

You know the Easter story by heart.

The women making their way to the tomb at early dawn that Sunday morning.

The angel rolling away the stone, and the astonishing message:

“He is not here...HE IS RISEN!”

Most of our neighbors know the story too.

They’re not interested in information about Easter –  
they can find that on the internet!

But there IS something they want to know:

“Why this important? What does it mean for my life?”

Our task is to tell them!

To give the answer, “THIS IS WHAT EASTER MEANS TO ME!”  
in our words and in our lives.

So this morning, instead of the usual TEXT and SERMON,

I would simply like to talk to you, to tell you, as plainly and truthfully as I can,  
WHAT EASTER MEANS TO ME...

in the hope that it will help you reflect on what it means to you,  
and encourage you to share in a personal way with others.

(come out of the pulpit)

**WHAT DOES EASTER MEAN TO ME?**

I began to think about it when I was a small boy.

Easter mornings started, quite literally, as journeys in the dark.

Each Easter, My parents woke me and my siblings at 4 a.m., bundled us  
into the car and drove us across town to the Indiana State Fairgrounds Coliseum  
for the city-wide Easter pageant...

a 90-minute passion play enacted in the cavernous darkness of the coliseum,  
with spotlights trained on the scenes  
and an invisible choir singing their beautiful, haunting music  
far above the stage floor.

I had only a bit part. Along with a couple of hundred other “extras” dressed in robes and sandals, I came out as part of the throng waving palm branches and welcoming Jesus,  
who rode in robed in brilliant white, sitting on a real, live donkey.

I was only a face in the crowd, but it made a mighty impact on me.  
For I was THERE, seeing Him!

It has never ceased to be a day of special WONDER,  
of incredible sweetness and joyful music.

But it was not until years later that I truly understood how sweet, how joyful was the message of Easter Day.

For it was not until my college years and beyond that I met my SIN and finally realized its ugliness and its dreadful power.

I won't try to recount all the things I did growing up, but I'll admit I did my share of bullying and tattling, stealing and lying.

I was blind to my sin because, outwardly, I was a straight kid, a good student, the apple of my parents' eye.

I lived in a kind of moral La La Land until the day in 1967 when my college roommate sat me down and told me he was moving out and getting someone different.

I looked at him dumbly. “Why?” I asked.

Very simply and humbly, and without any malice, he told me,  
“Because I've never met anyone so arrogant as you!”

The moment he said it, I knew it was the truth.

The realization was frightening. Shameful. I wanted to crawl in a hole and hide.

I knew my sin – the sin of PRIDE – but I did not yet know how deeply my pride could wound others.

That came with marriage.

Sue and I were 21 when we married, and I was not only too young, but too selfish to be able to care for a wife as a man should.

As a young husband I was thoughtless and self-absorbed, first at the seminary, then later as a fledgling pastor.

Already at the seminary we had such a fight that I struck her.

Out in the parish, our “Dream World” was eroded by “Disillusionment” and turned into “Misery.”

I neglected my wife,

I screamed at my children,

I kicked a hole in the clothes hamper.

At times I wondered if I was fit for the ministry,

and we both began to doubt that we loved one another.

And year after year, there came Good Friday - the sorrowful trip to the cross, and the realization that it was ME, it was my filthy, foolish, selfish pride and lust and anger that pinned Jesus there.

I realized that I was living the role of Peter, who had so easily boasted great things, and then denied his Lord.

On the heels of Good Friday would come Easter morning – my wife and daughters singing sweet music, and the flowers on the chicken wire cross, and their voices being the voice of Jesus, forgiving me as He’d forgiven Peter, saying once more, “Feed my sheep.”

That’s the first thing Easter means to me: because Jesus lives,  
**THERE IS A NEW BEGINNING WHEN I FAIL.**

The second thing Easter means to me is what God does about DEATH.

I knew about death, of course.

Intellectually. Academically. I preached about it. I conducted funerals.

But I did not meet death in all its hideous power until it took my PARENTS, one by one.

The year was 1998.

I got word of a deadly diagnosis for my father. Esophageal cancer.

It was “operable,” said the doctor, and so they operated,

and Dad appeared to do well for a time. But just months later, the cancer returned in a more aggressive, diffused form in his blood.

There would be no operation this time.

My sister Natalie called in October that year. “If you want to see Dad,” she told me, “you’d better come now.”

I made the trip home. I spotted Dad in the airport terminal in Indianapolis before he spotted me. He sat on a stool – withered and gaunt from the disease. I barely recognized him.

But it WAS him – the same man, with the same sure faith.

We had a good visit, a grateful, loving visit, and I was mightily encouraged by his calm and peace. A man who knew Jesus. Knew himself forgiven. Knew where he was going. Completely unafraid.

He died on February 8. It was news I had expected, but no longer dreaded, because of Easter.

My mother’s death, on the other hand, came suddenly.

It was eight years later - a Friday morning, April 20, 2007. My 60<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The phone rang early.

“It’s either my first birthday call, or somebody died,” I joked to Sue.

My sister – the family messenger – was on the phone with the news:

“Mom died this morning.”

She had had some mini-strokes. Had had to move into a smaller place. Give up driving. But I hadn’t expected this so soon.

Mom, with her mercurial moods – up and down.

Mom the writer, the artist, my biggest fan and my encourager.

Now Mom had gone too.

We kids gathered to clean out mom’s belongings, and I reflected on my parents.

Both of them brought into sharp relief the words written long ago by St. Paul:

**“For to me, to LIVE is Christ...”**

Together they had lived for Christ.

Raised their kids for Christ.

Made banners for Christ.

As I stood in Forest Lawn Cemetery with the family on that grey, rainy day of mom's committal, I knew the rest of it with certainty:  
**"To DIE is GAIN."**

For that's what Easter now means, fully, sweetly, and joyfully to me.  
**DEATH HAS BEEN SWALLOWED UP IN VICTORY**  
for them,  
for me,  
for all who have trusted in Jesus Christ.

So now, each time I sit with a family to plan a funeral or a memorial, I like to say,  
"Let's not have a service that's too gloomy."  
**WE'RE EASTER PEOPLE!"**

Today we've gathered on yet another Easter morning.  
Easter people, you and I.

Thinking today about what **EASTER MEANS TO US.**

There's a new layer to it this time, for we are soon to be parted as Sue and I move away to Illinois.

I reflect on the work to which God called me so long ago.  
On the work I've spent 11 years doing here in Oregon City.  
The baptisms, confirmations, marriages, burials, the countless visits and talks.

On Sundays, when the worship is ended and the people have gone home, I have often found myself standing in the empty sanctuary wondering, "What really happened here today?"  
Were lives really touched and helped, or was this just a pious formality?

These worship times together are, after all, just a tiny fraction of life's busy calendar. I wonder what connection is made between the sermons and Scriptures and songs and prayers in here...and what goes on out there:  
the daily grind – the work days and school days and retirement days  
and just plain mundane stuff that fills our calendars.

Satan likes to whisper to me that it's all a colossal waste of time and energy.  
That "boys will be boys" and "it is what it is" and  
"You can't change human nature."

I think, sadly, of people who have rebelled, defected, disappeared.  
I think of the two missions we began with such hope, and how both  
finally had to be suspended.  
I have times of deep discouragement.

Then along comes Easter  
and the great words of 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul draws on the message  
to frame his own answer to Satan's disappointing dirge...

**Therefore, me beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always  
abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as you know that  
IN THE LORD YOUR LABOR IS NOT IN VAIN!**

And I begin to remember the lives changed,  
the faith awakened, the griefs comforted, the countless deeds of love in Jesus' name  
that I have seen in this place, and I take heart again.

I remember a newly-active Larry Alderman telling me, "It's fun to be a Christian!"  
I saw Cheryl Shrode the seeker become Cheryl the teacher,  
watched Brian Pierson transformed from a church spectator to  
an elder with a pastoral heart,  
looked on with amazement as Patrick Lovejoy and Tom  
Arnold enrolled at the seminary,  
and marveled at Raejean Kuhnau, who recovered from a near-fatal  
auto accident and later became the congregation's Love INC  
coordinator..

I could multiply the stories endlessly, but you get the idea.

Jesus is ALIVE, and He has been making many of you COME ALIVE too, hasn't He?  
And so I am encouraged,  
because you are the evidence that all this pastoral laboring is not in vain.

Each time I go to the ordination or installation of a new pastor,  
and we brothers gather round the new fellow and put our hands on his head,  
that's the verse I like best to say over him,  
so that he will be assured even before he begins the new task:  
**IN THE LORD, YOUR LABOR IS NOT IN VAIN!**

That's what EASTER MEANS TO ME.  
A new beginning after the failure and shame of our SIN.  
Comfort and hope in the face of DEATH.

The encouragement that our daily LABOR IS NOT IN VAIN.

I urge you, my friend, to answer the question for yourself:  
WHAT DOES EASTER MEAN TO ME?

And then faithfully to say it and live it in your life.