

Luke 24:1-12

“Most Famous Words to live by”

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Rev. Heike Werder

The Congregational Church of Needham

A while ago I came across a wonderful website put together by an online magazine called SMITH. It is a collection of six-word memoirs -- people both famous and ordinary trying to distill their lives down to six words about what is most important or distinguished or interesting about them. Everyone is invited to participate, and there is an ongoing gallery of the most recent offerings. You can add yourself to the website and share your own six-word memoir with the world if you like.

The site I understand has also spawned several books, which collect the best of the stories; the first was called “Not Quite What I Was Planning,” and the most recent is titled “It All Changed in an Instant.” I find it fascinating, both how popular the site is and also what a challenge it is to try to fit something about our essence into such a narrow form.

Some six-word stories are poignant: “I still make coffee for two,” writes someone recovering from a breakup. Some are clever: “Well, I thought it was funny,” is the offering of comedian Stephen Colbert.

Some are tragic: the inspiration for the project was an old tale about Ernest Hemingway, who, challenged to write a story in six words, is said to have come up with this: “For Sale: baby shoes, never worn.”

So I have been thinking what I would write to sum up my life story so far. Looking back at growing up in East Germany, I thought: “It could have been much worse!” Coming to America could be summed up: “The best thing I ever did!” I know - not very original but true to my story.

All this made me think that, for all the joy and fanfare of Easter, for all the complexity and mystery of our whole religious life together, and for all the billions and billions of words we use to try and explain it all, Christianity itself has a six-word autobiography, and it is this: **Jesus is risen from the dead.**

There are a quarter million words, more or less, in the Bible, and not one of them makes sense without these six words. There are roughly 2.1 billion Christians in the world, and not one of us has a thing to say **without** these six words.

These are the words that the breathless women carried from the empty tomb back to the other disciples who at first thought it an idle tale. These are the words that have been passed from person to person, from community to community, every day since then -- in secret, in triumph, in darkness, in celebration.

It is these six words that have taken us from the scattered, broken and lost people of Good Friday to the largest religion in the world. It is these six words that have found countless individuals whose lives were already dead -- broken by pain and suffering, by despair and darkness -- and given them new life.

These are the words that are whispered at bedsides and shouted from rooftops and shared at dinner tables and workplaces and in neighborhoods. These are the words that have been forbidden by governments both ancient and modern, and yet somehow they have still been spoken, still been shared.

Jesus is risen from the dead.

These are the words that the martyrs sang as they were being burned at the stake, fed to the lions. These are the words that Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German martyr who opposed the Nazis and was forced into seclusion, taught his students in the secret seminary he managed to hold.

These are the words that Oscar Romero was speaking as he was gunned down while celebrating the Eucharist in El Salvador.

These are the words that Martin Luther King Jr. held fast to as he opposed the violent racism of our culture, the words that inspire Desmond Tutu's work in South Africa; these are even the words that Mother Teresa admitted had lost meaning for her, at the end of her ministry. And yet she so believed in their meaning for the world that she did not abandon her work with the poor.

Jesus is risen from the dead.

Are these words true? If they are not, Paul says to the Corinthians, "we have lived in vain and should be the most pitied people of all."

If they are not, then millions -- maybe billions -- of people have gone to their graves unnecessarily. And millions -- maybe billions -- more continue to live in the tombs of whatever darkness and despair overshadows them. If they are not, then we are doomed to very short and pointless lives, and to be defeated by the suffering that we continue to see all around us. To be defeated by death itself.

But this is not our story, right?

Of course, we hear all the time that Jesus' resurrection cannot be proven, because nobody saw it; that it cannot be true, because people still suffer, they still die; that we cannot believe it, because it seems so utterly unbelievable.

I have no logic which is adequate to convince anyone of the truth of Easter. If I were to argue the hard evidence for the resurrection in a court of law I would expect to lose. That is because Easter is neither a logical proposition nor an historic event. Easter is an experience, from that first morning to the present.

How many lives have been transformed, starting with Mary Magdalene and her companions, falling to the ground in utter shock, upon hearing these six words; Jesus is risen from the dead? How could we possibly explain the ways that billions of hearts have been strangely transformed upon the understanding of these words?

What could we possibly use to measure the impact that these six words have had upon the world -- the ways in which forgiveness, joy, reconciliation, self-giving love and charity have wrought miracles and abundance on the face of this earth in the time since we have first heard that Jesus is risen from the dead?

Is it true? I love this little vignette that the catholic writer and theologian Megan McKenna included in one of her books (*Not Counting Women and Children: Neglected Stories from the Bible*).

She wrote: "Once in a parish mission when I was studying the scriptures (Luke 7) with a large group, someone called out harshly, 'Have you ever brought someone back from the dead?' I had been saying that life happens when we are interrupted, and that some of the most powerful acts of resurrection happen to the least likely people; that we are the people of resurrection and hope, called to live passionately and compassionately with others, to defy death, to forgive, and to bring others back into the community, to do something that is life-giving, that fights death and needless suffering. And then this challenge from the back of the church.

"My response was 'Yes.' I went on to say, 'Every time I bring hope into a situation, every time I bring joy that shatters despair, every time I forgive others and give them back dignity and the possibility of a future with me and others in the community, every time I listen to others and affirm them and their life, every time I speak the truth in public, every time I confront injustice — yes — I bring people back from the dead.' "

C.S. Lewis, a convert to the Christian faith later in life, once said, "I believe in Christianity as I believe that the Sun has risen, not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else."

This is the story of our lives, the story of the life of the world, the story of life itself. It is the story of how life is stronger than death, how God's love for us is stronger than death. It is, in the end, the only story that there is.

And so, in Easter, we hear these six words again: Jesus is risen from the dead.

How will these words change your story? Where in the essence of who you are do you hear the call to new life -- to come out of the tomb you've been sealed in, the tomb of fear or the tomb of hopelessness or the tomb of dreams that have been lost or delayed? Where are you looking for the living among the dead? How will you receive this news that has been handed from life to life, from heart to heart, from age to age, that is now handed again to you?

And how will these words change the world? What does our story of our faith still have to say to a world at war, a culture at odds, a people in pain? How will we be sure that they will hear this - our story of hope?

Every day we write our story again, and we say that it is no less true today than it was on the first day; it is no less miraculous today than it was on the first day -- no less shocking, no less joyful, no less important, no less life-changing and meaningful.

Jesus is risen from the dead! Believe it, live it, share it with the world! Amen