



LESSONS for LIFE

APRIL 12, 2009 11:00 a.m. and 7:00 p.m.

FROM DEATH TO LIFE

Rev. Dr. Brent Hawkes, C.M.

SACRED READINGS

Lesson: JOHN 3: 1 - 7

Gospel: JOHN 3: 1 - 7

I want to welcome you on this historic day for us as a congregation. With the folks who gathered very early by the lake at the sunrise service to over 200 people who attended at the nine o'clock service and with the congregation here now and those in the social hall and tonight this will be the largest Easter service in the history of our church and we are glad that you are here and that you are part of this day. And so I wish you a blessed happy Easter.

We have many guests with us today and unlike some churches that might chide people for only coming at Christmas and Easter we thank you for making us a priority on those two occasions in the year and we're glad that you're here. With many guests here today and with this being the most important day in the church calendar I want to give an explanation before I begin the lessons for life today. This is a church where we wrestle with tough issues, where we don't gloss over questions and contradictions, where we don't pretend that we have all the answers. This is a church where we can disagree with each other – and often do; where we can disagree with sermons and classroom curriculum, and we can still be in community together while sometimes radically differing with each other in theological beliefs and lifestyle choices; where we even honour those differences; and this is a church where the role of the senior Pastor is not confined to pushing traditional orthodox beliefs, thank you. This is a church where the role of the senior Pastor is not confined to just feel good sermons. My role is also to raise questions, to challenge some beliefs, to push some boundaries; to introduce some new and different – and even sometimes near the edge concepts. What might God be saying to us that's new today? This means that this church – that you – expect these things of me and you give me enough freedom in this to even be wrong once in awhile. So today on our most holy of Sundays we will fulfill, believe me, the best of who we are as a church, yes, a welcoming atmosphere, an inclusive community welcoming all, great music and great music while we wrestle today with some tough issues; and while we honour different opinions exploring what God might be saying to us that's new, challenging us to think anew. Now, one more explanation before I start my sermon, and please don't start the clock on me yet!

I want to tell you something about me this morning that you may not know and I'm going to explain to you how I approach the stories in scripture and how I find meaning in them. I'm going to come out of the closet this morning in a new way before you and because of the web cast to the world. Are you ready for it? Well, here goes: I'm admitting to you this morning that I am a metafactualist. Now, I just made up that word. I've invented it but I don't think I'm the only one here who's a metafactualist this morning, so let me explain that word first. I'm a factualist. I believe that most of the stories in the Bible actually happened. A few examples: As a factualist I believe there was an exodus. I believe the Red Sea (Reed Sea) actually parted. I believe Jesus lived and I believe Jesus walked on water and performed miracles. However, I don't believe that God or Jesus requires any one to be a factualist. The real issue isn't did this story happen or did that story happen? Is there proof or is there no proof? The real issue,



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the important issue, is what is the metaphorical meaning of the story? What is the deeper meaning of the story? How is the story meant to change me? How is the story meant to change the world?

That's when the first part, the most important part of the word 'metafactualist' comes from: metaphorical meaning. So, while I believe most of the stories are true – but I'm not sure about Noah and the ark one. I still can't figure it out – how they could build it, feed them, clean up after them, etc. I just can't figure it out so I'm not sure about that one. While I believe most of the stories in the Bible are true I don't think it matters at all whether you believe they are true. I believe it is very important, though, for all of us to wrestle with the deeper meaning. For too long, fundamentalists and literalists and even some of us factualists have driven thinking people out of the church; have driven questioning people away from faith and from community, even from belief in God and spirituality because they have insisted that everyone believe that every story in the Bible really happened; and by doing so the true power of the stories gets watered down, the deeper meaning gets lost when they're all reduced to – isn't God great? Wasn't Jesus powerful? Weren't the heroes and heroines great in scripture? It's time for us as a church, MCC Toronto, to come out of another closet and to claim our own place as believers in the holy and believers in the holy one and to claim if you choose the label as followers of Jesus and to claim that we are as true Christians and as real a church as any, even if we believe a bit differently. Yes, it's a powerful and wonderful healing message that historically we've proclaimed that GLBT people can be Christian; and it's a powerful and moving message that we've been moving into that our house shall be a house of prayer for ALL people. However, it's been an even more powerful message to say that even if you're a factualist or not a factualist or whether you move back and forth depending on what the story is that all of us are welcome together to explore the deeper meaning and today the deeper meaning of Easter.

So now I'm going to start my sermon, so you can start the clock on me, please: What is the meaning of Easter? First, guess what? I'm a factualist. I believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. I believe in the words of Jesus that because I live you shall live also. I believe in the resurrection of the dead and I believe that I will one day meet those who have gone on before us. One day I will, in heaven, meet Anita Bryant! (laughter). We will have a conversation and if I believe as she will be truly healed from her homophobia I will say to her, 'Finally, will you let one of us do your hair! It needs a makeover.' (much applause and laughter). And I will meet Jerry Falwell and we will have a conversation and I will say, 'Jerry, you need to take better care of yourself physically. I have this lesbian trainer who's been looking forward to whipping you into shape.' And one day I will meet Matthew Shepard and give him a hug and one day I will meet the twenty-five young men from Iraq, gay men who've been murdered in the last two months with the word pervert written on their bodies. Twenty-five in two months! One day it will be my turn to walk through the valley of the shadow of death and may I fear no evil and may I trust God is with me; and I just pray that when that day happens and if there is a reception for me organized on the other side, I just ask that Paul Fairley be allowed to organize that reception and I'll say 'Paul I have a few requests and I'm putting in my requests now. I don't want to be kept waiting in line; I hate it! And Paul, I want some rainbow flags flying and I want the Canadian flag flying because I'm so proud of this country. And I don't know what kind of a body I will have or what clothes I'll be wearing, but Paul, I just hope that there's a place for me to put on a pin because I'm so proud of what we have done to be able to make this pin possible and if I can take it with me I'd like to do that (the Order of Canada pin); and I'm looking forward to meeting Jesus face to face. I'm looking forward to thanking him for his courage and for his challenging messages and for his not giving up on his disciples, because that meant he wouldn't give up on me; and I'm looking forward to asking him how he turned that water into wine and why he didn't tell us a little earlier how to do it!' I celebrate that God raised Jesus and that he appeared to his disciples with his message of peace and that they got so excited they continued the movement to fight against



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fundamentalism of their day; the movement to reform religion, to move it back to love and away from the rules; the movement to open up religion so that the early church could become this wonderful group of people, men and women, believers and skeptics, gay and straight, Jews and Christians and questioners – all together and loving each other, respecting each other and together exploring the deeper meaning.

Beyond the meaning of Easter that I find as a factualist there is also a deeper, more powerful meaning of Easter, a metaphorical meaning. First, life wins over death. Death is just a door, a door to the next step on our spiritual journey, and yes, it is true to say that someone died; however, it is also true to say that they have transitioned. No ending is really an ending. Endings are really transitions. We are all able, here and now, on this earth to move from death to life.

The second metaphorical meaning comes from the part of the story where in the morning the stone had been rolled away, and this is a crucial meaning of the Easter story that so often is overlooked. God has already rolled the stone away. We can stop begging God for things. We can stop asking God for things that God has already done. A way out is already there. Believe it and look for it. The scriptures say, seek and you WILL find. Yes, Jesus said, *Ask and it will be given to you*, but beyond just the asking, he also asked us to take action – not only asked but SEEK and you will find – more action: Knock on the door you think is locked. Knock and the door will be opened to you.

And maybe like that poem *Footprints in the Sand*, instead of us always begging God to carry us, always begging God to change things, maybe the truth is that God has been carrying us all along.

The third metaphorical meaning: Get up and walk out of your tomb! You have a choice in those deadly places. You have a choice when life throws difficult things at you. You can stay and you can wallow in it and some folks – not naming anyone in particular – some folks are permanent tomb dwellers – even though the stone has been rolled away – for fear they want to stay in the negative and difficult places, the ‘woe is me’ places. And yet Jesus said, *You must be born again* – not as the fundamentalists have distorted it but as the scriptures talk about it. Being born again is healing our relationship with God, making the decision that our spiritual selves are our priority; to come out of the tomb and to re-connect with our spiritual source and our spiritual power. The metaphorical meaning of Easter says to us YES, life wins over death. It says to us that no disease is an ending, that healing will come, possibly on this earth or on the other side. Yes, disease may come and it will change your life. It can be a transition but it need not define you nor confine you. In this life you may not be healed of the disease but you can be healed of its hold over you. The deeper meaning of Easter is that no divorce or separation is an ending; they are only transitions. Life can continue after separation; life must continue after separation. The deeper meaning of Easter is that life can win no matter what comes.

Believe that no endings exist; there are only transitions. Believe that God has already done God’s part. Believe that you can walk out of the tomb. So whether you believe in the factual meaning of Easter, as I do, or whether you believe in the metaphorical meaning of Easter, as I do, or whether you’re like me – maybe you’re a metafactualist. I think there are quite a few of us around. Easter is full of meaning. Easter has an amazing message for us and over this last few weeks we’ve looked at eight life-changing messages from Jesus. However,, I’m left with a real problem: the messages and the message today are not just for us. They are for other people who need to hear them. The message of what God is saying in and through this place the world needs to hear that message, and frankly, this morning I want to say we need your help – and I’m not talking about the offering this morning – that may be the least important way and the least important call. I’m saying to you this morning that the good news we share



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here, the radical – and do you realize how radical this sermon is this morning, to think of some of the things I've said this Sunday morning? After the nine o'clock service an elderly woman came up to me and she said, "Brent, thank you for making a place for me. I believe in the metaphorical meaning. I don't believe in the literal meaning and thank you for making a place for me in this church." This message has to get out and we need your help. Some of you have been away for awhile and we need your help. Come back and help. For some of you this is your first Sunday. Welcome home. Our vision is to be a bridge. Will you be a bridge builder? Will you help us to get this message out, transforming lives and transforming our world.

So I end this morning by saying to you: May all of the meanings of Easter comfort you, inspire you and challenge you. Thanks be to God.

Amen.