

On the Rise

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Mark 16:1-8

Jesus said: “Truly I tell you - unless a grain of wheat falls from the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain. But if it dies it bears much fruit.”

As many of you know my family likes to make it an annual habit to get together at the North Carolina shore for a week of R&R and family bonding. With my two brothers and me – the patriarchs of the family --all being Presbyterian pastors you can imagine how boring this must be. Actually we have a lot of fun – and a lot of the fun comes in telling stories on one another. And preachers have lots of stories – some of them even true. One such story that comes up from time to time is the story of one Thanksgiving dinner to which one of my older brothers, then in high school - invited his girlfriend. We will name her Kathy. Kathy was delighted to be invited to our Thanksgiving feast and was insistent that she bring the dessert. She liked to bake and wanted to bring the dessert. So she brought a couple of freshly baked cherry pies. Yum! So when dinner was over Kathy retired to the kitchen to cut the pie into as many pieces as there were folks at the table but she forgot to count herself. She didn't save a piece for herself. So she served her warm cherry pie to our family and then sat down awaiting our approval. We all dug in. We all dug in to discover that Kathy had forgotten to put in the sugar. Ever eat cherry pie without the sugar? Don't. The only thing worse than eating cherry pie without the sugar is making like you are enjoying eating cherry pie without the sugar. We did the best we could. I was ten years old at the time and remember receiving from across the table my brother's death stare which said – “You

say one word in front of her and I'll kill you.” To this day dear Kathy whose romance with my brother did not survive the end of high school – has not a clue what she put us through.

There are some essential ingredients when it comes to cherry pie and next to the cherries themselves pretty high up there is sugar.

It's not unlike the story some of you have heard me tell of the Thanksgiving many years after that when my mother took suddenly ill and it was left to me and my father to prepare Thanksgiving dinner. He gave it to me to make the mash potatoes. I went out and got a box of Hungry Jack mash potato mix and followed the directions and with great pride placed my first bowl of mash potatoes on the Thanksgiving table only to discover when the first person took the first bite and promptly spit it back onto their plate (my family was less polite with me than they were with Kathy) – that what I had thought said on the box 2 tablespoons of salt, actually said 2 teaspoons of salt. Yum! Now it wasn't until later that I learned the remedy to grossly salted potatoes – and some of you know this -- sugar! Add sugar!! Sugar takes the saltiness away.

Are you seeing a theme here? Add sugar.

So we have been taking our journey these last several months through the story of God from the beginning of the Bible until now – and we have listened and pondered over the great stories of Scripture and have been stirring together our interpretations of these texts into a batter of what we believe about God. We have been baking, in a sense, the ingredients into the pie. And every Sunday we remind ourselves what our faith is all about when we recite together the Apostles' Creed. This great 8th century statement of faith that seeks to condense the essence of what we believe. Every church seeks to come up with the essence of Christianity in some way and for the most part we Church of the Palms Presbyterians are grateful to have this historic creed as the framework for what we

“God doesn't just visit the world – God enters the world, immerses himself in the world, buries himself, if you will, in the world.”

believe about being Christian. “I believe in God the Father, Almighty ... I believe in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord ... I believe in the Holy Ghost.”

And yet even with what we weekly recite – I know enough of you well enough to know that there are still a variety of interpretations of what makes up for us the essence of Christianity. What are the essential ingredients? What do you have to have in the pie to make it what it is supposed to be?

Is Christianity a bunch of rules, for example? A bunch of do's and don'ts. Is the Bible this rule book that tells you how to straighten up and get right with God? Slip up and you're going to hell?

Or is Christianity a political platform? That if you believe in Jesus then you need to vote for this guy or this woman or turn out for this particular party?

Or is Christianity some sort of amorphous feel good spiritual self-help thing that's all about you and not much about anyone else?

Or is Christianity some sort of closed society that is only open to the people of our persuasion, our opinion, our lifestyle, our perspective?

At the end of the day when you put it on the table – what has to be in the pie?

You know I mentioned a minute ago about this creed that we recite every Sunday here – the Apostles' Creed – that's been around for 13 centuries.

That's a long time. And I wonder if why it has been around for such a long time – is that it sticks with the essential ingredients. Because when the creed talks about Jesus – the creed says four things – he was born, he suffered, he died, and he rose. He was born, he suffered, he died and he rose. God was born in human likeness, lived the life of human struggle, he died a human death, and he rose a Godly resurrection.

Jesus put this whole thing another way – he said, A seed must fall to the earth and die before it can live to bear fruit. It's something we see everyday – unless a seed falls to the earth and dies, it cannot live to bear fruit. Jesus was born, he suffered, he died and he rose. Essential ingredients.

I wonder sometimes if we don't make Christianity a little too complicated for our own good.

Because it was just three short months ago – back in December – when we celebrated the good news of God's appearing. Appearing as a tiny baby in Bethlehem. And of course the big story in all that is that God chooses to plant himself in the soil of the world – in the condition of the world. God immerses himself into the human condition. God doesn't just visit the world – God enters the world, immerses himself in the world, buries himself, if you will, in the world. God gets down and dirty in Jesus. The Lamb of God who takes on the sin and pain of the world. With every leper he touches, with every blind man he heals,

with every ostracized woman he talks to, with every betrayal and denial he experiences – Jesus descends deeper into the muck and mire that this world can be. All the way to the cross. All the way to the point that they strap him on the cross. And even beyond that, the creed says, all the way to hell. That’s how far down the good Lord goes. Even if we make our bed in hell, says the Psalmist, he is there. In Christ, God falls to the earth. In Christ, God descends to the depths.

And of course that means your depth and my depth. Our deepest pain, our deepest worry, our deepest anxiety. Because you know you can’t be a human being without some pain, without some worry, without some anxiety. If you are free and clear of all these things then why, in heaven’s name, did you come here? Because the whole story of Jesus starts when the prophet says, “Those walked in darkness have seen a great light, those who dwelt in the land of deep darkness on them has light shined.” Who knows where that is for you – the deep darkness, the deep worry, the deep anxiety – maybe your future, maybe your health, maybe your family, maybe your view of the world, maybe your concern over current events --- but we believe in the one who descends into those depths and says, “Fear not, I am with you. Fear not, I will be present with you until the close of the age.”

But that’s not the end of the story. We’ve got these women who go to visit that place where the seed fell to its deepest. Where the grain of wheat has fallen into the earth and died. And they think that is the end of the story. Oh my Lord they think that is the end of the story – that when a seed falls to the earth that is the end of the story. But they haven’t been to science class. They haven’t been to the green house. They haven’t gotten past Christmas. They just don’t know that when a seed falls to the earth and dies – that’s when things start to get interesting. That’s when things start to rise. Three days later and the shoots are springing. Three days later and the tomb is empty.

Three days later and the fruit is ascending. The first fruits of all creation.

See what they don’t know, those women, is that the one who is gone to the depths of their lives, their fears, their worries – this one is on the rise. And when he rises he takes us with him. You see this is why Easter is the essential ingredient. That’s why Easter is the sugar in the cherry pie. Because when he rises he takes us with him.

It’s the only way to explain that scared Jesus following. Hiding inside their homes afraid even to go to the cross – throwing Jesus under the bus out of their fear, their worry, their anxiety – buried in their own darkness – but those who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Because when he rises he takes us with him. The one who has died is risen. The one who buried himself in death has now conquered death. The one who descended into hell has taken over the city. The one who breaks into the prison has released the captives. And he rises. And he takes us with him. 21 centuries later and we’re still packing the house!!

It’s the only way to explain what’s happening inside the Estelle High Security Prison in Texas. Reported by the Houston Chronicle last month -- inside the highest security prison in Texas – inside the High Security Unit inside the High Security prison – they decided to open up a seminary. A seminary for guys who would never see the light of day. A seminary for guys to become pastors so they can minister to their fellow prisoners. Into the depths the crucified Christ descends. And sure enough prisoners are starting to rise. Prisoners have become pastors and pastors are spreading the good news. You can rise. And now they are starting to give their lives to the love and power of God. Just last month – 3 inmates baptized by their fellow inmates. One in for 99 years for home invasion said, “This is the happiest day of my life. I’ll never be free in this life, but I’ll be free in the next.” And another with “Outlaw” tattooed to his arm: “I’m tired

of the hidden hate. I was an outlaw out there, but now I’m a changed man in here. I am living in the Spirit.”

When he rises he takes us with him. There’s no place too low that he won’t go, and there’s no place too high that he can’t take us.

You know, I think this world needs a resurrection. I think this world is missing the essential ingredient. I think we are allowing this world to get scarier and scarier, more and more sour – because we are forgetting to put in the sugar. Too many Christians walk around like they are baptized with lemon juice. I don’t know about you, but I’m getting tired of cable TV telling us what the story is. I’m getting tired of the front page of the newspaper telling us what the story is. I’m getting tired of so called Christians telling us that the story is more about hate than about love. More about keeping people away than bringing them in. We know what the story is. The great God of heaven has entered into our depths. The depths of our fears and worries and pain. And he is on the rise. And he is taking us with him. No one left behind. No one pushed to the side. No one kept away. This world needs a resurrection. And it started with those women amazed at what they had seen. Shock and awe. How about us being the community of shock and awe? The community on the rise with the risen one. The community that is not afraid. How about us being the ones who finish the story. Rising from our prisons to announce to the four corners of the world – he is on the rise. And we rise with him. We all rise with him. No more fear. No more worry. No more darkness. No more judgment. No more unclean. No more slaves. No more prisoners. No more outcasts. We all rise with him. It’s the only way for the story to end. Sugar in the cherry pie.

He is risen. He is risen indeed.



On the Rise

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell
March 27, 2016


Church of the Palms

© 2015 Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

3224 Bee Ridge Rd, Sarasota FL 34239 • (941) 924-1323