

“Tell”

Texts: Psalm 90:1-2; Matthew 24:1-10; I Corinthians 15: selected verses

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For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. I Corinthians 15:3

Above all else, the word for today is thanks to you and gratitude to God for God's claim on my life, for allowing me to work among you. I am one grateful woman today. There are not words to express my gratitude to and admiration for my colleague in ministry at Morningside, the Reverend Chris Henry. This past week, Chris celebrated the second anniversary of his ordination to the Gospel ministry. I know you're surprised to hear that; you thought he'd been ordained 30 or 40 years. God brought you to us, Chris, and you along with the Session, along with the inimitable Walter Huff and Melinda Sandkam, will lead this church on to greater and greater things. We will keep in our prayers the Pulpit Nominating Committee that has been elected to find you next senior pastor, who is out there somewhere. We don't know what his or her name is yet, but even now, God is preparing that person to come and be your pastor.

I am married to a very fine man whose sees to my best interests every opportunity he gets. Several weeks ago, when he noticed that I was beginning to manifest signs of anxiety over my farewell sermon, he did what husbands of anxious wives usually do. He went online. An hour or two later he came into the den where I was sitting, reading the newspaper. Beaming with joy, he handed me a 12 page document and said, “This might help.” It was entitled “George Washington’s Farewell Address.” Interestingly, Washington wrote it to eliminate himself as a candidate for a third term as president of our country. The speech, though eloquent, was never delivered but was published in a journal in September of 1796. I am going to preach my own sermon and leave Washington's Farewell Address to Washington, but I will share with you one line: “In withdrawing from service,” President Washington said, “I am influenced by no diminution of zeal for your future interests, no deficiency of grateful respect. . . I am supported by the full conviction that the step [I am taking] is compatible with both [my deepest respect and my confidence about your future interests.]”

I have served five different congregations in the course of the past three decades. One of my jobs as a leader is to know what time it is, and it has seemed to me that now is the time for me to retire from full-time parish ministry. It has seemed to me that soon will be the time for Morningside to welcome a new leader who will take you into new places, where God is already at work preparing the soil for you to do the planting for future growth in the kingdom of God. My leaving does not indicate any lack of zeal on my part for this wonderful church and its future, but rather a sense that I have given to you all I have to give.

What a wonderful, surprise-a-minute adventure we have had together at Morningside! The changes that we have undergone have taken place in a relatively brief period of time. In another era, they might have take 10 or 15 years. We are living in a time of rapid change, but it was also past time for Morningside to get up and get going into a new century. That meant a few things had to be fixed fast. Remember how the roof leaked and the Fellowship Hall carpet got soaked every time it rained? Remember that a tree once grew from the steeple of Morningside Church? Remember that Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus could be seen in the watermarks on the sanctuary ceiling? Remember that the boiler had to be turned on and off manually? Sweeping the sidewalks on Sunday morning was a part of the pastor's weekly routine. There was no elevator. There was no budget for mission. There was no Melinda. There was no Chris. There was no Bible Study, no Christmas pageant, no Board of Deacons, but we had Walter, and we had the choir! Yes! Most of what was broken is fixed now. Also, our membership has dramatically increased, and we give thanks to God for that.

But what I'm most grateful for are not the things that have been fixed or the number of new friends who have come to be a part of our community. What means the most to me are those things that are intangible - the kindness, the joy, the authenticity that permeate our life together and our work in the world. I'm most grateful for the long-timers who kept the faith during the lean years. I am most grateful for those of you who, when you came on board for this new chapter, came with your sleeves rolled up, asking, "How can I help? How can I volunteer? What can I do for my neighbor?" I am most grateful for the surge in the number of children and their families who have become a part of our life together, because the church is the place where the gospel is preached and the story of God's unchanging love is told. We are the stewards of the cumulative wisdom of the great Judeo-Christian tradition. I think it's working with these kids. A Morningside mom told me that on one recent Wednesday evening when she was dropping off her son for children's choir practice, she asked him why he thought it was important to come to choir practice. "Mom," he answered, "you know why! So we can glorify God on Sunday!"

Earlier in the service, you might have thought you had shown up on the wrong Sunday. The Gospel lesson Dr. Gray read so beautifully is usually reserved for one Sunday out of the year - Easter Sunday. But it is a 52 Sundays a year passage if there ever were one. The empty tomb is the place where those of us who follow Christ receive our marching orders. It is a wonderful story. It is the **key** story - how it was that the women came to the tomb, armed with funeral spices, expecting death. When they arrived, they discovered that in the night, the stone that sealed the tomb had been rolled away. What a surprise! How perplexing! Soon their perplexity was replaced by terror as two men in dazzling clothes stood before them. The women fell to the ground, but the men said, "Why are you looking for the living among the dead? Remember how Jesus told you

while he was still in Galilee that he would be handed over and would be crucified and on the third day rise from the dead.” Then they remembered. And they returned from the tomb and “told all this to the eleven and all the rest.” (Luke 24:8-9)

Back in the day, a magnificent preacher named Elam Davies held the pulpit at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago. Easter Sunday one year turned out to be a bitterly cold day. Chicagoans are rarely daunted by the weather - and God bless you - you don't look like you're daunted by the weather either! The sanctuary that Easter morning was packed. Dr. Davies had an accent from Wales where he had grown up. In his dramatic Welch accented voice, he held the congregation captive with his words. Then, he came to a dramatic high point in his sermon: “And when the women arrived at the tomb, they found the stone r-r-r-rolled away.” Just as he said the words “r-r-r-rolled away,” a huge sheet of ice fell off the John Hancock Building across the street and it crashed into the middle of Michigan Avenue with a sound that would have waked the dead. I've never been able to pull off that kind of special effect. All I have been able to do is to have the good sense to let those women at the empty tomb be role models for my life. Yes, many times I have had to push back my fears. I have struggled to make sure I heard the message right. Then, I have come here to share the story with you with as much love as one heart can hold.

The message we have to share has been wrongly used and woefully misunderstood more times than one can count. But when we get the story right, when we tell the story of God's everlasting love revealed in Christ Jesus, the story of the final triumph over death and sin through the power of God's own Spirit, lives are transformed, the world is renewed, and life-giving power from the realm of eternity is released into our earthly reality.

For years, I have saved this little piece of paper. It is a quotation from a professor at Yale Divinity School, Margaret Farley, a leading Christian ethicist. She wrote, “Whatever else the Christian faith is about it has always included the proclamation of new possibility, the opening to a new reality that transcends the present limits of ourselves and our lives.” Being the bearer of this good news is the greatest privilege I can imagine. I am grateful that some Sundays at least, the Holy Spirit takes human words that I have struggled with and through them communicates to you the divine Word.

I am grateful to be a Presbyterian, because our tradition acknowledges that God “calls women and men to all the ministries of the church,” which includes the ministry of proclamation. (Brief Statement of Faith, PCUSA) Please note that in today's Easter story, it was the women who told the apostles. In Luke, the women are not just errand runners for the disciples. They *are* disciples, and they are the ones first entrusted with that great news that a new reality has been released into this world. (As noted by Fred Craddock in his commentary on Luke)

Luke was himself an early proclaimer of the Gospel. He wrote at a time when the church was becoming discouraged, at least 40 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. People were beginning to feel abandoned by God and wondering if the coming of Jesus into the world had really made any difference. Had the story the women told turned out to be “an idle tale”? No, Luke said, the story of the incarnation is the pivot on which all of life turns. Through his telling of the story, and Mark’s and Matthew’s telling, and John’s telling, and your telling, and my telling, the story has been passed along for over 2000 years.

In his *Systematic Theology*, the great Paul Tillich wrote, “Christianity is what it is through the affirmation that Jesus of Nazareth is actually the Christ who brings a new state of being. Christianity was born not with the birth of a man called ‘Jesus,’ but in the moment when one of his followers is driven to say, ‘Thou art the Christ.’ And Christianity will live as long as there are people who repeat this assertion.”

The core conviction of our faith tradition is that the Word of God has been spoken in Jesus of Nazareth. Without that Word, the world would still be languishing in hopelessness and darkness. But when the Word is received, then the world is changed, and the light of Christ shines anew.

At our December Session meeting, Elder Marty Rightmyer reminded us that the passing on of the faith ought to be a natural part of life. She said that we do it through story and music and art. She made reference to the Christmas pageant which had taken place the night before. She said most of us - all of us - know the Christmas story from beginning to end, even though we hear it only once a year, because it is told through music, art, and story. We love to hear the story of the little baby, who, when he was born, altered the course of history forever.

A formative story in my life comes from a time long before I was born. When my mother was a child, her father, a Methodist minister in South Georgia left the house one Sunday afternoon to go to Waycross, Georgia, to preach at an evening revival service. His text was the passage that I read from First Corinthians, and more of that chapter. “Now, I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of what I heard and what I passed on to you...” and so on. I am confident that he followed Paul’s beautiful logic deep into the heart of the meaning of the resurrection, Paul writes, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, then we are of all people to be pitied.” Somewhere in the middle of his sermon, my grandfather Flanders collapsed in the pulpit. Unconscious, he was taken out of the sanctuary. The next day, he was put on a morning train to Atlanta so that he could be treated at a hospital here. It was all to no avail. A massive cerebral hemorrhage had taken his life. My own life didn’t begin for several decades, but there is nothing I can think of that means more to me than the thought that the last words on my grandfather’s lips were words of resurrection assurance, Easter hope. Yes, life is fragile and unpredictable, but I’ll tell you what else is true: God has power over all that would finally separate us from one another and from God.

Not powers or principalities nor height nor depth nor even death itself. (Romans 8: 38-39)

Paul asks, "Where, O Death, is your sting? Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Corinthians 15:55-57)

And then there is that wonderful ending of the 15th chapter: *Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord for you know your labor is not in vain.*

Therefore, what you are doing is being drawn up into what God has already done, That's where the power comes from. *Therefore*, you keep on doing what you need to do to relieve suffering, to teach the children, and to right social wrongs. You might not see victory in your own lifetime, but do what you can to shake the world up a bit, because you know your labors are not in vain.

I love that little poem that says -
You say the little efforts I make
Will do no good.
They never will prevail
To tip the hovering scale
Where justice swings in the balance.
I never thought they would,
But I am prejudiced beyond debate
In favor of my right
To choose which side will feel
The stubborn ounces of my weight.

We said last Sunday God in Christ has already done the heavy lifting. The stone has been rolled away once and for all! We simply need to muster the stubborn ounces of our weight and lean into the transformation of the world that has already begun.

"Proclaim the Gospel," the Book of Order of the Presbyterian Church (USA) says.
"Proclaim it for the salvation of humankind."

I love the words of my favorite Catholic Saint, Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times. Use words, if necessary."

In Second Corinthians Paul writes, "We have this treasure; that is the message, the story of God's love in Christ, in clay jars (that would be us) so that we can make it clear that the extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us." (II Corinthians 4:7) From one clay jar to another, I will say it has been the joy and honor of my life to share in this resurrection project that is Morningside Church 2010.

I close with a story, a story about how we ought to treat the treasure that has been trusted to us. I love this story for several reasons: Its setting is UCLA, where our daughter Elizabeth studied for her Ph.D. It is told by David Bartlett, who used to teach at Yale and was a friend of my son Sam there and is now a great friend of Chris Henry.

The story is about a Stradivarius violin that went missing one day. It had been placed in the hands of a faculty member who was the second violinist in the University String Quartet. That violinist reported to the administration that the priceless instrument was gone. At first people thought the violinist might've just stolen it, but eventually it came out that he had gone to the grocery store, and somehow the sack of groceries and the violin in the case were both in his arms, and he put the violin case on top of the car, the groceries in the trunk, and when he drove off, he forgot about the Stradivarius. Decades later, the instrument turned up in a music shop across the country. The present owner said he had bought the violin from somebody who had found it lying beside the on ramp of a California freeway. "You'd think if you had something so precious you would guard it day and night. But we get busy" with the details of life, the details of church life, our personal lives. We make unimportant things important, and we forget to stress that which makes all the difference. (As told in *Journal for Preachers*)

Friends at Morningside, I remind you that you have been entrusted with the greatest treasure imaginable, the story of God's saving love. This good news may be the only thing that can heal our world, "which seems to be coming apart at the seams." It just maybe the only thing that will heal your life and mine. When I came among you to be your pastor and your friend, I had some ideas, but I had absolutely nothing new to say. I had only an old story to share with you. Thank God, you have shared it right back. My thanks and love to you. All thanks and praise to God, who has entrusted the treasure to us all.

Tell the others.