

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 4/1/2024

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

ONE AT ONE – *Every day this week beginning on Tuesday, April 2 you are encouraged to pray for one minute at one o'clock. This week, pray for those who are not in a meaningful relationship with GOD. Ask that they might hear the story of JESUS and come to faith in HIM. Pray that we might have the courage to be the voices that share that story with others.*

In 1925, Laurence Stallings, a novelist and film writer, was asked to cover the college football game between the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Illinois for a local newspaper. Playing in the game for Illinois was the brilliant halfback, Red Grange, nicknamed “the Galloping Ghost.” On that day, Grange was brilliant. Despite a muddy field, he broke free for three touchdowns and set up a fourth. The veteran sports writers watching the game pounded away at their typewriters, writing their columns about the game and Grange’s performance. Laurence Stallings, however, paced up and down with his hands on his head. Over and over, he kept saying, “I can’t. I can’t write it. It’s too big!”

I wonder if the gospel writers felt that way about the resurrection of JESUS. How do you tell it? How do you describe something as earth-shaking and history-changing as this last chapter of JESUS’ life on earth? It has taken us a week to walk through that story. HIS triumphal entry into Jerusalem with crowds cheering. HIS Last Supper with HIS disciples followed by HIS arrest in the Garden of Gethsemane. HIS trial before the Jewish and then the Roman leaders. HIS suffering, crucifixion, and death on the cross. HIS dead body sealed in a tomb. And finally, the amazing story of HIS resurrection. How do you tell a story as big as the Easter story? How do you describe something so momentous as JESUS CHRIST returning from the dead?

Easter gives us meaning beyond this life. We have someone who has crossed over from life to death and then come back to tell us that there is more beyond the cemetery and the grave. Easter means that we can live our lives without fear of death. A rancher told a funeral director he wanted to be buried in his pickup truck. When asked why, the rancher replied, “I ain’t never seen a hole that old truck couldn’t get me out of.” The resurrection means for us that JESUS has found a way out of the hole of death and promises us another chapter after death, one of living in the very presence of GOD.

Easter also gives us greater meaning in this life. Some churches emphasize only that faith in JESUS means life after this life, that we are saved from something, namely death. And that’s it. There is something to look forward to at the end of this life, but they don’t say much more than that. Indeed, that is true, but the resurrection means much more than that we are saved from something. We are also saved for something, namely a new way to live in this life. Because JESUS lives, our lives in this world have purpose and direction in even the most difficult circumstances.

In 1973, Pastor Kefa Sempang was preparing to preach on Easter Sunday to the church he served in Uganda. He had witnessed bodies being burned, people being beaten, and boots crushing bones under the regime of dictator Idi Amin. He wondered if he had anything to say that would make a difference. The Easter story gave him the confidence to preach with wisdom and strength. After the service, he returned to the vestry to remove his robes. Five men followed him, closed the door, and pointed their rifles at him. They were members of Idi Amin’s secret police. “We are going to kill you,” they said with hatred. “Do you have anything to say?” Pastor Sempang thought of his wife and child and began to shake. But he managed to speak, “I do not have to plead for my life. I am dead already. My life is dead and hidden in CHRIST. It is your lives that are in danger. You are dead in your sin. I will pray that after you kill me, GOD will spare you from eternal destruction.” The leader lowered his gun as did the others. “Will you pray for us now?” he asked.

We may not have to face a death squad, but there are challenges in the world that can only be addressed by the love of JESUS. We need to speak the good news to those who don't know or who have forgotten. That may seem more than we would like to consider. We lack the courage to speak. But if JESUS has risen from the dead, we need not fear anything in this life. If JESUS has risen from the dead, we can become all that HE wants us to be. If JESUS has risen from the dead, we can be united to HIM and change the world for HIS glory.

The Easter story is a story almost too big to tell! Almost! But we can tell this story, this story that changed the world. We can tell this story to those who have not heard or have forgotten. We can tell this story with three simple words: "CHRIST is risen!"

In CHRIST's love,
Pastor Jeffrey