

TELLING STORIES TO KEEP HOPE ALIVE

“He said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here But go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’” (Mark 16:6-7)

It is 1945 and the final months of the Second World War. The Jews confined in the ghetto in Warsaw have all but lost hope. Each morning family members and friends take down the bodies of those who in despair hanged themselves during the night. Then, by chance, one of the Jews left alive overhears a news bulletin on a German officer’s radio. Jacob stumbles on the fact that Russian troops are advancing on the Polish capital and are now nearer than anyone had ever dared believe. At once, as the news spreads, the ghetto is galvanized with new life and fresh hope. Each morning everyone turns to Jacob for further bulletins, believing that he must have a radio hidden somewhere, a radio the Nazis know nothing about.

But the truth is that Jacob has no radio, so what is he to do? To keep up their spirits, he invents the news, giving free range to his lively imagination. And within a matter of days there are no longer any corpses to be cut down in the morning because people have had their despair dispelled by hope. For, as they all know, Jacob has a radio and good news to share. But then the Nazis discover the truth about Jacob’s non-existent source of news. They demand that he stand in front of his fellow Jews in the ghetto and admit that all his “good news” has been made up. He refuses and is shot there in front of them all.

The remaining Jews are herded into cattle cars and begin the dreaded journey to one of the death camps. But they never get there, for the train runs straight into the advancing Russian army, and the Jewish prisoners are set free. Jacob is dead, yes, but the good news he shared, the good news that he did not hear on his non-existent radio turns out to have been true all along. And the stories he told, they have kept hope alive, have kept his people alive until the day when they are free, free at last.

All this week, from Palm Sunday onwards, Christians in every part of the world have been telling the story that has kept hope alive for two thousand years. The story of Jesus moving resolutely through the stages of his Passion, suffering and dying for our sake, and not for ours only, but for the sake of the whole world. The story of his disciples who saw their hope being swallowed up by the darkness of utter despair. And now this morning, like Jacob in the Warsaw Ghetto, we have heard a bulletin of amazing good news. A bulletin that galvanized the first Christians and has filled every generation of Christians since with new life and fresh hope. And the bulletin goes like this:

“He said to them, ‘Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here But go, tell his disciples that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him, just as he told you.’”
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“Just as he told you” – and now you and I are charged to tell others, to share the story of Jesus risen from the dead in order to keep hope alive in all the ghettos of human existence. After all, why have hope in the Warsaw Ghetto, hemmed in on every side by the Nazis? Why have hope in the “Two-Thirds World”, hemmed in by impossible burdens of poverty and disease, hunger and insurmountable debt? Why have hope right now in this country, hemmed in by war and ballooning deficits, growing unemployment and gnawing uncertainty about the future? Why have hope in the world at large where the natural order which sustains our life together here on earth is sending out warning signals which for the most part we prefer to ignore?

Why have hope? That is no idle question this Easter morning. And the answer? Time and again the good news of Jesus risen from the dead inspires ordinary, fragile people like you and me to defy the odds, to believe that lasting change can happen, to give of themselves for the sake of others. And through those ordinary, fragile people like ourselves God is working his purpose out amid the world’s confusion and pain. And the good news of Easter is that

nothing, neither war, nor deficits, nor unemployment, nor loss of purpose, nor even death itself can frustrate God's loving purpose to save us all.

To help us remember that and to celebrate it this Easter Day, there are stories to be shared. Here are one or two of those stories by which God is keeping hope alive at this time.

Last night and again this morning 7,000 young people from all over Europe and beyond have gathered in a small French village to celebrate Easter with the monks of Taizé. A host of languages, a wild array of clothing and hairstyles, a range of religious affiliations or no affiliation at all, but all these young people are there because they are eager to hear the Easter story which keeps their hope alive.

Then there are the five students belonging to the Yale chapter of Engineers Without Borders who spent weeks sweltering in the summer heat of the West African country of Cameroon. They went there to install the water-tank they had specially designed for the people of a village which had no running water, no clean water at all. As a result everyone has suffered from gastrointestinal illnesses, but now, because those five Yale students were inspired to care, the villagers have hope, hope of a better and healthier future.

My Connecticut friends, Ellyn and Peter McGinnis, and their colleagues at the Amity Press in China have so far printed fifty million Bibles in Mandarin. With the approval of the Chinese government they are distributing them among the growing Christian community there. In fact, the Minister of Religious Affairs arranged for all the participants in last summer's Olympic Games to be given one of these Bibles. "The local production of Bibles", he said, "not only unites us but also delights us!" And this is Communist China! Recently forbidden, but now freely distributed, these Bibles in Mandarin are making it possible for countless Chinese to hear for the first time the story of Jesus that keeps hope alive.

Grace Episcopal Church in Old Saybrook undertook to provide shoes for needy people in the Anglican diocese of Tabora in Tanzania. By the time they had finished and sent the shipment off, they had collected 8,000 pairs of shoes, 1,500 articles of clothing, mattresses, sewing machines, bicycles and medical supplies - \$400,000 worth in all. And people from all over Connecticut had been drawn into the "little miracle", as it has been described. A little miracle that is keeping hope alive in a distant corner of the world.

And lastly there is Gabriel whom I met a year ago in Arizona. He is a tall, upstanding young man, a Dinka from Southern Sudan. At the age of four (yes, four) he was herding his family's cows back to their village when he heard shots. Troops from the north were slaughtering all the inhabitants of the village, his entire family among them. So this four-year old set off alone through the bush. Eventually he joined up with an endless stream of "lost boys", as they are now called, heading first for Ethiopia and then moving on to Kenya. After fifteen years in refugee camps, Gabriel was bought to Phoenix by a Christian refugee resettlement agency. No longer lost but found and cared for, Gabriel is now the lay-leader of St. Paul's, a local Episcopal congregation of young Sudanese. And, given the chance, he will joyfully tell the story of Jesus, and in doing so will keep hope alive for those who hear him.

Last month Anne and I went on retreat to Weston Priory in Vermont. While we were there (and perhaps with you and me in mind), the monks sang these words one morning:

"Do not let your hope drift away,
for I will raise you up;
my Spirit shall come to life in you.
Strength you shall have as you return
to the land which is your home.
and you will know that it is Yahweh
your God, who leads you to this new life".

My friends, not just for your own sake, but also for the world's sake, do not let your hope drift away. Instead, tell the story of Jesus risen from the dead. Share it with others to keep hope alive. And live by the good news we have heard again this Easter morning: "Alleluia! Christ is risenThe Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia!"