

Everyone's Story
Mark 16:1-8
First Presbyterian Church
February 5, 2017

Bible Reading

Mark 16:1-8 (ESV)

16 When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. ² And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. ³ And they were saying to one another, “Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?” ⁴ And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. ⁵ And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. ⁶ And he said to them, “Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. ⁷ But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.” ⁸ And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Sermon

A good story bears repeating and this is a good story. It's adapted from a short story by Emory University's, Lynna Williams, and is titled “Personal Testimony.” Young Ellen Whitmore is a twelve-year-old PK (preacher's kid). Her Dad is a fire-breathing, evangelistic preacher in west Texas. Each summer Ellen is sent to spend a couple of weeks at a fundamentalist Bible camp in Oklahoma where by day, the camp is like any other summer camp with hiking and canoeing, archery and arts and crafts. But at night... every night... there is a “revival meeting” is held for the campers – a high pressure worship service where there is sweaty “come to Jesus” preaching and lots of pressure for kids to surrender their lives over to him. And the unspoken expectation (which all the kids know) is that sometime during camp each one of them will come forward and give a moving personal testimony about how Jesus had dramatically changed their life.

The problem is that these are just kids... most of them pretty normal kids... and a good many of them don't really have a personal testimony to share. That's where our twelve-year-old preacher's daughter comes in. You see, Ellen Whitmore figured out that she could make a little money on the side being a “ghostwriter for Jesus”... I mean, writing personal testimonies for the other campers to share at evening worship. For instance, for a mere five bucks she wrote a doosie for a boy named Michael – who got up and talked about how in his old and sinful life he used to be so bad that he would take the Lord's name in vain at football practice. But now that Jesus had come into his heart, his mouth was as pure as a crystal spring.

Michael's story was a good one, of course... and received a hearty AMEN! From the other kids... but Ellen's most dramatic personal testimony... her best piece of work... was crafted for a kid named Tim Bailey. It was about how his life was empty and meaningless until he met Jesus in a tragic and almost fatal pickup truck accident near Galveston. It was all made up, of course – none of it was true - but he told of this near catastrophe in which Jesus himself grabbed the steering wheel and averted certain disaster. Now, that took some real imagination

so she charged twenty five dollars for it.

I told you it was a good story... and the reason it's so good is that we all can relate to it. Using just enough humor, it plays off the anxiety and fear that so many Christians have that we just don't have a testimony... and even if we do, we don't have the knowledge or the words with which to share it. Well, this retreat – at least in part – has been about trying to assure (to convince you) that, in fact, you DO have a testimony... and that you DO have the words with which you might share it. You really don't need 12 year old, Ellen Whitmore, to be your “ghostwriter for Jesus” and you don't need some dramatic “before and after” story to have something to say. You already have all you need... because to speak of your faith...and to share your faith with others simply means to tell YOUR story. It means to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about who you are... because that truth will always include your relationship with God. Your faith is important to you... it's a big part of your story... and everyone has a story!

Pastor Rick Warren calls this story our “life message.”¹ God has given each of us a life message, he says, and that life message has four parts. The first part of your life message is your relationship with Jesus Christ. Think with me - How did it begin? How long have you been following Jesus? Have there been ups and downs along the way? Times when your relationship with Christ has been strong and alive? And times when it has been dry and lifeless? Remember, it is YOUR testimony...and that's the important thing.

Second, your life message includes your life lessons. For those of you who are adults (who have a few years on you) ... what has God taught you over the years? For you who are young, what is God teaching you: about what matters most... about patience... about forgiveness... about handling success and failure... about suffering. These life lessons uniquely shape who you are... they are your deep wisdom... and they are part of the message God is sharing with the world through your life.

Third, your life message includes those things you are passionate about. These are the things God has shaped you to care about most. For one of you it may be a cause – like protecting the planet or speaking up for people who ordinarily aren't heard. It may be ministering to someone facing a particular life challenge or teaching children... or singing or playing music... it may be caring for older adults using a therapy pet or welcoming foreign exchange students. You see, your unique passions are a part of the message of your life... and what God knows is that we can't keep from talking about those things we care most about.

Finally, your life message includes the Good News of God... the gospel... the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. This is where most of us get hung up, I think, because we're not at all sure how to describe this good news. We can talk about how we came to follow Jesus... and we can talk about the lessons God has taught us over the years... and

¹ Rick Warren in “Sharing Your Life Message,” *The Purpose Driven Life – What Am I Here For?* (Zondervan-2002), 289-295.

we can even talk about our passions for serving Christ. But we don't think we know enough about the Bible... we don't think we have the "right-enough" words to share gospel message. Am I right?

Well, I happen to think you DO KNOW ENOUGH about the Bible and you DO HAVE "RIGHT-ENOUGH" WORDS... and because I think that, I want you to humor me by actually speaking to someone sitting near you. And what I want you to say to them IS THIS: (in eight words or less) What the gospel means to you.

Many of you have probably read or heard words that are often attributed to St. Francis of Assisi: "Preach the gospel at all times, when necessary use words." The thing is - you and I are not born knowing how to talk about faith. It is not second nature to us. No, the ability to give testimony has to be learned and practiced - sort of like if we were travelling to another country and before we went, we took a short language course at CVCC or did Rosetta Stone. The point is to grasp a little bit of the daily language and through that, maybe get a little better understanding of the customs of another culture.

Well, one way to think about the church is as a "language school" of God... church is where we are learning how to speak and act as the people of God. We are on a journey together... we're traveling toward the Kingdom of God - and along the way we are learning words... trying out phrases... eating the food and practicing the customs of our destination. That's what this weekend has been all about - in addition to the awesome snacks and the wonderful fellowship and the unbelievable talent we enjoyed last night. This weekend we have tried to be the "language school" of God - learning how to speak faithfully in the whole of our lives.

One last good story that bears repeating.² One morning some years ago, a young bookstore clerk named Deborah arrived early to open the shop. Standing at the door waiting was a man wearing the traditional clothing of a Hasidic Jew. While Deborah was opening the door, the man quietly asked if he could come in. She hesitated since it was nearly an hour till the store officially opened, but the man seemed polite and evidently needed something right away. "Would you like some help?" she asked, turning on the lights. Softly and with a heavy accent, he said, "Yes, I want to know about Jesus." Well, this was not an altogether surprising request in a store specializing in religious books, so Deborah guided the man upstairs to the store's ample selection of books about the Christian faith. She pointed him to shelves which were bulging with volumes of scholarly research of Jesus. Yet, as she was turning to go back downstairs the man called her back: "No," he said, "I want to know about Jesus the Messiah. I'm not interested in more books... just tell me what you believe." Later on, when she was describing this encounter, she said: When he asked that "My Episcopal soul shuttered... I gulped and told him everything I could think of... as much as I could sputter out in my confusion, in the dark." Sound a bit like you and me? When asked to tell what we believe our Presbyterian souls shutter, too... don't they?

² Thomas G. Long in Testimony: Talking Ourselves Into Being Christian (Jossey-Bass, 2004), 21-22.

Yet, when you (like Deborah) are presented with an opportunity and you take it... when the Spirit opens a door and you go through it... remember friends, it is YOUR STORY you are sharing... it is your life message... and it includes things you know very well:

1. how you came to know Jesus Christ...
2. what God has taught and is still teaching you
3. what you are especially passionate about...
4. and the message of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ

You don't have it all together... you don't have to have to have a seminary degree (in fact, sometimes I think that gets in the way) You don't have to have all your Biblical and theological ducks in a row, God will provide words for you. God will give you the words you need. So, remember speaking about faith is simply about you... telling the whole truth... about you... it is your story... or better, it is the story God is telling through your life.