

Easter Day A (4/16/2017)

Jeremiah 31:1-6

Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Acts 10:34-43

**John 20:1-18**

*We all conduct our lives according to guiding narratives, whether we're aware of them or not. So, which story do you live by? The American Dream? The Myth of Redemptive Violence? A personal narrative of tragedy or triumph? We are free in the end to choose the story on which we pin our hopes and by which we engage the world. Why not the story of Easter?*

We all conduct our lives according to guiding narratives, whether we're aware of them or not. Humankind is unique among species not only by virtue of our capacity to think, to reason, but also on account of our love of stories. We are not simply *Homo sapiens*, in other words, we are *Homo narrans*, storytelling creatures. **Throughout the ages, we have made meaning of the world by telling each other stories. Whether passed down orally or recorded in writing for posterity, these stories are embedded in our cultural fabric and our family structures, forming our identities and interpreting the events of our lives.** The years come and go, generations live and die, yet the stories remain. Even the suspicion that there are no underlying stories – that we create our own reality from an essentially meaningless existence – is itself a guiding narrative, influencing the way we view the world and make choices.

I suppose it's possible to accommodate more than one defining story, but certain stories tend to take precedence over others. What's more, some stories compete with each other, forcing us to choose between them.

**So, which story do you live by?**

Is it the American Dream? Our nation's popular legend holds that those of us who are fortunate enough to live amid these purple mountain majesties and fruited plains are fundamentally free to pursue our individual aspirations. With a measure of virtue and a hardy work ethic, no one is prevented from achieving success and prosperity.

Historian James Truslow Adams famously defined the American Dream this way:

It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, we are masters of our own circumstances, uninhibited by structures that would otherwise determine our destiny. And in the end, suffering and success are mostly matters of character and personal responsibility.

Is this the story you live by?

Or, is it the Myth of Redemptive Violence? We are easily compelled by the notion that the world is a theater of conflict between good and evil, and we are, of course, invariably on the side of good. One side will only vanquish the other by force, so wherever wickedness strikes, indifferent to the suffering it causes the innocent, it must be met with righteous aggression. To borrow the words of theologian Walter Wink, the Myth of Redemptive Violence thus

enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world.

The belief that violence "saves" is so successful because it doesn't seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It's what works. It seems inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Epic of America*, cited from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American\\_Dream](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Dream).

<sup>2</sup> *The Powers That Be*, 42.

Bullies won't back down until you hit back. The bad guy will get it in the end. Our heroes are the ones who kill to protect us.

Is this the story you live by?

Or, is it a personal narrative of tragedy or triumph? Perhaps your life's journey is defined by a particular event, a particular relationship, a particular struggle. You may have suffered a trauma or loss that has permanently altered your self-image or your ability to trust or experience joy. Maybe your relationship with a parent or companion has shaped you such that you cannot fathom who you'd be without them. It could be that the story you tell yourself is that you'll never be good enough, beautiful enough, happy enough. Or, it could be that you've beaten the odds, overcoming hurt or hardship to achieve some semblance of the good life, and you cling to this success like a trophy.

Is this the story you live by?

Or, is it that the ocean chose you to reclaim the voyager spirit of your ancestors and set out across the sea to find the demigod who stole the heart of an island deity, compel him to return it, and thereby restore all life to its former vitality? "You're welcome."<sup>3</sup>

Amid all the other stories, today we hear again the story of Easter. Doomed by the scheming of the elite and our callous complicity, Jesus has suffered the worst imaginable death. This shocks his followers to the core, dashing their hopes for the world he envisioned – the world he manifested in their presence, that is until his summary torture and public execution. The light shone in the darkness, but on Friday, the darkness snuffed it out.

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<sup>3</sup> Walt Disney's *Moana*.

It's still dark when Mary rises on Sunday morning to go to the tomb. From grief suddenly emerges confusion, as she and Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved discover that the body is missing. "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him." The theft of his remains adds insult to injury, and Mary is devastated. Then, a figure unexpectedly appears behind her. The gardener? After all, who else would be in the garden that early in the morning? "Mary," the risen Jesus calls her by name. In an instant, Mary's anguish changes to astonishment. "Rabbouni!" *Teacher*, she cries. And immediately, her Lord trains her in the art of resurrection storytelling: "Go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" **Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ is returning to the heart of God, never to die again.**<sup>4</sup>

Is this the story we live by?

**In the beginning, God set before us a garden paradise, and, defying our hostility, carried on the work of creation, this time in another garden, by overcoming the despair of crucifixion and sending us to tell about it.** In the words of the prophet Jeremiah, **God has loved us with "an everlasting love," love that embraces us on both sides of death, sustaining us in spite of our grief and fear.** **This is the day the Lord has made – a new light to chase away our shadows; let us rejoice and be glad in it!**

Dear church, we are free in the end to choose the story on which we pin our hopes and by which we engage the world. Why not the story of Easter?

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<sup>4</sup> See D. Cameron Murchison, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 2, 374.