

“Breaking News!”

Matthew 28:1-10 and 16-20
Covenant Presbyterian Church
Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Jesus had come into Jerusalem and the people had high hopes. Those hopes were destroyed with his arrest and trial and death.

The stunning, ground-shaking good news of Easter morning, which you just heard, is that he was now alive.

So the disciples heard the good news. What do they do in response? How does this news change them?

In our second reading the resurrected Jesus speaks to the still surprised, still doubting disciples, giving them some guidance as to what to do in response to the good news. Hearing and acting. Seeing and responding. Learning and living.

These words of Jesus are known as the Great Commission, his final words in Matthew’s gospel. We share these words at baptisms, and we have some of them on the artwork just outside our sanctuary. So these words must be important.

Listen for God’s word.

¹⁶Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. ¹⁷When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. ¹⁸And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

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On this Sunday when we celebrate the Good News, it’s a good Sunday to think about the news.

In our house when I was growing up, we had three main ways to get the news. One was with the morning newspaper—the “Hartford Courant” which I delivered for seven years. The second was on the radio; Bob Steele on WTIC told us what we needed to know, with a sense of humor. And sometimes, we watched TV news in the evening. That was it.

Things changed in 1980, when the Cable News Network went on the air. Since then CNN has been broadcasting news 24 hours a day, and with the spread of the internet, we can get news anywhere, anytime.

I can use my phone to access up to the minute updates from thousands of sources: CNN, New York Times, Fox News, whatever. My news app lets me get headlines from a dozen different outlets.

With all these options for news, it seems that the news agencies are working harder and harder to get our attention. One increasingly common way is with BREAKING NEWS updates.

For my parents, breaking news was things like John Kennedy or Martin Luther King being shot, or Neil Armstrong walking on the moon, or President Nixon resigning. But today, there is *a lot* of breaking news.

For the past year or so, I've been getting breaking news updates via email—anytime anything remotely bad happens in the world or in Wisconsin. But I think we've gotten a little overboard with breaking news updates. In recent weeks, I've received breaking news updates telling me:

New legislation to address homelessness

Growers say water certainty is needed

It's a Wisconsin sweep at the US Cheese Contest

Don't get me wrong. I like Wisconsin cheese, and I want to know what is going on in the world. But getting an email, or text, or a red flashing message on our screen every time there is a murder, or a political situation, or whatever is unnecessary and unhelpful. The truth is that every day there are murders and natural disasters and chaos, and we simply can't focus on all of those events. We would easily get overwhelmed, depressed, and fearful.

And, in the rush to break the story, often the first reports are wrong.

Jon Stewart did a fantastic report on breaking news a few years ago, pointing out the flaws in rushing to get incomplete stories out. When there was a shooting the Navy Yard in

Washington DC, CNN was there live, but there was nothing to report, so the reporter pointed out police officers running, a helicopter flying, and a police van driving fast.

Stewart said it was like walking down the street with a five year old. Later in the same broadcast the CNN reporter starting asking about “initial conclusions” while recognizing that the “initial conclusions” could be very wrong.

I can't help but think that the obsession with breaking news, and especially with any kind of bad news, is to get us to watch and to be afraid.

The old saying “if it bleeds it leads” is as true as ever. News outlets seem almost eager to get violent and fearful stories out, even if the facts aren't clear.

Even the weather forecasting has become a source of breaking news, to make us afraid. Storm Center, Severe Weather Tracker

Several years ago, on one of my favorite TV shows, “The Simpsons,” there was a spoof on weather forecasting, which all too often seems more concerned about making us afraid. Anchorman Kent Brockman was reporting on a snowstorm, and the weather map had a DEATH COUNT on top of it, as if they were eager for a big count to have more people watching. This satire sadly isn't too far from the reality.

In this context of breaking news, of news to make us afraid, of news to make us worried; in this context of us just waiting and wondering what the next bad news will be,

We gather with the disciples on Easter morning and we hear the angel say “Do not be afraid.”

We gather with the disciples to celebrate the good news, that God has raised Jesus from the dead, that sin and death are conquered.

Good news and goodness in general are central to our faith. Some people have the impression that church is where you go to hear how bad you are. Sin is real, and we need to confront it, but goodness and good news are more important.

Look at the Bible:

Goodness is on the first page: God created light, and it was good. God created the land and skies and the creatures, and they were all good. God created humanity, and in summary God says that creation is very good.

Then when the people got into trouble, God saved them, leading them away from slavery and oppression, to a good land, flowing with milk and honey.

Jesus came proclaiming good news, and teaching about seeds growing in good soil. He called himself the good shepherd. He taught his followers about a Good Samaritan.

In a world with plenty of bad news, we gather to celebrate and lift up the good. We gather to renewed in the good. We gather to become people of Good News, that somehow, by the cross and resurrection of Jesus, our sin is forgiven and we have new life.

And the good news is not just for future heaven, but right here and now. Jesus proclaimed the good news saying: the kingdom of God is among you. Right here. Right now.

One of my favorite affirmations of scripture comes from Psalm 27.13

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord
in the land of the living.

This verse was the theme for a Honduras mission trip I led several years ago, when we spent a week in a remote rural community with no electricity, no running water, where the people were struggling to survive. But they were building a school, with the help of Presbyterian Mission Co-Workers.

I love the way the Presbyterian Church does mission work that focuses on schools and health care and churches—for right here and now, to make the good news real and concrete in people's lives.

So we are here today on Easter Sunday to celebrate the good news of the resurrection. Our songs and our tradition affirm that this means that sin is forgiven, that death is conquered and that we have new life.

But what does that really mean? It's a reasonable question.

To get beneath those headlines, to begin to really make sense of what the good news of Easter is all about, we need time. Reading a breaking news headline doesn't give us the whole story any more than saying "Happy Easter" and eating some chocolate gives us a full understanding of the Christian life. It takes times to figure out what this good news and this new life are all about.

Several years ago, Scottish theologian Elizabeth Templeton was speaking to a group of bishops in England, and she offered a scenario: You are at a bus stop and a man says, "My bus leaves in two minutes. Tell me about the resurrection in the time remaining."

While the bishops pondered how to explain the resurrection succinctly, Templeton suggested a clever response: "If you really want to hear about the resurrection, be prepared to miss your bus."

Theologian Rowan Williams added another response, saying, "I think I'd have asked the man where he was going and accompany him on the journey." (*From Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*).

I think Covenant Presbyterian Church is a place where we get on the bus together and accompany each other on the journey. As we journey together, we affirm the good news in all sorts of ways:

- By feeding hungry people here in Madison
- By supporting education and health care in Guatemala and South Sudan
- By being pen pals with kids at a local elementary school
- By sharing beautiful music together
- By enjoying donuts and coffee and laughter together
- By acknowledging our own brokenness and supporting each other in sadness and grief
- By reading the Bible and asking questions.

Together we learn the Good News, and together we live the Good News.

With all the bad news out there and with all the breaking news making us more fearful and afraid, we need to be careful. Yes, we want to be informed and engaged with problems in the world, but we can't let ourselves get overwhelmed with fear and sadness.

So I did something this week, to help me be more of a good news person.

I turned off the "breaking news" updates on my phone. I will no longer get immediate (and sometimes inaccurate) breaking news about shots fired or political nonsense or about cheese contests.... I will find out about those things in due time, and I will continue to be engaged in making this world a better place, but I won't be doing it from a posture of fear and anxiety.

What I really need are regular Breaking GOOD News updates, to remind me of what is really central.



- For God so loved the world
- I am with you always
- Peace I leave with you
- Christ is risen. Alleluia

I get these GOOD NEWS updates from being part of this community, from reading my Bible and from prayer, from sharing the journey together.

Jesus Christ is risen. Sin is forgiven. We have new life, new hope, new strength, new possibilities. God's Kingdom is among us. Thanks be to God for the Good News. Alleluia. Amen.