

THE FIRST OF MANY BEGINNINGS

A sermon by Galen Guengerich
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I love almost everything about the Easter season: the rapturous music, the colorful pageantry, and the budding promise of spring. I'm also fond of Easter bonnets, a legacy of my somewhat austere upbringing as a Conservative Mennonite. I see bonnets are relatively scarce again this year. No matter: I'll enjoy whatever this season brings and hope for a more bountiful supply next year.

Easter Sunday is my favorite Sunday of the year. As many of you know, my favorite holiday is Thanksgiving, the festival of gratitude. But Thanksgiving doesn't fall on a Sunday. Besides, if you're going to rise from the dead, it somehow seems wrong to do it on a weekday.

For those of you celebrating Easter at All Souls for the first time, let me give you a roadmap. In many churches today, the unofficial anthem of Easter proclaims that "Jesus Christ is Risen Today." We don't tend to use the term Jesus Christ here at All Souls. Our preference is to speak of Jesus of Nazareth, an itinerant Jewish teacher who cared for those in need. He urged his followers to become, as the poet William Blake put it, the human form of love divine. When Jesus was asked to name the greatest commandment in the Hebrew scriptures, he responded, "Love God, and love your neighbor."

We sometimes refer to him as the Jesus of history in order to distinguish him from the Christ of Christian doctrine. Christians believe the Christ — the term means Messiah — was both fully human and fully divine. By living a perfect life, dying a blameless death, and rising from the dead, Jesus the Christ became savior of humanity and sovereign ruler of all creation.

If you find this scenario hard to accept when presented as actual history, which it usually is, you're in good company. But my guess is that you did not come to All Souls this morning because of what you don't believe in. Our purpose this morning is to discover an Easter we can believe in.

Someone once said — and it's been attributed to everyone from Dostoyevsky to the thriller writer John Gardner — there are only two possible stories in all of literature: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. The Easter story, on my reading, is about someone going on a journey — not so much Jesus, whose story appeared to have ended, but the three women who went to visit his tomb.

According to the earliest gospel account, on the Sunday morning after Jesus had been killed on Friday, three women who were close to Jesus took spices to anoint his body, as was the custom. To their surprise, the tomb was already open, and a young man sat inside. He was dressed in a long, flowing white robe — the conventional garb of an

angel. Sensing their fright, the young man reassured them: “Do not be alarmed.” He explained that Jesus had been raised. “He is not here. Look, there is the place where they laid him.”

For those of you concerned about bodily resurrection, the verb translated “raised” was a widely-used Greek verb that would typically have been taken to mean something like “he has been lifted up,” as though his body had been taken elsewhere. The verb was also used metaphorically on occasion, so you can get the idea of resurrection out of the text if that’s what you need.

After explaining Jesus’ absence, the young man told the women, “Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.” Jesus had often told his disciples that his presence would always be with them and his spirit would remain among them.

At that point, the three women had a choice. They could have remained at the tomb and commiserated with each other about their grief at Jesus’ death. Or they could have returned home and never told a soul about this inexplicable and frightening experience. But the young man implored them to go — to set out on a journey that would extend the story of Jesus. The women didn’t know how their testimony would be received or where their journey would take them. Even so, the appeal remained — to go. They did, and the story of Jesus continued and does so even today.

As it happens, the Christian celebration of Holy Week coincides almost precisely this year with the Jewish celebration of Passover, known as Pesach in Hebrew. The story of Passover is also about someone going on a journey — in fact, it’s about lots of people going on a journey.

As the Hebrew Bible recounts the story, the ancient Hebrews found themselves living in Egypt several thousand years ago, drawn to the fertile Nile River Valley during a time of drought and famine. For a couple of centuries, the Egyptians and Hebrews lived side-by-side in relative harmony. But then a pharaoh came to power who decided to enslave the Hebrews and put them to making bricks and erecting monumental buildings.

Over time, the Hebrews began to rebel against this treatment and protested to their leader Moses, who eventually went to Pharaoh and demanded that the Hebrews be released to return to their homeland. When Pharaoh refused, the God of the Hebrews reportedly sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians — plagues such as frogs, biting insects, hail, locusts, and the like. After each plague, Pharaoh was given an opportunity to release the Hebrews, but each time he refused.

The ninth plague was darkness — utter darkness throughout the land. Again Pharaoh refused release. The tenth plague was by far the worst: the death of the firstborn child in every household in Egypt. Through Moses, God told the Hebrews to put lamb’s blood on the lintel above their doors, and the angel of death would pass over Hebrew homes and spare their firstborn children — hence the term Passover. God also

told them to prepare to leave in an instant. When Pharaoh learned of the carnage, he set the Hebrews free, and they set out.

In her poem titled “Passover Remembered,” the contemporary American poet Alla Renee Bozarth captures this moment when the Hebrews were granted their freedom, and they set out in the dark for an unknown homeland.

She writes:

Pack nothing.
Bring only
your determination to serve
and your willingness to be free.

Don't wait for the bread to rise.
Take nourishment for the journey,
but eat standing, be ready
to move at a moment's notice.

Do not hesitate to leave
your old ways behind —
fear, silence, submission.

Only surrender to the need
of the time — to love
justice and walk humbly
with your God.

Do not take time
to explain to the neighbors.
Tell only a few trusted
friends and family members.

Then begin quickly,
before you have time
to sink back into
the old slavery.

Set out in the dark.

Someone goes on a journey. Almost always, the journey begins at a turning point, where the story can end before it even begins. Often, it's easier to stay put — no matter

the hardships at hand — than it is to take the risk of setting out on a journey that leads to you know not where.

But if you're feeling trapped, it's time to go. If some part of your life needs to be left behind, it's time to go. No matter if you are Jewish or Christian, or a little of both or a lot of neither, Passover issues an invitation that Easter echoes: when freedom awaits or new life beckons, it's time to go.

To be sure, there's no guarantee that you will reach the Promised Land of which you dream, at least not right away. The poet cautions:

Outsiders will attack you...
Some of you will be so changed
by weathers and wanderings
that even your closest friends
will have to learn your features
as though for the first time.

Some of you will not change at all.
Some will be abandoned
by your dearest loves
and misunderstood by those
who have known you since birth
and feel abandoned by you.

When you set out, she goes on to say, it will be “the first of many beginnings.” Even so, she advises, “Do not hesitate to leave your old ways behind — fear, silence, submission... Begin quickly, before you have time to sink back into the old slavery. Set out in the dark.”

For William Least Heat Moon, author of the best-selling book *Blue Highways*, the time to go came on a Tuesday — February 17. It was, he says, “a day of canceled expectations, the day I learned my job teaching English was finished because of declining enrollment at the college, the day I called my wife from whom I'd been separated for nine months to give her the news, the day she let slip about her “friend” — Rick or Dick or Chick. Something like that.”

That night, he got an idea. Maybe instead of trying in vain to make things go right, he should just go. He decided to set out on a long circular trip around the United States, following the smaller back roads — the blue highways on the map. But, he wondered, how should he make a beginning?

One night about a month later, he lay awake in his tangled bed. He says, “A strange sound interrupted my tossing. I went to the window, the cold air against my eyes. At first I saw only starlight. Then they were there. Up in the March blackness, two entwined skeins of snow and blue geese honking north, an undulating W-shaped

configuration across the deep sky, white bellies glowing eerily with the reflected light from town, necks stretched northward. Then another flock pulled by who knows what out of the south to breed and remake itself. A new season. Answer: begin by following spring as they did — darkly, with neck stuck out.”

I don't know what darkness fills the tomb of your life today. I don't know how you have failed yourself and those you care about. I don't know where your weaknesses have sabotaged you or your fears have thwarted you. I don't know what deep pain, or searing loss, or haunting regret tempts you to give up on your dreams.

But I do know that your story doesn't end here. It's Easter, and it's time to go on a journey – to leave what's past and embrace what's possible.

The natural world is casting off the darkness of winter and the husks of what is old. It's time for you to do the same. It's time to go.