

After the season of Lent with all its incumbent introspection and self examination, I was musing to a colleague, “I am tired of Lent. I’m going to preach a sermon entirely on good news. There is not going to be any darkness in this sermon.”

She replied, “Well, that would be a first for you. I don’t think you’ve ever done that.”

I wasn’t so sure I liked that! I mean, who wants to be thought of as the person that gets up in a pulpit and reminds people that while there is good news to be had it must be had in the midst of suffering and pain and the reality of life in the present age. It makes me look like a pessimist. I resolved then and there that this sermon was going to be utterly devoid of any mention of anything that could be considered a downer, a depressor, even so much as a storm-cloud on the horizon. I was going to preach sweetness and light even if it killed me.

Well, unless I deviate drastically from what I have written, I think we will all agree when the last word is said that I didn’t succeed on the matter. At every stage in the year, though, we need to remember that the whole story includes both light and darkness, both faith and doubt... but I tell you all this to set up what I really want to say which is this: the Gospel is nothing but good news.

I’m going to say a whole lot more about it, but really, that’s my point. The Gospel is nothing but good news. If it is not, then we aren’t telling it right. If what we are saying is anything other than good news, then it is not the Gospel.

Not too long ago, I reread an old classic, Les Miserables. As you probably remember from middle school or Broadway, the whole thing hinges on the conversion of Jean

Valjean. Valjean, a man of prodigious strength is arrested for breaking a baker's window and stealing a loaf of bread, which in the most poetic of ironies, is not even for himself but for his sister's children. He, in the justice of the times, was condemned to slavery in the galleys. Three times he attempted escape and had his sentence extended and so when he is finally released, it is nearly twenty years after his incarceration. Part of his terms of release is that he must present his papers as a released convict upon entering any city. The justice of the day was cruel but the prejudice of the day was crueler still. In one village after seeking hospitality in each of the inns of the town, and being refused, he even begged to be allowed to sleep in the stables of a home and was turned away. Finally, dejected, depressed, sitting on the square of the town, a woman tells him to inquire at the house of the Bishop.

This bishop was a man who had won the hearts of his parishioners through his extraordinary generosity. He had won his bishopric through a rare moment of serendipity and it had never been his intention to be a bishop. It was as though he didn't know how to be one so he continued his habits learned as a humble priest, of sharing all he had and engaging in blatant- almost promiscuous hospitality. He was a man who, upon learning that the convalescent hospital adjacent to the palatial dwelling reserved for the bishop was less than adequate had swapped places, giving his home and gardens to the invalids and reserving for himself the humble abode designated for the indigent patients. Valjean happened upon his house at a moment when his heart was on the verge of hardening, and the bishop welcomed him in. At dinner, he made a point of having all the silver owned by the Bishop's mansion placed out at dinner, though it meant there were more places set at the table than there were guests. During dinner, he remarked that the light was dim

and had his housekeeper go to his chambers and bring out silver candlesticks and place them on the table. He made a show of locking the silver and allowing the guest to know where the key was not so well hidden. During the dark of night, Valjean struggled through a dark night of the soul, conflicted between his criminal desire to abscond with the bishop's silver and his gratitude for the hospitality shown him. The criminal heart won. What happens next is simple: he stole it and he got caught. When gendarmes contemptuously declare that Valjean has claimed that the silver was a gift, the bishop exclaims that his dear friend has forgotten the other items he meant him to have, declaring he took only the plates, but the bishop intended him to have the candlesticks as well. He ceremoniously gifts the candlesticks to Valjean as well, telling him to go in peace, that this day he has bought his soul for him.

The conversion is not immediate. There is a struggle for Valjean's soul, but in the end, goodness, good news wins. Valjean becomes, for lack of a better word, not a criminal, but a saint. I think maybe that's what the Calvinists mean by the irresistibility of grace. The gospel is nothing but good news. If it is not, we aren't telling it right.

In our text today, Thomas, an apostle who has been dubbed the doubter for the last two thousand years because of his questions dares to question the resurrection. I don't know why we treat Thomas so uncharitably, calling him doubting Thomas, because don't we all do the same thing? Sometimes the Gospel, the good news, is too unbelievable to be true. Is it such a stretch that Thomas had some issues in claiming it?

Let's analyze the situation. The disciples have scattered in disarray. They have reconvened and claimed that the Lord has appeared to them. That stands flatly contrary to medical science. Dead people don't get up. They stay dead. That's how the universe

works. And here, these disciples appear at the outset to be the victims of a massive dose of wishful thinking. One of my favorite observations is the only thing worse than one person with a bad idea is two. And the only thing worse than two people with the same bad idea is oh, say, ten more. There is nothing logically that should suggest to Thomas that the disciples are telling the truth. They must seem to him to be high as kites or deluded and drunk with their depressive reality of the death of the messiah. Let's have a moment of honesty here. My sympathy lies with Thomas because I'd probably have said the same thing. I won't believe until I see the imprint of the nails on his hands because it's too good to be true. It can't possibly be true. Dead people don't get up. They're dead. Life has ended. Sin won. Rome won. The mob won. Dead people don't get up. It's not good sense to argue otherwise.

I love Anne Lamott's description of what the disciples must have been thinking that first night after the crucifixion.¹ A lot of Monday morning quarterbacking, she said. A lot of cigarette smoke. And I won't quote her directly, because it's church and we aren't supposed to say the words she said, the disciples basically sat together and got drunk and said, in so many words, our luck has run out. We are the hunted.

And to this the risen Lord appeared. And to this Thomas is supposed to blindly believe that the same disciples who had been as out of options as he was two nights earlier have somehow seen good news?

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And then the Lord appears. Not an apparition, but a real, flesh and blood Lord, complete with nail marks and spear punctures.

¹ Lamott, Anne. Plan B

Now I'm sorry, but this much is true: in the same circumstances, I'd have missed the resurrection. But Jesus doesn't leave Thomas in his moment of doubt, but comes to him, inviting him to realize that the resurrection doesn't remove our scars, it just redeems them. The marks are still there.

Let me tell you a story about a time I was preaching. It was one of those moments when, while preaching, I had the realization that I was in way over my head. I'd remembered when my grandmother was dying of cancer. It had a profound effect on me. We were really close, and cancer is a cruel disease. So I used it as an illustration. (This is the occupational hazard of being close to me- you get used for sermon illustrations.) I was talking about a theologian who had argued that in those moments when we just don't know what is going on, how things can possibly turn out good, how Jesus and faith and God matter, that in *those* moments, we have to remember that God suffers with us. And I had preached about how when reading it, I had concluded that it was a misery loves company theology. But, I went on, I had come to believe it too after my internship in the cancer ward of Presbyterian Hospital. Now the moment that I realized that I was in way over my head was when I looked out in the congregation and saw that there was not one, not two, but three people I knew were suffering from cancer. One has died, one is in remission, and one struggles daily with the disease. That knocked the wind completely out of my sails. I had to own up that I could no more make the disease go away for them than I could fix all the minor little annoyances that plague us daily. And I wasn't at all sure that the assurance that God suffers with us was even remotely relevant for them nor could I convince myself that it was true.

Being stabbed by doubt and fear is not only part of faith, it is normal. Here's the moment of darkness that I warned you was coming: we do have to claim good news in the face of the fact that we live still in a Lenten world. Yes, Easter has happened and we shouted about it, or at least we should have, but it's a week later, and it's always going to be a week or a month or a year later and we have to hang on to that good news even when it isn't so clear at all that the resurrection is coming, or has happened, or will happen.

The gospel is nothing but good news. If it isn't good news, we aren't telling it right.

The problem that I would argue that most of us have in figuring out that the Gospel is good news is that things aren't generally all that bad for us. Sure, we have our moments, but really, most folks I know are doing alright. They are generally happy. The Gospel is the cherry on top of the whipped-cream: sure, it's good, but the sundae is really what you ordered. It's a sort of an afterthought: Oh, I'm living now and things are alright, but if and when I die, it sure is good to know that Jesus loves me.

That's not good news. It's life insurance. The gospel is more than that. It's an invitation to a way of life. It's a declaration that the emptiness of possessions or sex or drugs or loneliness isn't the way God meant us to live, and wonder of wonders, God has said we don't have to live that way. But, when things are good, I wonder how easy it is to know that the Gospel is nothing but good news, because from a prosperous healthy vantage point, it seems awfully bleak. God wants us to give our money. Sit with the sick.

Embrace the poor. I can't tell you the last time I did that one. Oh, maybe I can. I volunteered with Room in the Inn a year ago. It's been a while for me since I really engaged the poor- how about you?

God wants more for us than that. You see, we were created to love. Love God, love neighbor. It's pretty hard when you think about it.

But it's good news.

Let me tell you one more story. This one is about a friend of mine who sort of melted down theologically while we were in Seminary. While I wouldn't trade my seminary days for anything, I'd be lying if I didn't tell you that they can be rough. They start us off from the very first day debunking all the theology that we thought that we knew so that they can retheologize us in the right way. It's good but it's hard. You see, we trust the church to feed us the right stuff, and when our brains get it all turned around, it's kind of hard to adjust. It's sort of like when kids learn that their parents, whom they have trusted to tell them the truth have fed them a bunch of stories about, shall we say, various mythic and holiday oriented superheroes. It doesn't sit well. Here we thought we had a strong faith and here they, the professors, are bent on strengthening it by straightening it out and making it consistent. Anyhow, my friend melted down. He wanted to be a good Christian, but he didn't really know how. You see, the gospel was mostly good news for him, but not completely. It was good news if you were a good boy. It was good news if you straightened up and flew right. It was good news if you managed to confess all your sins and were really genuinely sorry for them and managed somehow not to do them again. (Because, he had been taught, if you did them again, you hadn't really repented.) He struggled mightily against this. I remember him sitting in my room in Brown Hall, on the verge of tears, saying, "I want to believe this but I don't know how!" My heart aches even now when I think of what he was going through. The Gospel wasn't good news to

him, not yet. It took a long while for him to learn the Gospel was good news. I think he was theologically abused, and wounds of abuse last a long time.

Ah, but the good news won't be stopped. The truth has a way of overcoming doubt.

Doubt isn't wrong. It's normal. Life slams us into myriad circumstances that would drain the Gospel of its power. I can't make everything alright for everybody and neither can you. It just won't happen. Only God can do that. But we can, and we should, and we are called to attest to the Gospel.

We come to this table so that we may be fed in grace so that we can go forth in grace to tell of God's grace. We're charged to tell the good news.

Because the Gospel is nothing but good news. If it is not, we aren't telling it right.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.