

Risen, Conquering and Forever

Easter Sunday

March 23, In the Year of Our LORD, 2008

Gates Presbyterian Church

The Rev. Ralph S. English, Pastor

Acts of the Apostles 10:34-43 and John 20:1-18

A controversial Easter poster juxtaposes two images – Elvis and Jesus. The caption is:

There is confusion over which came back from the dead.

Fiction versus fact; short-lived versus eternal. How those dichotomies confuse us, seemingly if not particularly in our day and age. A few years ago, it was Dan Brown's novel, "The DaVinci Code," that led people to wonder if Mary Magdalene was present at the Last Supper and whether she and Jesus married and bore children. I joined the chorus of those who asked the simple question: "What part of the word 'fiction' do you not understand? 'The DaVinci Code' is *fiction*." I thank God that the hullabaloo over "The DaVinci Code," "The Last Temptation of Christ" and Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ" are past. Their notoriety was short-lived. Their confusion of fiction and fact succumbed to the light of truth and that which is eternal.

Fiction versus fact; short-lived versus eternal. A "come-on" this last week, that is, a teaser to make one want to read more was this:

Films that make you high school history teacher cry. ... We all accept that movies stretch the truth in the interest of building drama. The following ten flicks, however, treat the truth like it was Silly Putty -- pulling and twisting it until it's unrecognizable.

People who want to be entertained may not care that in the new release "10,000 B.C." the use of woolly mammoths to build pyramids makes purists groan because mammoths were extinct by the time the pyramids were built and the thick hair of the mammoths that protected them from arctic cold meant they would have died from heat exhaustion in the Egyptian desert. In the epic "Braveheart," William Wallace fathers Edward III. The only problem is that Edward III was born seven years after Wallace's death! In "The Patriot," the climatic Battle of Guilford Court House, in which the character played by Mel Gibson prevails over a bitter rival in a wonderful victory by the Americans, twists history beyond recognition. The British won that battle!

To the retort that movies are just "entertainment," the problem is that people are learning their history from the big screen in theaters or in the comfort of their homes – and in cases like these, they are getting it very if not terribly wrong.

Fiction versus fact; short-lived versus eternal. Be it radio talk shows from every religious or political stripe, listeners need to discern what is true and what is not. It is amazing what people will believe if someone says it or repeats it often enough. In a prophecy that within two decades convinced a supposedly intelligent nation of people to go to war against nearly everyone on the globe, one of those most insightful quotes from the last century was this:

By means of shrewd lies, unremittingly repeated, it is possible to make people believe that heaven is hell -- and hell heaven. The greater the lie, the more readily it will be believed.

Those words are those of Mr. Hitler as written in “Mein Kampf,” “My Battle.” Do those words not haunt us today? Do they not suggest we ask the questions: What are people to believe? Who are we to believe? What is fiction? What is fact? What is short-lived? What is eternal?

A week ago, on the Day of Palms, when we recalled Jesus’ triumphal entry into the City of Jerusalem, I suggested how the praise of those who shouted “Hosanna,” ... indeed the praise of the faithful today who sing God’s praises was and is all too often, fleeting and short-lived. The historical setting was clear: those who sang “Hosanna” one day were more than willing to be among those who cried “Crucify” but days later. I suggested that when we worship God, sing God’s praises, but then are not satisfied with whatever we think God was supposed to deliver in exchange for our homage, then our praise is fleeting as well. In hindsight, I could have nuanced the message with some other words. As fleeting, short-lived and transitory as our praise of God might be, so, too, it is often fickle, erratic, inconsistent if not downright self-contradictory.

So, let’s pronounce why we are gathered in this place this morning! Mirroring Peter’s profession of faith as we heard read from the tenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles,

- We are not confused as to Who was raised from the dead! We know that the One Who was alive on that first Easter morning is none other than Jesus the Christ, the Only-Begotten One of God, crucified, dead, buried and raised from the dead. It wasn’t that musical icon of the 1960’s who self-destructed on drugs and self-abuse.
- We are not confused by the roles played by those wonderful people who followed Jesus in three years of ministry, from Mary, His mother, to the twelve disciples, to Mary Magdalene whose run to and from the tomb is at the center of our Gospel reading today.
- We are not confused by the miraculous nature of the resurrection or how Jesus’ followers did not believe it at first! We embrace their demonstration of humanity and their inherent foibles. We identify with their doubts and fears, and we resonate with and mirror their amazement at the events of the resurrection – an event that is far more amazing than any sensationalism wrought of the latest fictional twist on an eternal story.
- We are not confused as to Who won the greatest battle in all of human history. It was and is God Who conquers, Who wins the war between evil and good, wrong and right, death and life, despair and hope, damnation and salvation, injustice and justice.
- We are not confused as to what is fiction and what is fact, what is a short-lived sensation to tickle our fancy and what is eternal. We know that God wants
 - to move us from complacency with the status quo of our lives and those of others to working actively for justice and peace, grace and love, redemption and hope,
 - to cajole us from that which entertains to that which invites us to work hard so that other might know the love and grace of God,
 - to challenge us to look beyond what bestows comfort in our lives to that which might bring solace and ease to those so desperately in need,
 - to force us, yes, *force* us to look beyond how fickle, erratic, inconsistent, self-contradictory if not self-destructive humans are, to look beyond to the ultimate truths of our faith which out-live every human fad, survive every attempt to rewrite history, and begs us to share the good news with the peoples of the world – so that all might know what is true and eternal: the wondrous love of our God.

Amen.