew 28:2-7)

In an instant every obstacle to God's Story melts away. The tough Roman soldiers guarding a dead man's tomb fall like dead men. The solid stone, intended to seal Him in, is toppled over. The cave that traps His body shakes violently. Even our old enemy death cannot hold Him down. When the women look inside the tomb His body is already gone. Yet an empty tomb proves nothing. One more thing must happen.

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me." (Matthew 28:8-10)

Jesus is alive! They see Him. They hear Him. They hold Him. They worship Him. Then they run to tell the disciples. Peter and John run to the tomb. There was a whole lot of running going on that first Easter. Why? It dawned on them that the Story is not over. The true Story is just beginning. In fact, God's Story is never-ending.

God's never-ending Story means **My Earthly Story is Different**. Because Jesus lives I never have to face life alone. When Mary sits by the empty tomb crying for the missing body of her Lord, Jesus comes to her, calls her name and dries her tears. When the two disciples take a twilight walk to Emmaus feeling depressed over the crucifixion, Jesus Himself joins them. They do not recognize Him. Yet when He speaks and teaches them the Scriptures, their grief lifts and

their hearts burn with hope. When the disciples tremble behind locked doors for fear that they will also wind up on crosses, Jesus appears and says, "Peace be with you!" (John 20:21). When Thomas doubts their story, Jesus shows up and says, "Touch my wounds and believe." When Peter is discouraged and ashamed for denying his Lord three times, Jesus three times tells him, "Feed my sheep." What Isaiah prophesied long ago, what the angel said to Joseph before His birth is still true: Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us.

My earthly story and your earthly story will include episodes of discouragement and despair, chapters of doubt and depression. There will be scenes of stress, loss and grief. There will be moments of anger, fears and tears. These happen to all of us. The Resurrection does not mean these parts are edited out of our story. The Resurrection means God will be with us in all the twists and turns of our story. The Resurrection tells us our fears are not facts, our flaws are not fatal, our failures are not final.

This fall I received an email from a Woodside member who is discovering strength and receiving hope from God as he goes through some difficult challenges. He gave me permission to share this with you.

Good morning, I just wanted to reach out and let you know how much "the Story" has helped me through a very difficult time in my life. Going through this struggle has beat me down tremendously, emotional and physical. Areas where I thought I wouldn't have problems proved me wrong. Family and friends that promise to be there for me through anything seem to turn the other way. Coming to church and hearing about the Story has provided me with a comfort and understanding that truly ALL of life's problems are answered in the Bible. I just want to say thank you, the Story has opened up a new world for me and my love for God. Thanks again.

God's never-ending Story means I can face all life's challenges knowing God is with me and God's in charge. That makes my earthly story different.

The Resurrection also means **My Eternal Story is Different**. My life-story no longer ends with death. The Onion is an online magazine that writes comical, fictional news stories. In one headline it reported: "World Death Rate Holding Steady at 100 Percent." The article said:

World Health Organization officials expressed disappointment Monday at the group's finding that, despite the enormous efforts of doctors, rescue workers and other medical professionals worldwide, the global death rate remains constant at 100 percent. Death, a total shutdown of all life functions, has long been considered humanity's number one health concern. Responsible for 100 percent of all recorded fatalities worldwide, the condition has no cure.

"I was really hoping, what with all those new radiology treatments, rescue helicopters, aerobics TV shows and what have you, that we might at least make a dent in it this year," WHO Director General Dr. Gernst Bladt said. "Unfortunately, it would appear that the death rate remains constant and total, as it has since the dawn of time."¹

¹ The Onion, "World Death Rate Still Holding Steady at 100 Percent" (1-22-97)

Death always wins – every time. No matter how long we prolong life, it still ends in death. And that can cause us a great deal of fear and worry.

This year the New York Times did a piece on television commentator Larry King's obsession with death.

His day begins with reading obituaries, and he ponders "who will give the eulogy at his funeral." He smiles as he thinks it might be Bill Clinton, and then his face becomes blank. "But I won't be there to see it." He has had "a heart attack, quintuple bypass, prostate cancer, diabetes, and seven divorces." He was 77 years old when the television news station CNN dropped him, and when this happened he really became aware that there will come a day when he dies. To move against aging and death, he takes four hormone pills for human growth each day. He plans on his body to be frozen so that someday he will live again. The New York Times writer reports: "It's nuts, concedes King—but at least it gives him a shred of hope." Larry King says, "Other people have no hope."²

The Resurrection means we have hope. We don't have to cling to this life. We don't need to fear death. God's never-ending Story means our stories can go on forever. Contrast Larry King's fear of death with the Apostle Paul. He is so convinced about Jesus' victory over death He actually taunts and trash talks at death.

"Death has been swallowed up in victory." "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (I Corinthians 15:54-57)

The Onion is wrong. Jesus is the one case where death did not win. God's never-ending Story means that our stories go on forever. And not just our stories.

The Resurrection means **Everyone's Story Can Be Different**. All four Gospels end with Jesus telling the disciples to tell God's Story to everyone.

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18-20)

God wants to bless the whole world. That's His plan from the beginning. Now that Jesus has defeated sin, death and the devil, He sends His disciples out to bless the world with the Good News that people from all nations can come home to God. For two thousand years, followers of Jesus have been sharing God's Story. We want everyone to know that their earthly story and their eternal story can be different.

² King's morbid fixation, The Week, (9-11-15)

Tori Vouk is the daughter of Kurt and Elizabeth Vouk. She was baptized here at Woodside and you've taught her God's Word through worship services, Sunday School, Adventure Club, Vacation Bible School, Confirmation and youth group. Today she is a high school student who leads worship at Higher Ground and serves in Senior High youth group. She said recently,

Woodside has changed my life in so many ways. It's so hard to count all of the ways that I've been influenced throughout the huge community that we've made here. I absolutely love being able to go up on stage to sing with all of my friends in the band and it's just such an interesting feeling to be able to know that you're coming together to praise the one who loves you the most.

Woodside has, I believe, made me a better person. I think I'm able to empathize with people more. I'm able to be more compassionate to others and I really love just putting forth the love that has been shown to me in this community. It's such a great feeling to know that I'm able to pass that on and to share that love that's been shared with me.

I can't think of a better description of the Christian life: to share the love that's been shared with me. Woodside exists for this one purpose: to share God's never-ending love Story with as many people as possible. That's why we built this building. That's why we offer our ministries and missions, worship services and Growth Groups. That's why we ask everyone to make a commitment to Share the Story and God's work at Woodside in 2016. We don't give for us. We give for others like Tori Vouk, Greg Ritz, Lena Lattanzi, Rachael Tresch, Scott Burgess, Anthony Mannarino, Susan Sciarratta, you and countless others beyond these walls who still don't know Jesus. We want to help Jesus write a new life-story for them.

There are even people who are not members of Woodside who understand this. I received a letter from someone who occasionally worships with us. Inside was a check for \$300 and a simple piece of paper which read, "Doug, Because God said so!" When I wrote a thank you email I was so curious I asked what the note meant. She replied,

Being retired and on a fixed income I'm what you might call a money worrier. God said give \$300 to Woodside church and get my husband's support. I hemmed and hawed and prayed for 24 hours. The next morning I asked my husband. He said if God said so then do it! I wrote the check and put it in the mail box. The check wasn't even out of the mailman's pouch when I was told by my husband's neurosurgeon's billing office that they were going to adjust our bill for \$479 to \$179!!! God is good!!! "May the God of hope fill you all with joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" Romans 15:13.

It can feel risky to step out in faith and give and tithe. Yet when we give to God, He meets our needs in ways we can't imagine. When we give to God we join Him in writing a new life-story for others that goes on forever.

Every Easter morning Sonya loves to sit on her porch and hear the Woodside brass proclaim the Resurrection. One of the trumpeters who played every Sunrise service since the first one in 1994 was Clay Hayden. There were many frigid Easter sunrises when Clay feared his lips

would freeze to the mouthpiece. Yet somehow he and the other brass players joyfully announced the arrival of Easter morning to the delight of Sonya and the rest who gathered.

What many of you do not know is that Clay Hayden was baptized as an adult here at Woodside. Before that he was not a believer. Recently his first wife Pam told me Clay used to ridicule her faith. He said there was no proof for the existence of God. He thought the Bible was a fairy tale. I asked her, "What changed? How did he become such a strong believer in Jesus?" She said, "I don't know." I do. You, Woodside, lovingly shared God's story with Clay. Over time he became a devoted follower of Jesus. He fell in love with God's Word. He came to love the Bible so much that for several years he quietly gave offerings to make sure every new member of Woodside received an NIV Study Bible. Many of you use Bible's given by Clay. He wanted everyone to fall in love with God's Story.

On Thursday, October 1st, I learned that Clayton Hayden was suddenly called home to be with the Lord. I will truly miss him. Clay loved God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength and his neighbor as himself. I will miss the deep theological discussions we shared and the deep laughs we enjoyed. I will miss his trumpet joyfully proclaiming "Jesus Christ is risen today."

But Easter will still come. And Jesus is still risen. And because Jesus lives, I know Clay lives. Because Jesus' story is never-ending, I know Clay's story is never-ending and I will see him again. And because Jesus will one day come again at the sound of the trumpet, I know Clay will be among the trumpets playing that joyful song.

Share the Story. Don't let God's never-ending story end with you.