

I Love to Tell the Story
Matthew 28:1-10 and Acts 10:34-43
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Preached April 24, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

Every family has stories, favorite stories that they like to drag out every so often, even if the telling of the story results in the embarrassment of one of the characters. Some of you know that my father was a concert violinist, whose passion in life was classical music. Some of you may also know that my sister's name is Allegra, a name which is only slightly different than Allegro which is the Latin musical term for "lively." Now, according to my mother, my father wanted to name all his children after musical terms. And so, when I, the eldest, was born, he determined that I should be named Adagio, meaning "in an easy, graceful manner." When I learned about this as a teenager, I thought it was pretty cool and began practicing my Italian accent so that I could win points with the ladies by saying, "Hi, my name is Adagio" while pretending to be a foreign exchange student. Alas, the truth is that I ended up being named after Jerry Van Dyke, whose character on the old Dick Van Dyke Show was named Stacey. But it was actually my brother who fared the best by not having his name music-fied. He was to be named Largo, or "slow," a description which he would not have found amusing later in life. But my mother prevailed two out of three and only my sister was stuck with a name she always had to explain. All families have their stories.

But there is usually a strange and underlying twist to all stories, no matter how grand or mythic they become. In fact, the name Stacey is a shortened form of the Greek name Anastasio, meaning literally “one who will rise again,” or, more succinctly and appropriately for today, “resurrection.” Either that, or the name Stacey comes from Eustace, but I prefer the former, thank you very much. And so today, I am privileged to preach not the adagio of Jesus Christ, but the anastasio of Jesus Christ, not the easy graceful manner of our Lord, but the resurrection of our Lord. My wife Flora suggested that it might seem pompous to make such a statement, and she may be right. However, I offer this play on words not to draw attention to myself but to speak about the power of story in our lives, and my purpose shall be made clearer in a short while.

Stories give shape to our lives. They connect us with something larger than ourselves, with other people, with ideas and dreams we could never come up with on our own. Children love to hear the story about their birth. I suppose it is their way of connecting with what came before them, but also in pinpointing just when it is they became important. Hollywood thrives on stories. There are huge organizations whose sole purpose is to cultivate the art of storytelling. But even more than that, we live stories, or at least, we live what one day may be a story told by a child or a biographer. “All the world's a stage,” said Shakespeare, who recognized that we spend our days as characters in a great drama. Each of us have stories to tell about faith or family or failure, and what makes those stories truly

our own is that they are our stories; we have lived them or are living them. We may think they are not worth hearing or observing, but perhaps that is only because we don't know who is listening or watching. If Peter and the other disciples had a motto in the good old days, it must have been "I love to tell the story," because they went about it constantly and with great passion. The way the disciples grew in faith was by telling their story, over and over and over again. They told it in the temple, they told it in the council chambers in Jerusalem, they told it in the marketplace, they even told it so long and hard that people fell asleep and tumbled from third story windows. They told it to gentiles, kings, rulers, jailers, Samaritans, barbarians, anyone who would listen. And they did it so well that even when it was not seemingly on the agenda to tell the story, God made sure they did.

And this is how Peter ended up in the home of Cornelius the Centurion telling the story from Acts we just heard. Peter had just had a disturbing dream in which something like a sheet descended from heaven filled with all sorts of critters, previously inedible by good Jews like him, which God tells him to kill and eat. The point of the dream, of course is not to improve Peter's diet but that God might reveal to Peter that the good news of Jesus Christ is intended for an audience larger than the Jews alone. At about the same time, an angel of God urges Cornelius to seek out Peter and so the stage is set for Peter's visit to the town of Caesarea and the home of Cornelius. Surrounded by a crowd of eager listeners, relatives and friends of Cornelius, Peter gives it all he's got. And as he does, an

amazing thing happens: the Gentiles in the room are filled with the Holy Spirit and Peter's vision is fulfilled. The Word of the Lord now reaches the Gentiles, and another page is turned in the story of the early church. The faith of Israel is now brought outside Israel and the world is transformed.

What is notable here is that the Gentiles are not converted by dogma or doctrine, they are not convinced by philosophical logic. Rather, what happens is that with the simple, and we might suspect, passionate telling of the story, the transformation of the resurrected Jesus becomes the transformation of the Gentiles. There is power in the story, like there is power in the name of Jesus. Good things happen when you tell the story. Barriers between nations are removed, caste systems break down, enemies are reconciled, an utter transformation takes place. Please do not misunderstand me; it is not the words themselves, like some magical incantation, that call down the Holy Spirit on unwilling and unsuspecting listeners. Rather, it is the power of the story and the passion of its speakers which allow the transformative power of God to shine through and change people. Each time the story is told, and each time the story is lived, the resurrection is re-enacted in miniature and God's transformative power enters the world in another new way and in another new life.

Now, there is no such thing as an example of resurrection. You might have heard about how such and such football player has resurrected his career after a life threatening injury. You might have heard about comatose people waking up after

years of being unconscious. You may even have experienced something that felt like a resurrection in your own life. But none of these are examples of resurrection itself, only analogies. They are however, examples of what the resurrection is about, namely transformation. And each transformation comes with a story, one which much be told or lived, if it is to have any power to transform the world.

Allow me to offer you an example. As an idealistic graduate of Stanford University, Amy Biehl was completing a course of study as a Fulbright exchange scholar in South Africa where she had helped to develop voter registration programs for blacks and women as that nation's first all-race elections approached in April, 1994. On August 25, 1993, while Amy was driving three black colleagues back to Cape Town's Guguletu Township, a group of youths pelted her car with stones and forced it to stop. Dozens of young men then surrounded the car repeating the militant Pan Africanist Congress chant, "One settler [white person], one bullet!" Amy was then pulled from the car, struck in the head with a brick as she tried to flee, and then beaten and stabbed in the heart while she lay on the ground. During the attack, Amy's black friends yelled that she was a "comrade" and friend of black South Africa, but to no avail. Amy was carried back to the car after the attack by her friends who then drove her to the nearest police station where she died. Amy was 26 years old at the time of her murder.

A few years back, the news magazine "60 Minutes" ran a segment which still gives me chills when I think about it. It was about Amy Biehl's death and the

way Amy's parents were able to find God's grace in the midst of tragedy. For many families, a tragedy like this one is an opportunity to circle the wagons, to cry out for vengeance, to retreat into the pain inflicted upon them. But following Amy's death, the Biehls have taken a different approach -- they have taken on her work. Mr. and Mrs. Biehl spend much of their time in South Africa, supporting a school where a young sister of one of the convicted murderers attends. They have also started a commercial bakery to provide jobs, giving lavishly of their time, compassion and money to the township where their daughter worked and was murdered. And at the clemency hearing for the killers, they asked that the young men responsible be set free.

The reporter several times asked the Biehls how they could be so generous, where was their anger, their sense of injustice? The Biehls consistently responded that they were living Amy's legacy, doing what she had been doing, what she would want of them. There was no condescension, no anger evident either in their words or in the video clips of their actions. Clearly, this puzzled the reporter who asked the same question of Archbishop Desmond Tutu: How can the Biehls' work amongst these people? Like many I'm sure, I found Bishop Tutu's response very interesting. He said it was a "mystery" how one might forgive such a grievous wrong and that we would do well to leave it as a mystery, not trying to pin down exactly how or why the Biehls were choosing these actions, but rather to be inspired, to be transformed, by their actions. I'm inclined to think that Amy's

actions, the story which Amy lived, offered divine transformation which her parents, and a township in South Africa are now experiencing.

Friends, the miracle of Easter is not that Jesus was raised from the dead, but that divine transformation takes place still today in the hearts and lives of people who hear or observe the story. It happened to the Gentiles, it happened to the martyrs of the early church; it happened to Martin Luther, it has happened to countless people in every corner of the world and in every seat in this church and it can happen to you each and every day, beginning with today. The resurrection cannot be confined to being an article of faith, but must be a living reality in every generation. It happened only once yet it happens every day, each time we tell or live out the story of Jesus' life, death resurrection, and ascension. But we would be mistaken if we believed that all that was necessary was to record and play back the stories of Jesus. As important as that is in bringing transformation to the world, the story is perhaps more profoundly told in the way we lead our lives. By that I mean that the Gospel story is told and seen in the stories of our lives. It's how we tell the Bible stories in Church School and at home, but also in how we say "no" to dinners on the run. It is how we share our faith with our friends but also how we demonstrate our integrity to them in the little things. In every case though, it is about how we are transformed by God in the stories of our lives. In my case, that means living into the fullness of my name. In your case, well, that's between you and God. But it is the transformation of the world which took place that Easter

morning which makes possible the living and the telling of the story of our lives in Christ and in the world.

Matthew's gospel reports that after the two Mary's were told by the angel that Jesus was risen, "they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples." May we leave here this morning afraid, yet filled with joy, running to tell others -- spine tinglingly afraid of what our discipleship might mean, but joy filled at the prospect of telling the story, and may we leave here with that old hymn on our lips, "I love to tell the story; 'Twill be my theme I glory; To tell the old, old story of Jesus and his love." Amen.