

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 21st, 2019 (Easter Sunday)
And Now You Know the Rest of the Story
Rev. John Crow

Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:14-29
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
Luke 24:1-12

I still remember about 10 years ago, while I was driving somewhere for work, hearing a story on the radio that got me completely hooked. I got where I was going, but wanted to hear how it ended, so I stayed in my vehicle until I heard those immortal words, “And now you know the rest of the story.” Paul Harvey was a master story teller. He shared stories, usually about people we have heard of, but weaving them with previously unknown connections. Story is powerful. I want you to know the rest of the story about the greatest story ever told. Sure, we could probably all recite the events of that first Easter as recorded in today’s gospel, but do we really know what it all means? Honestly, most of us get it wrong. Too often, I myself have gotten it wrong. As Christians, we may call ourselves Easter people, but we think and act like Good Friday people. The differences are subtle, so you are going to have to pay close attention today, but the consequences are very significant because we will get the results to which our beliefs lead us.

If I asked the question, *Why did the 2nd person of the Trinity come to live among us*, you would probably say, *To pay the price for our sins by dying on the cross*. While this answer is correct, it is also incomplete. And an incomplete answer to something so central to our beliefs has serious ramifications. Like I said, this makes us essentially Good Friday people, because it's all about the Plan of Salvation. Don't get me wrong; the Plan of Salvation is important, but it is not the end of the story. Nor is it the gospel. It is intertwined with the gospel, and a result of the gospel, but the good news is the bigger story. Jesus came to live and preach the gospel of the Kingdom of Heaven. If that is what He was about, then shouldn't we be about the same thing? Why, then, are we so wrapped up in the Plan of Salvation? Don't worry, it's not your fault. This is a problem I only became aware of by reading Scot McKnight's book, The King Jesus Gospel. People have been getting this wrong for hundreds of years.

According to the Plan of Salvation, Jesus's primary role was that of sacrificial lamb, and the most important day was Good Friday. As a result, what He accomplished is all about us—those who will spend eternity with Him. I think you can already see how conflating the Plan of Salvation with the gospel misses some important points.

Let's look at some of the most glaring ways in which the Plan of Salvation fails to tell the whole story. First, the Plan of Salvation sets up a binary state for the individual. Either you are born again, or you are not. And because the state of your soul is an individual decision to accept Christ or not, all we can do for one another is encourage and pray for each other. But ultimately, we cannot know with certainty on this side of eternity who is saved and who isn't. The Plan of Salvation is thereby also personal and private. One can be a believer and not really speak of it, or demonstrate it in an obvious way through action. I've known people like this. They think they are just fine being solitary Christians.

I want to remind you that the Plan of Salvation isn't bad, nor is it wrong. It just isn't the full story. Those who rely on the Plan of Salvation too much are more likely to end up with a version of Christianity that is abstract and philosophical. In other words, one could simply take the New Testament epistles, and get rid of everything else in both the Old and New Testaments. Think about it: If eternal life is all about believing correctly, then all one needs is a set of principles to adhere to, and *viola!* That's it. End of story. The problem is, it's the end of the wrong story. The Plan of Salvation is the solution to the *how do I get saved from my sins?* story.

As I've mentioned earlier, this story requires neither the Old Testament, nor anyone other than God and oneself. It doesn't even require the preaching of Jesus Christ, nor his ascension. Even His resurrection seems secondary to His substitutionary death on the cross.

Now you must understand, I've been dissecting a stand-alone Plan of Salvation. In reality this story doesn't stand alone. It is an integral part of the much larger, much grander gospel story. Now that I've laid bare the shortcomings of being solely a Good Friday Christian, let's allow ourselves to open the windows and breath in the fresh air of the entire gospel story.

The gospel story is not only the answer to *how do I get saved from my sins?*, but it is also the answer to *how does God fulfill His promise to Abraham of blessing the entire world, as well as the hopes of every Old Testament prophet, including King David?* In other words, the gospel story encompasses the entire Bible, and it isn't done yet! The Plan of Salvation is completed the day I arise in eternity, but the gospel story is only completed as our reading in 1 Corinthians 15 tells us, once all enemies are defeated by Christ including Death itself! Christ is a conquering king.

Yes, He is the sacrificial lamb of the Plan of Salvation, but He is also so much more.

I could just about wrap it up there, but I need to take a step back for a moment. In case you didn't catch it, the gospel is the resolution to the Story of Israel. So no, you can't throw out your Old Testaments. Today's reading in Acts 10 tells us that the prophets bear witness to Jesus as the one God appointed. Centuries of yearning came to an end in Christ. Even us today, we are part of God's promise to Abraham. And the gospel story still resolves the greatest yearning of our hearts today.

The gospel story is historical, earthy, and messy. It involves real people in real places at an actual point in history. It involves things like perfume, oil, dust, water, bread, wine, tears, blood, and nails—every day things. The gospel could never be abstract or philosophical. If you disembodied God's plan for mankind, you get something entirely less than the gospel. Jesus was and is, a real person. His entire life on earth matters, not just His death on a cross. The friendship He shared with his disciples is what He still offers us today. The gospel is relational. Having a relationship with God is so much greater than merely believing the right things.

Imagine your life without any relationships. None. It would be so empty. That is why pretty much the worst punishment one can get in prison is being put in solitary confinement. God created us for relationship—with one another and with Him.

And relationships aren't static; they change over time. They can grow or they can shrivel, but they rarely stay the same. Relational growth with Christ is what the gospel offers us. While the Plan of Salvation requires us to trust in the remission arrangement established by Christ, the gospel requires us to trust in the person of Jesus himself (Dallas Willard, The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God, para.). It's not mere obedience, but discipleship increasing our faith and love that transforms our wills to be more like Christ's. Obeying because you know it is right is hard to do. Obeying because it is what you genuinely want to do is quite easy. Part of the gospel good news is that it doesn't leave us the same.

The gospel completes the Story of Israel in a way that the Plan of Salvation never could. In fact, faithful Jews already believed in eternal life, as shown by Martha when she told Jesus that she knew Lazarus would rise again on the last day (John 11:24). The Jews of Jesus' day were waiting for something more—a Messiah who would be king. And that is the gospel. Jesus Christ, the Messiah, is King. Then,

now, and for all eternity. He is the triumphant ruler over all. Christ has died. Christ is Risen. Christ will come again. Ultimate victory is ours; everything else is secondary. What is greater than a personal salvation message? Jesus' message that the Kingdom of Heaven is near.

That means the question isn't so much *Am I saved?* But rather *Am I a citizen of the Kingdom?* Or better yet, *Are WE citizens of the Kingdom?* There are two fine points here where the question for the Plan of Salvation differs from the question for the gospel. First is the matter of chronology. One is saved for a future life in eternity. At it's worst, the Plan of Salvation is an insurance policy that one keeps hidden away, only to be thought about when needed. Being a gospel citizen of the Kingdom is for the here and now as much as it is for eternity. There is Kingdom work to be done today. By being faithful citizens of the Kingdom, we grow more like Christ through doing the Kingdom work God has given us.

Then there is the matter of belonging. Being saved is a strictly individual matter and can unfortunately lead to an *us vs them* way of thinking. Such a mentality can go unnoticed, and is dangerous. On the other hand, one experiences the Kingdom through worship in community. We sing, read Scripture, pray, and receive the

Eucharist in community. These are all tastes of the Kingdom. If you are a citizen of the Kingdom, then you inherently belong. You have a spiritual home. In fact, one is invited to participate in some Kingdom activities *before* being saved. One need not say *yes* to Christ before worshipping. So the Kingdom's borders are a little more fuzzy. It's less a question of is one in or out, because the Kingdom is always inviting others to come and see. And one cannot come and see outside of community.

The final piece of the gospel completing the Story of Israel is that there is no way the gospel can be merely private and personal. The good news is political. And by that I mean it demands our full loyalty and calls us to action now. Whereas a Good Friday Christian may keep his new life in Christ as almost a secret, a true Easter Christian understands that Kingdom is the top priority, and cannot be kept secret. I think communist countries like the USSR and China didn't get much right, but there is one thing they correctly understood—Christianity is dangerous. Christians are loyal to the Kingdom first, and then their state. Christians take action based on their belief in, and relationship with Christ. These things scare communist leaders. A Kingdom citizen has already been mentally and spiritually freed from anything the state can do to them. They know where their ultimate loyalty lies.

As we prepare to come to the table today, let us do so not merely as Good Friday Christians, but as true Easter Christians. Nor as those who are merely saved, but as Kingdom citizens. Jesus died a brutal death on the cross to pay the price that we should have paid, for our sins. His resurrection establishes our hope for eternal life with Him. His entire ministry, including His death, resurrection, and ascension demonstrate His eternal kingship over all authorities, even Death itself. This mysterious meal that we share unites us to the Story of Israel, and involves common stuff of life: bread and juice. It is a meal we share with one another, and mysteriously, as did the disciples, we share it in relationship with Christ Himself, who is also the very meal. This isn't a meal on the run and it isn't private. The Eucharist doesn't leave us the same as before. Like the Kingdom it represents, there is an expectation of our participation. It also points to the final celebration feast when our eternal King will draw the Church—His bride—to Himself in perfect love. In other words, communion, like Easter, is so much more than a celebration of our individual salvation through Christ. And now you know the rest of the story.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.