

April 19, 2009

1 John 1:1-4; John 20:19-31

HE'S BACK!

A number of years ago, the great Mario Lemieux, captain then owner of the Pittsburgh Penguins Hockey Team, retired from playing. It was a sad day for hockey fans, but stories of this incredible athlete continued to be told and retold. Jerseys bearing the number 66 were still seen at Penguins games.

Then one day the sun rose on a Pittsburgh buzzing with excitement. Mario Lemieux had decided to come out of retirement and don his famous jersey. The news took the hockey world by storm. One of the greatest men to play the sport was going to be skating once again.

My daughter was down in the “Burgh” shortly after Mario’s announcement, and she bought me a black, long-sleeved T-shirt with the Penguins’ logo, the number 66, and the name “Lemieux” on it; and these words: “He’s back!” The legend lived on.

As I read the stories of Jesus’ appearances in the 20th chapter of the Gospel of John, I can’t help but picture the astonished and jubilant disciples whispering, then shouting to one another: “He’s back!” If the hockey world got so energized by the return of one of its greatest players, just imagine the current that was flowing through those disciples! “He’s back!” indeed.

Jesus had told His disciples that He would rise from the dead, the angel announced His resurrection, the women, Peter and John had seen the empty tomb, Mary Magdalene had seen and spoken with the risen Christ, the two on the road to Emmaus had not only seen and spoken with Jesus but had broken bread with Him, and the disciples except for Thomas had seen Jesus and spoken with Him. What excitement must have pounded through them.

The next week, there they were, gathered together once again, this time with Thomas, the doors still locked, fearful of what was going to happen to them. And as they talked among themselves, suddenly, there He was, with them. Jesus came back, this time to prove to Thomas that He was alive.

And Thomas saw with his own eyes. Jesus had promised that He would not leave them lost and alone. He had come back – again! And He had marching orders for His disciples – then and now: “Go and tell.”

Mary Magdalene ran and told; Peter and John ran and told; the women ran and told; Cleopas and his journeying companion ran and told. Jesus commanded: “Go into all the world and tell!” We do not follow a dead martyr. We worship the living Lord who came back and keeps coming back for us.

Newsweek magazine, in the issue that went on sale during Holy Week, had as its cover words printed in the form of a cross that proclaimed the decline and fall of Christian America. (Back when I was a kid didn't Time magazine proclaim on its cover “God Is Dead!”?) As Yogi Berra famously said, “It's déjà vu all over again.”

To quote from the article: “There it was, an old term with new urgency: *post-Christian*. This is not to say that the Christian God is dead, but that he is less of a force in American politics and culture than at any other time in recent memory.”

Actually, this writer is a number of years behind the times. Church leaders have been saying for awhile now that America is a post-Christian country. Why is this so, when Christianity is growing by leaps and bounds in the so-called “Third World?”

There are many factors, of course, but I believe one factor is that we American Christians have failed to go and tell our stories of our encounters with the risen, living, indwelling, powerful, joy-sharing Jesus: a Jesus who is a vibrant force in our daily lives.

Look at the early Church! The apostles and the other disciples, the new converts, and St. Paul himself, couldn't stop talking to everyone they met about the living Jesus and how He had changed their lives forever. Even the Jewish and Roman authorities couldn't halt the tidal wave of proclamation.

The news of the risen, living Jesus and what He was doing in the lives of His followers spread like wildfire. The world was turned upside down by the stories that were told. So, what are our stories?

We Christians proclaim that “Every Morning Is Easter Morning” because Jesus is alive and keeps coming back for us. Like the shepherd who doesn’t leave the lost sheep to die in the wilderness but risks his own life, beating down the bushes until he finds the sheep, Jesus searches for us until He finds us and brings us home, rejoicing.

Like the woman who searches through the muck in her home until she finds the lost coin, Jesus combs through the muck in our lives until He breaks through and finds us and brings us home, rejoicing.

A student was once asked to summarize the Gospel in a few words. He responded, “In the Bible it gets dark, then it gets very, very dark, then Jesus shows up.” When it was darkest for the disciples, the risen, living Lord showed up.

So, what are your stories? How has Jesus appeared to you? How has He changed your life? Today, I want to share with you two stories with the hope that you will share your stories with other people.

Early in 1985 my brother was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. It was spreading rapidly and Bob was given two choices for treatment. He could have radiation and chemotherapy and a 50/50 chance of survival. Or he could have his voice box surgically removed with a 95% chance for a cure.

Bob was 34 years old and had 3 small children. It was a no brainer. He chose the surgery, even though it meant he would no longer be able to sing. He was a tenor, and he sang and played guitar and arranged music for his church’s praise team. It was a horrible decision for any musician to have to make, and I grieved with him.

Bob’s surgery was a complete success – all the cancer was removed and he needed no further treatment. He has a permanent hole in his neck, through which he breathes. So swimming is out, and riding on boats is dangerous.

I was there for Bob’s surgery and for several days post op. On the day I returned to Pittsburgh, Bob was literally dancing down the hospital hallway with his IV stand. His was an amazing recovery.

But when I got home, I was still grieving the loss of his voice. I found I couldn't sing in church without weeping, thinking of Bob not being able to sing anymore. One day, I was at home while the children were in school and Bill was at church.

I was on a cleaning rampage – something I do when I'm emotionally upset. I had put a Sandy Patti tape on and was listening to her sing "We Shall Behold Him." I was on my hands and knees, wiping down the coffee table with Murphy's Oil Soap when my tears began and quickly turned into heaving sobs.

I cried to the Lord, pouring out my grief over Bob's lost voice. As I knelt there in the living room, sobbing, I felt a hand on my shoulder. My shoulder felt warm, and a strong peace filled me. My sobbing quieted, and soon I stopped crying.

I looked up, expecting to see Bill standing beside me. But no one was there. I could feel the pressure of that hand on my shoulder, and the warmth, and peace continued to surround me. I knew without a doubt that the Lord was there, comforting me.

He remained there with me until I was completely calm, and filled with the assurance that my brother would be OK – that He wasn't finished with Bob yet. Indeed, it wasn't many weeks later that Bob completed training in esophageal speech in record time and was soon "talking" to me on the phone. But a greater miracle was in store.

The man who invented esophageal speech taught at the University with my father, and was so pleased with Bob's progress that he asked Bob if he could try to teach Bob how to sing using esophageal speech. In October of 1985, 7 months after his voice box had been removed, Bob stood in front of his church and "sang" "Jesus Loves Me."

His lovely tenor voice is gone, but he is able to "talk" and "sing" now without having to use artificial means of communication. And he hasn't stopped telling his stories of how Jesus has come into his life and changed him. In 1985 it got very, very dark for me and for Bob; and then Jesus showed up.

This next story comes from Tim Jones, who would be speaking to you in person were he not in Mexico today. Tim writes: “Anybody that knows me knows that if we talk for any length of time, the conversation usually ends up about Mexico.

“This story started last summer when we raised quite a bit of money to send to Elezar for his church to add on Sunday School rooms for the church. A good friend of ours from Ellwood City was not able to make it for that Sunday, so he added to what we raised, and I gave the money to Shari Getway and asked her to hold it and I’d let her know when I wanted it.

“This past Christmas I thought they could use that money, so I asked Shari for the check. Janie and I thought that since I now had a “real” job and get a paycheck, we could add some money to that check, so we did and sent the money to Mike Garcia. We send the check to Mike because when Rev. Elezar tries to cash a check, he doesn’t always get all of the money.

“Mike was going to take the money to Rev. Elezar in December, but due to a death in the family, problems getting back into the USA, and other circumstances, he was not able to get the money to Rev. Elezar until the end of February.

“In doing so, we found out that the money bought 30% more than it would have in December because the peso had been devalued again. We also learned that Rev. Elezar’s church had been broken into and all their sound equipment had been stolen.

“Rev. Elezar’s house had also been broken into and most of his food was stolen; and his car had completely quit on him. So this money could not have come at a better time. Once again, this just shows me that the Lord has a hand in things that transpire, and it’s His timing, not our timing that makes things work. “I think it’s important that we share things like this so people know that we really do serve an awesome God.”

Jesus said to the disciples, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” Go, and tell.

Let us pray. Risen, living, reigning Lord Jesus: we thank You that You keep showing up, that You keep coming back for us, and that You keep calling us to go and tell our stories. Fill us with Your Spirit that we may have the courage to witness to the work You are doing in our lives, so that others will open their hearts to Your presence. May we live every day as Easter day – with joy, praise, and thanksgiving; and with Your name on our lips. Amen.

The Rev. Pamela Maloney
Copyright April 8, 2009

First Presbyterian Church of Sharon, PA
All Rights Reserved