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Series: Judges
Sermon: Life v Death

Judges 16:23-23, 25-30a

The Philistine tyrants got together to offer a great sacrifice to their god Dagon. They celebrated, saying, “Our god has given us Samson our enemy!”

Then this: Everyone was feeling high and someone said, “Get Samson! Let him show us his stuff!” They got Samson from the prison and he put on a show for them.

They had him standing between the pillars. Samson said to the young man who was acting as his guide, “Put me where I can touch the pillars that hold up the temple so I can rest against them.” The building was packed with men and women, including all the Philistine tyrants. And there were at least three thousand in the stands watching Samson’s performance.

And Samson cried out to God: “Master, God! Oh, please, look on me again, Oh, please, give strength yet once more. God! With one avenging blow let me be avenged on the Philistines for my two eyes!”

Then Samson reached out to the two central pillars that held up the building and pushed against them, one with his right arm, the other with his left. Saying, “Let me die with the Philistines,” Samson pushed hard with all his might. The building crashed on the tyrants and all the people in it.

Mark 16:1-8

When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so they could embalm him. Very early on Sunday morning, as the sun rose, they went to the tomb. They worried out loud to each other, “Who will roll back the stone from the tomb for us?”

Then they looked up, saw that it had been rolled back—it was a huge stone—and walked right in. They saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed all in white. They were completely taken aback, astonished.

He said, “Don’t be afraid. I know you’re looking for Jesus the Nazarene, the One they nailed on the cross. He’s been raised up; he’s here no longer. You can see for yourselves that the place is empty. Now—on your way. Tell his disciples and Peter that he is going on ahead of you to Galilee. You’ll see him there, exactly as he said.”

They got out as fast as they could, beside themselves, their heads swimming. Stunned, they said nothing to anyone.

Sermon

I don’t like endings. I will be the first to admit that I am a person who does not like it when something finishes. The finality of an era that slips away. I get kinda nostalgic and a little down when something is about to end. I remember leaving home to set out on my own after high school years. For years, the folks would send the dog downstairs to wake me up and he would jump up on the bed and wake me. But the last day that would ever happen, I shed a little tear, happy to fly and be free, but sad to see this little tradition end. When little girl, our youngest went off to school, it was a happy but sad day, for there are times that I do not want them to grow up. I’m enjoying this time too much right now. Maybe you’ve read some books where you didn’t want to reach the end, but you wanted the story to continue. I’ve only had tears at the end of two books. Of Mice and Men, and

Where the Red Fern Grows. Both conclusions had to do with endings. I don't like endings! I've only had tears at the end of about five movies - and they almost all had to do with endings. Titanic got me. ET was in there, Schindler's List was in there, not because of endings, but for crying out loud, it's Schindler's list. The first movie I remember shedding tears was, and Lord, I'm about to lose all credibility with you people, was Star Trek Two, where Spock dies in the end. I was nine - and although I didn't really care about Spock or really the show for that matter, it seemed like an end of a beloved character. The end of something special. I don't like endings. They brought Spock back in the next movie, no big deal. But we feel the passage of time, when what was familiar is no longer there. You can reminisce about people who are no longer with us, you can recall places and stores, houses and favorite spots to where you can no longer return. It's weird to drive by a house that you used to live in, and there is a sense that you just don't belong. You can't go back home again, they say. I don't like endings. And death is that final ending.

Samson found out about endings. This is the last of our Judges in our Judges sermon series. Samson, tied and bound to the pillars of the pagan temple. He prays one last time, regains his strength, and brings the house down. At the end of the story, He is buried under the rock. His body was found, and his story is no more.

And pair that with Jesus. Jesus tied and bound to the pillar we call a cross. He prays one last time, and the earth shakes and trembles, the temple curtain is torn in two. At the end of the story, He is buried in the rock. But, and this is a big but. But his body, not found. That Sunday, after the sabbath rest, the women at the tomb are surprised to find angels. And the proclamation that HE IS ALIVE. He would appear to his Disciples. He would continue to appear to others. He is not dead but he is alive. There was no mistake about it. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried. They jabbed him in the side with a spear just to make sure of it. They laid him in a tomb and went home to cry. The end had come. And if the disciples were anything like me, they'd say something like, "It was a good run. We had fun, did a lot of good things, helped a lot of people, but it's over." They were not expecting the resurrection. They were not expecting for the story to continue. They thought they had closed the book. They were not in hopeful expectation of anything else. After the sabbath was over, the day of rest, at first chance, the ladies went back to the tomb, not to see if anything had happened, not anticipating a surprise, but they were bringing spices and embalming materials. As was the custom, they were going to prepare the body for its final resting place. I don't like endings! And this was the ending of endings! The son of God. Dead, and lying in a lonely tomb. But you know the story. They found the entrance of the tomb opened, with an angel who shared that Jesus was not dead, the story has not ended, but a new chapter had begun. And Jesus was going to meet his Disciples very soon. It's not game over, but game on!

There are a lot of themes that one can find in the Easter Story. New Life, Resurrection, Salvation, Forgiveness, and to each of us, Easter might mean something a little different, but the fact that Jesus has been raised gives us people of faith hope that God has something still to say to each and every one of us. And for me, I find in the Easter narrative the joy that our stories have no end. That our travels will continue and that even death is just a momentary pause upon our journey.

Just look at how the Disciples took the news of the Resurrection. They were going to go home and later on life they would tell their grand kids of their adventures back in the day. And they would have lived uneventful lives and history would have forgotten them. But Jesus came back, and gave them the words, "Go into all the world, preach the Gospel to all creation." And they did. Here is where the Disciples went after the Resurrection, continuing the story:

ANDREW

He was the first apostle, and the brother of Simon Peter. After the Resurrection he was said to have been a missionary in Asia Minor and Greece, and modern Russia and Poland.

According to traditional accounts, he was crucified by order of the Roman Governor in Greece, thirty years after

the Resurrection. He did not have a typical cross, but an X shaped cross, and is now called the Cross of St. Andrew. Some of his bones have made it to Scotland, where he is the patron saint. Hence, the flag of Great Britain has the Cross of St. Andrew in the background.

BARTHOLOMEW

Always mentioned in the Gospels in connection with Philip, he and Philip may have been close friends; Philip brought Bartholomew to Jesus. He is said to have preached in India, Mesopotamia, Persia, Egypt, Armenia, Lycaonia, Phrygia, and on the shores of the Black Sea.

According to traditional accounts, he was flayed alive and crucified, head downward, in Armenia as punishment for having converted the King of Armenia to the Christian faith; the date is uncertain.

JAMES the elder

Son of Zebedee and Salome and brother of Saint John the Apostle. He is said to have preached in Samaria, Judea, and Spain.

He was the first apostle to be martyred when he was put to death in Jerusalem by the sword at the command of Herod, ten years after the Resurrection.

JAMES the younger

He didn't leave the area, but instead became the first Bishop of Jerusalem. He was martyred c.62 at Jerusalem by being thrown from a pinnacle of the Temple, then stoned and beaten with clubs and mallets, while praying for his attackers.

JOHN the Evangelist

He was the son of Zebedee and Salome and the brother of James the Greater. In the hour of our Lord's Passion he stood at the foot of the cross, and Jesus made him the guardian of his mother Mary. He is said to have founded churches in Asia Minor and baptized converts in Samaria. Traditionally, the fourth Gospel, three Epistles, and the Book of Revelation have been attributed to his authorship. He is the only one who made it to old age.

JUDAS Iscariot

He betrayed Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane. He didn't see how the story ended. He thought the tale had ended. He hanged himself right after the crucifixion.

Jude

His parents were Cleophas, who died a martyr, and Mary, who stood at the foot of the cross with Jesus' mother Mary. He is said to have preached in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Persia. He converted minor kings in the area. According to traditional accounts, Jude was beaten to death with a club, then beheaded, in Persia, sometime before the end of the first century.

Matthew

A tax collector whom Jesus befriended. He would later write the Gospel of Matthew. He would find himself preaching and converting in Northern Africa. He would bite it by a sword in his old age.

MATTHIAS

He was chosen an apostle to replace Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:21–26). He is said to have preached the Gospel for more than 30 years in Judea, Egypt, and Ethiopia. According to traditional accounts, he was stoned to death in Africa c.80.

PAUL, also known as Saul Although not one of the Twelve Disciples, Christ chose him after his Resurrection to preach the Gospel. Paul made his way all over the Mediterranean, possibly even Spain. He was the most prolific writer of our New Testament. As a Roman citizen, he was exempt from crucifixion, so he was beheaded with a sword, in Rome c.64.

PETER

The number one disciple. Traditionally, he has always been considered the first bishop of Rome. He was crucified upside down (because he claimed he was not worthy to die in the same manner as Christ) in Rome c.64.

PHILIP

Originally a disciple of John the Baptist, he brought Bartholomew to Jesus. He is said to have preached in Asia Minor. According to traditional accounts, he was martyred c.80 at Hierapolis, Phrygia.

SIMON the Zealot

Not much is known about Simon; he is said to have preached on the Black Sea, in Egypt, Northern Africa, Persia, and actually found his way to Britain.

He was martyred, but the location is uncertain; some claim that he was crucified, others claim that he was sawn in half. In any case, it wasn't pretty.

THOMAS, also known as Didymus; "Doubting Thomas"

He is best remembered for doubting the resurrection until he was allowed to touch Christ's wounds. He is said to have preached in Parthia, Persia, and India. According to traditional accounts, he was pierced through with spears by four soldiers, c.72 in India.

Why do I share with you the lives of the Apostles? Especially if most of them died in horrible, gruesome ways? For me, this is the number one piece of evidence for the Resurrection story. They truly believe that the story continued. And that they were the next chapters in that book of faith. They went to the ends of the earth, from England to India, Northern Europe to mid Africa, telling the story of Christ and God's love for us. That's what you do with a Resurrection story! You never give up hope! With a Resurrection story, you know that no matter what life throws at you, you live to fight another day! There might be someone in here who is fighting a foreclosure and they feel like their life is about to end. There's life after foreclosure. There might be someone in here with a marriage about to end and everything shatters around them. There's life after divorce - most times a better one! Maybe it's bankruptcy you're facing. There's life after bankruptcy! Maybe it's your kids. Maybe it's your parents, but the story doesn't end. Maybe you're staring at death in the face, the loss of a loved one, or maybe it's your own battle with life and with death. The Resurrection story tells us that even beyond that veil, there is something else. Death has been swallowed up in victory, where o death is your victory? Where o death is your sting? But thanks be to God that he gives us the victory in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't like endings. Easter reminds us that winter leads to spring. Easter people have no ending. He makes all things new. Even us. And because of Easter, I'm going to be OK. You're going to be OK. And the people of God said, Amen.