

Epworth Chapel on the Green
April 16, 2017
Easter Sunday: Jesus, the Rule-Breaker
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Acts 10:34-43
Psalm 118:14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
John 20:1-18

In general, Americans LOVE sports. Last month many were gripped by March Madness. Before that was the Superbowl. And when it's on, who can ignore the World Series? We get hooked by the struggle and the sheer ability of those who rise to greatness. But what if basketball teams could have different numbers of players on the court at any time? Or if certain football players were allowed to use steroids? What if some baseball teams needed four or five outs before they had to stop batting? I know, these are crazy ideas, but they are only crazy because we have an innate sense of fairness, which underpins the rules that help make sports what they are. If there were no rules, it would be chaos, and we would lose interest.

That being said, one would think that rule-breakers would be universally despised; but that isn't always the case. We only need to look at the popularity of movies about gun slingers of the old West, or of the Han Solo character from Star Wars, to see how easily we can overlook one's disregard for rules. But we are here today to

celebrate Easter. Today has nothing to do with rules. Or does it? The world is full of rules. I contend that Jesus was the premier rule-breaker, and that Easter is a celebration of Christ breaking the rules of the world. As I look around me, I see a room full of people who have largely lived their lives by the rules, so breaking rules may seem like a strange thing to celebrate and emulate. Let's take a look together, shall we?

One of the rules that Jesus broke on that first Easter was to bring about change while disregarding the powerful. This was something that Jesus had been doing His whole life. He didn't pursue elite academic achievements or political power; He was the son of a carpenter who never held any office of any kind. Most of His ministry didn't take place in and around Jerusalem—the political center of Israel—but rather in Galilee. This would be the equivalent of starting a national movement based in Idaho. And most importantly, rather than focusing His ministry on winning over the Pharisees, He went to the poor, the blind, fishermen, and tax collectors.

Everyone knows that if you want to have an impact, you need money and power. This rule is universal, in that it is just as true in America today, as it was half-way around the world 2,000 years ago. If one wants to have an impact and lacks money

or power, then it is imperative that one gets the support of those who possess these things. If one fails to gain the support of the wealthy and powerful, then there are generally two outcomes: One, the movement goes nowhere, and is soon forgotten; or two, the movement angers the rich and powerful who shut it down one way or another. Remember Occupy Wall Street? It was big news for a while, and yet I don't believe it had any long-lasting impact of any kind. The rule of needing wealth and power to create change isn't written down anywhere, because it doesn't need to be—it's simply how things are. One would be foolish to disregard this. It reminds me of the lyrics from an old Jim Croce song, "You don't pull on Superman's cape. You don't spit into the wind. You don't pull the mask off that old Lone Ranger, and you don't mess around with Jim."

Jesus fits this description. His habitual disregard for the powerful continued on Easter morning. Was Jesus as foolish as one who spits into the wind? If Jesus came to plant his kingdom—the Church—on Earth, then surely the best way to do so would be through the halls of power. Yet He seems to be doing His best to do just the opposite! Who does He appear to first? A couple of powerless women. I don't know about you, but if I had been resurrected after being killed, I think I would want to go pay a visit right away to my executioners. Surprise! And in Jesus' case, how better to get His Church started than by converting the Jewish

leaders? That would seem the logical place to start. But Jesus instead retreats to Galilee, and continues to focus on His disciples. No strategic planning focus group would recommend this course of action, yet that was what Jesus did—and it worked.

It may have occurred to you that there is an even greater natural rule that Jesus broke on Easter morning: He didn't stay dead! As universal rules go, this has to be at the top: The dead stay dead. And this isn't something that required modern science and medicine to prove—even 2,000 years ago this was a well-known rule. They may have gotten it wrong some times as to when someone was actually dead, and thus some did revive after a day or two, but they knew that if someone was truly dead, they stayed that way.

Ah, but Jesus didn't like this rule either. After all, death is a weapon of the enemy, so Jesus had to prove that the enemy was powerless over Him. By staying in the tomb for three days there was no question that He had genuinely died, because everyone knew that by the third day, the time for reviving was over. At that point, the body was truly dead beyond any doubt. So on the first Easter morning, Jesus broke the rule, and rose from the dead, and unlike Lazarus, Jesus would never die again. Jesus thus became the first of the resurrection, enabling all who follow Him

to follow Him in resurrection. As the hymn-writer Cecil Alexander wrote, Jesus was able to “unlock the gate of heav’n and let us in” (*There Is A Green Hill Far Away*). We mustn’t underestimate the importance of the resurrection. I know personally, that I tend to thank Jesus for dying for me. But I should also thank Him for rising for me. He died *and* rose for all of us. And according to Romans 6:5, our resurrection we have to look forward to will be “like His.” After His resurrection, Jesus wasn’t the same as before. As Oswald Chambers wrote, “He rose to a life that had never been before” (*My Utmost for His Highest*, 99). This reminds us that the new life that awaits us isn’t quite the same as the life we now live. It will be better in ways we cannot even comprehend.

This bit of rule-breaking is probably the hardest one for people to accept. Many people simply cannot believe that someone who was previously dead can now be alive. We’ve never seen such a thing. It doesn’t happen. By the same logic, the high priest was right when he accused Jesus of blasphemy for stating that he was the Messiah. To say such a thing was blasphemy—unless the one who said *was* the Messiah!

Many, if not most non-believers will readily agree that Jesus was a good teacher and a kind man. They just can’t go as far as to believe that He died and rose again.

Even a spiritual person has trouble with this, because everyone knows gods don't die. Immortality is kind of in the definition of being a god. For the son of God to have died and rose again shatters everything we think we know about the world, and such a belief has consequences—it requires a response on our part.

This would be a good place to end an Easter sermon: Jesus rose from the dead and we must respond. But...I've got one more bit of rule breaking that we cannot overlook as we celebrate Jesus the rule-breaker, and it has to do with that response of ours. Our New Testament reading today from Acts chapter 10 highlights the breaking of a rule as the apostle Peter experiences it first-hand. Peter finally catches God's vision, responding, "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right" (verse 34).

As far back as Abraham, with a few notable exceptions, God's vision had been entirely for his chosen people—the nation of Israel. The Pharisees of Jesus' day clung to their ancestry as the foundation of their righteousness before God.

While it was true that the Jews were God's chosen people, they didn't seem to get the hint that their special role was for the benefit of all mankind. Worse, Gentiles (along with Samaritans) were considered second-class citizens. Did you notice

that in last week's reading, the land bought with Judas' blood money was to be a cemetery for whom? Foreigners; not Jews. Jesus seemed perfectly happy to break the rule of caring more for Jews than others. We heard just a few weeks ago about how Jesus ministered to a Samaritan women by a well, thus breaking Jewish social norms. His final command to His followers was to go into the whole world to make disciples. He later sent the Holy Spirit who broke down language barriers at Pentecost for the benefit of all who were present. The Holy Spirit may also have been the one to warn Pilate's wife about harming Jesus. God's grand vision for renewing all of Creation broke the rules of the Jewish people. This is truly good news! Of course, this was God's plan all along, but rules set up by men tried to hinder God's vision.

How does this last bit of rule-breaking tie into our response to the events of Easter? Like the original disciples, we too, are to go into all the world to proclaim God's love and His plan to redeem all humanity. Easter requires a response because it is the great spiritual T-intersection—one must turn right or left, and the direction one chooses impacts everything. As I said earlier, Jesus didn't go into the halls of power, or even the preeminent cities of his day; that he left for us to do. And despite the fact that he didn't follow the rules, it worked. Here we are, 2,000 years

later, and half-way around the world, worshipping Christ due to the faithfulness of those who have gone before us.

Not only did Jesus not stay dead, he is alive and active right now. The earth has seen many great people come and go, and a few of them have their deeds recorded forever in history. Alexander the Great conquered most of the known world in his day. Abraham Lincoln preserved the union while ending slavery. Winston Churchill inspired England to stand up to the vastly superior military might of Nazi Germany. These are just a few people whom we remember. They accomplished a great deal. And even though they are dead, in one way or another, our lives are different because of what they did. But their actions were all in the past. It is different with Jesus, however. He paid the price for our salvation, which is made real and present in the mystery of the Eucharist. As Pastor Thelander pointed out in his Maundy Thursday sermon, partaking of the Eucharist isn't a mere memorial to remember what Jesus did for us so long ago; it is his offering of empowering grace for us today and every day—offered by the *living* Christ. And through this celebration, we too accept the role of being rule-breakers in the tradition of the martyrs. Consider what rules may be getting in the way of you living with reckless abandon for Christ. Maybe it's time for us to be more like Christ, and break some rules.

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