

Easter Life: Starting Again
Acts 3:12-19
First Presbyterian Church, Sarasota
April 15, 2018
Rev. Glen Bell

When was Easter this year? Easter was on Sunday, April 1.

On the calendar, Easter has come and gone, it seems. You may have started noticing that things are changing in Sarasota. Our friends from Iowa and Ohio and New York are packing up and departing. It makes me sad to think about missing them for the next six or seven months.

But depending on where you live, the timing of the season may feel quite different. One of my friends and former colleagues from Indianapolis is now the pastor at First Presbyterian Church in Wassau, Wisconsin. Yesterday and today, they expect to get twelve to eighteen inches of snow. Twelve to eighteen inches!

One of our elders lived in Wisconsin for years. Yesterday she posted a meme on social media. In the image, men and women are shoveling deep snow from the street, beginning to free trapped cars. The caption reads, “Meanwhile in Wisconsin, folks are busy clearing the streets for the July 4th parade.”

Timing is important. The calendar is important. Sometimes we depend on our schedule, our calendar, to tell us a lot about ourselves.

It was no different for Anne and me this Easter. Meredith, our daughter, made it home from Orlando for the weekend, and we set out the PAAS Easter egg coloring kit. We sat at our kitchen table, the three of us, and dyed eggs and talked together.

But Easter Sunday came and went, and in most of our homes, perhaps unlike Christmas, I’m guessing that most of our decorations may have come down.

When does Easter begin and end? Where does Easter figure in our schedule and calendar?

You and I have an almost insatiable desire to believe in a special person, someone we know or someone we can connect with, someone we can listen to or whose books we can read, someone who will unlock the meaning of life for us, someone who can deliver purpose and peace. Tom Long puts it this way. “Whether they are the faith healers of the backwoods revival tent or the slick self-help counselors on television talk shows, we want to believe that these people have the right touch, can say the right prayer formula, have the right technique, have discovered the right wisdom to bring wholeness to our lives.”

I feel this hunger too. So some Christians listen to Joel Osteen or David Jeremiah or Erwin McManus. Others of us read books by Anne Lamott or Richard Rohr or Barbara Brown Taylor.

This a powerful hunger. Tom Long concludes this way. “We order the CDs, go to the rallies, watch the programs, read the books, touch the hem of the garment, seeking for ourselves some of their power and knowledge.”

That’s exactly what happening as our scripture lesson begin in Acts this morning. At the temple, in the name of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, Peter and John had healed a man lame from birth. And all the people who had known this man his entire life were amazed by this. They ran to Peter and John the same way that you and I run to our favorite spiritual thinker or speaker. Like the crowd, we want a special friend with real power and piety.

Peter begins his sermon with a simple response. “That’s not how it works,” he says. It is not my power, my identity, my special relationship with the Lord, he says. No, it is the God of Abraham and

Sarah, the God of Issac and Rebekah, the God of Jacob and Rachel, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, the Author of Life.

God is the source of the power, not a special person or place or day or moment in our schedule or calendar. Easter is today. Easter is every day. Because God shows up every day, God loves and blesses and forgives every day. And God commands us to do the same, both in here and out there. Easter life doesn't happen when we sit back and listen and go home. Easter fills us with joy and peace as it becomes a way of life.

This was surprising for Jesus' earliest disciples too. They thought they knew the times. They could read the calendar. They saw the writing on the wall. Jesus had been alive, but now he was dead. They knew Jesus had healed and preached and transformed lives. But they also knew the day-to-day power of evil and meanness, of betrayal and arrest and crucifixion. They didn't want to put their faith and trust their lives to a fairy tale.

They were shocked when the risen Christ showed up. "Jesus himself stood among them" – right there in the midst of them – "and said, 'Peace be with you.' They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost."

They were startled, because they thought death was the end of life. They were shocked to begin to learn that Easter is not only a one-time experience, but also a way of life.

That's it, you know: life. Life is the beginning and end, the life of Christ made real in our lives and in our world. Jesus opened their hearts and minds as he helped them to understand the scriptures, and he's been doing the same for us and through us ever since. In my name, he charged them, "repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed to all people, in every nation."

This presence of the living Christ resets our lives, restarts our existence. Peter gets it exactly right when he is preaching at the temple. This is the Author of Life, he proclaims. Everything about him is life. Everything about our following him is life.

This means that you and I are charged regularly, weekly, daily to repent, to change direction, to change our habits, to change our mind, to change our loyalty, to change our identity.

Oh, we don't need a preacher to hear what we need to repent of. We know the ways of death. It is so easy for me and perhaps you to fall into them. We reduce our adversaries through sarcasm and manipulation, through meanness. We give in to the temptation to demonize others or to categorize them as crooked or lying or slimy.

We know the ways of death. Our anger and resentment lead us far from home. We try so hard to hide it, even from ourselves. But we realize we are lost when we revel in the misfortune of that former boss or coworker who never appreciated us. We realize we are lost when we cheer as we watch the missiles streaking toward the destruction of our enemies.

The ways of death are clear: idolatry, enmity, jealousy, anger, quarrels, impurity, carousing. But the Author of Life gives us the power of life. Over and over again, as we repent and turn toward God, we discover by faith the One we can see and hear and touch, the One who surrounds us with kindness and care and love, with patience and gentleness and self-control.

Easter is only Easter if we live it every day.

Thousands of years ago, Moses stood before the people of Israel on the verge of the Promised Land. He set before them the most important choice of human existence. "I have set before you this day," he proclaimed, "life and death. If you obey the commandments by loving God, walking in God's ways and observing God's commandments, then you shall live."

You will live, he promised. You will live a life of joy and peace and purpose – not a life without wounds or great disappointments – but a life of healing and wholeness and love.

Kara Powell, Jake Mulder and Brad Griffin all work at Fuller Seminary, and specifically the Fuller Youth Institute. In a recent book, they tell the story of Isabella.

“In 2014 Isabella, a high-school sophomore, found she had no place to go. Kicked out of her house by her drug-addicted mom, Isabella ended up wandering the streets, looking for someplace safe to spend the night.

“Desperate, Isabella remembered Dale and Kathy, a couple who had already welcomed a homeless classmate of Isabella, named Emily, into their home. Isabella didn’t know that Dale and Kathy followed Christ. Or that the couple was a part of a church with a legacy of living out Scripture’s mandate to care for all young people, including orphans.

“All Isabella knew was that Dale and Kathy had already said yes to Emily. If she was lucky, they would accept her too.

“Dale and Kathy were overwhelmed with Emily. Self-employed and strapped financially, they felt stretched thin in every way. But they knew Isabella needed a family and had a strong hunch they could be family for her.

“It wasn’t all sweetness and light. Far from it. Isabella could be moody, angry and downright mean. Dale and Kathy knew this was normal teenage rebellion on steroids, but the slammed doors and sulking didn’t make it easy.

“Isabella certainly wasn’t excited about attending the church’s worship services with her new family. Seeing Isabella standing in the back, one of the youth leaders, Tori started a conversation. Or rather, tried to start a conversation. Isabella responded with the shortest answer possible. At the end, Tori told Isabella, ‘I hope you come back next week.’ Arms crossed, Isabella mumbled, ‘I probably will. Because my new parents will make me.’

“Isabella’s grumpiness would have been too much for many leaders, but not Tori. Every week that Isabella was forced to come to church with Dale and Kathy, Tori tried to start a conversation. Eventually, Isabella’s responses went from a few words to a few sentences. And then a few stories.

“Isabella loved to play guitar, so Tori invited her to join the youth ministry’s worship team. Since Dale, Isabella’s adoptive dad, was also a musician, he and Isabella would practice together in the evenings at home.

“A few months later during a youth group retreat, Isabella pulled Tori aside and confessed, ‘I feel dirty. And like something is missing in my life.’ Isabella shared more with Tori about her promiscuity, as well as how she had been cutting herself to try to relieve some of her pain.

“Tori responded, ‘Well, would you like to trust Christ and experience his love?’ Isabella broke down in tears. ‘That’s all I want,’ she said. After months of being loved by a new family and church that didn’t abandon her, Isabella decided she was ready to follow Jesus.”

Every day, the sun rises and Easter begins again. Every day, as we live in the light and share the love of Christ, Easter may begin for someone else.

Easter is today. Easter is every day. So share the great good news of life.