

April 28, 2019

"Barabbas the Acquitted"

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Matthew 27:15-23

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Hallelujah! His is risen! He is risen indeed! Yes, it is still Easter! And I want to repeat what I've said before: one of the great testimonials to the power of God through Jesus Christ is to change people - to enable them to be more than they would have been without the love and light of Christ. Because isn't that what the Easter message is all about? Yes, the Easter message is one of hope, new life, a second chance, forgiveness of sins, eternal life. And we've seen this time and time again, but what better time than Easter is there, to remind us of so many examples. So let's pick up where we left off last week. Mary Magdalene, standing at the empty tomb, seeing a man she thinks is a gardener. Until she hears his voice call her name. Mary! Mary! What a wonderful sound that must have been to her. I wonder if at that very instant she remembered Jesus saying, "the Good Shepherd calls his own sheep by name, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice." And of course, you know the rest. Mary talks with Jesus, he sends her to tell his disciples what happened, and she runs, exclaiming, "I have seen the Lord. He is alive."

Now in order for us to understand just how meaningful the first Easter was for Mary, we need to look a little more closely at her life. Tradition has it that Mary was a prostitute, but that is not what the Bible says. The Gospel of Luke tells us, "Jesus went through towns and villages, and he took his twelve disciples with him, along with some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases. Among them was Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons, along with many others." Now in Biblical times the seven demons likely meant Mary was mentally or emotionally troubled with various issues. We can all probably name some demons in our own lives. But Jesus had healed her. She was a changed person. And from that time on, Mary was one of his most loyal followers, staying with him right until his last breath on the cross. So there at the tomb, standing in front of Jesus, standing in the light of his resurrection, Mary knew full well the meaning of Easter. That hope and new life was, in fact possible. And Mary was the first to know about it. Yes, the Easter message was for her.

Now let's look at a second person – St. Paul. He wrote his first letter to the Corinthians in approximately fifty-three A.D., only twenty years after Christ's crucifixion, and this letter contains a passage which is actually the earliest written testimony to the resurrection. In it, Paul lists a number of people to whom the risen Lord appeared. Peter, all the apostles, and "more than 500 brothers and

sisters, most of whom are still alive.” Then, in all humility, Paul finally includes himself. “Last of all,” Paul says, “the risen Christ, appeared also to me.” Now remember, Paul was a Pharisee who had persecuted Christians. The Book of Acts tells us he dragged people out of their homes to have them arrested, and he “was eager to kill the Lord’s followers.” But then, on the road to Damascus, he meets the risen Christ. And Paul becomes a changed person. He later wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. Everything old is passed away, see, everything has become new.” As Rev. Eugene Bay writes, Paul is being autobiographical. “All you have to do is look at me. I was given a second chance, given forgiveness. I am a new man, a new being, a new creation.” And, of course, he went on to convert thousands to follow Jesus, to start new churches, and to author much of our New Testament. Yes, the Easter message was for him.

So what do these stories of the Easter message have to do with today's Scripture and Barabbas, a seemingly bit player in the Easter story. Well, let's first watch a video.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVZeQkJgVyY>

Over the centuries, Barabbas has been known as the criminal that Pilate offered in exchange for Christ. The criminal who was acquitted – set free, while Jesus went to his death. And quite the criminal he was. He was an insurrectionist, a murderer, a “notorious prisoner,” as St. Matthew said today. And, as we heard, his first name was Jesus. Yes, his full name was Jesus Barabbas. It's ironic, don't you think, that Barabbas had the same first name as Jesus, the Christ. Now his last name, Barabbas, is also interesting. In Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, the word “bar” means son, or son of. As an example, in Matthew 16:16-19, where Jesus asks Simon Peter the question, "Who do people say that I am?" Peter declares Jesus to be the Christ, the ‘Son of God.’ Christ then calls him Simon Bar-Jonah. Essentially, in response to ‘you are the Son of God,’ Jesus says back to Peter, “you are the son of Jonah.” Even today, Jewish custom preserves the term in “bar mitzvah,” which means “son of the commandment.” So quite literally, Barabbas means son of Abba. And Abba, means “father” in Aramaic, and Jesus and Paul both used the name Abba when referring to God the Father. So here we have both Jesus Christ and Jesus Barabbas, as “son of the father.” All this points to the great paradox of Barabbas being freed in the place of Christ. The false son of the father, is released. The true son of the heavenly father, is sent to his death. Interesting about Barabbas and his name, isn't it? ¹

¹ The Ironic Theology of Barabbas, Catholic Voyager

So let's get to the heart of the message of our scripture today. And that is, in God's great plan, Barabbas was the ultimate example of all us sinful human beings, a person clearly guilty, yet freed because Jesus Christ took his place. Consider... Barabbas was sitting on death row in a Roman prison. There was no hope. He hears the guards come for him, and he's sure this is it. As Pastor Dave Furman writes, "Put yourself in his place for a minute. You're walking to your death in chains and then all of a sudden, when you least expect it, you're a free man. The shouts of, "Crucify him," are not for you. The guards drag another man to his death—Jesus of Nazareth. He's beaten and flogged and is forced to carry his cross to his death. You think to yourself, that's my cross he is carrying, that's my death he's dying." Jesus told us that the shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. And one could make the argument that the very first person Jesus did that for, the very first person saved in his sins, was the undeserving Barabbas. We all know that Jesus could have saved himself, but he chose not to. Instead he gave himself up, and Barabbas was acquitted.

So you see, the Easter message was even for Barabbas. Here he was – a sinner, the worst of the worst, and yet he was given a new hope, another chance, a fresh start. Whether or not he went on to live a better life, we do not know. But, if it can be true for Barabbas, just think of what that means for you and me. It means there is nothing so hopeless, so dark, so seemingly permanent, that the love and power of God cannot break through and change it. It means that there is nothing you have done that cannot be forgiven. It means the past is behind you, and new life shines on the future before you. It means, as the Bible says, there is nothing, nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. How do we know? Because the Easter message...is for us!