

(1) Friendship International: The Easter Story

I am so glad to be with you again, and to have a chance to continue the story that we began during our meeting before Christmas. The two holiest days of the year for Christians are Christmas and Easter. (2) In December we talked about the story of Christmas – the events around the beginning of Jesus' birth and life, and today I'd like to share with you the rest of Jesus' story.

Many of you were here in December and heard the story of Jesus' birth, how Jesus was born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, and how shepherds and wise men worshipped him, and why this all mattered.

What makes the story of Christmas so important is that (3) Jesus' birth was no ordinary birth and Jesus was no ordinary person. Jesus is God – who became a human being, a man, and entered human history—human life-- and experienced all the things we do, all because he loves us and wanted a relationship with us.

The story of Easter, is even more amazing and important than the Christmas story for people who are followers of Jesus.

We don't know very much about the first 30 years of Jesus' life. But we do know a lot about the last three years of his life on earth. When he was doing very public work and his actions and words were recorded written down. And it's those last three years of his earthy life that I want to talk about today.

(4) Many of you have seen crosses, which are Christian symbols, on top of all sorts of churches, crosses worn as jewelry such as necklaces, or crosses on gravestones.

Sometimes they are just decorations or fashion accessories, but most of the time, they are symbols of Christian faith. But what does a cross mean? Why is it so closely connected to Christianity? And what does it have to do with the Easter story?

Around Easter you might also see lots of decorations for Easter in stores, on houses, on greeting cards. (5) We see cute little bunny rabbits and spring flowers and colored eggs. What do these things have to do with the Easter story and what do they have to do with a cross? They are all signs of life—the earth coming back to life in spring, eggs holding the promise of life, and so on. But the cross? The cross was an instrument of death. (6) In ancient days, 2000 years ago during Jesus' time, it is how criminals were executed by the Roman government. It was a very horrible way to die, and very humiliating. It was filled with shame; a form of slow torture and awful death—intended to humiliate the person being executed and to frighten the people who watched.

(7) So again, why would Christians use this symbol to represent their faith? It is a strange choice, but it is more understandable if we know that the cross is also a symbol of love and sacrifice and victory.

So, let me tell you the story of Easter. This story is the reason Christians follow Jesus. (8) When Jesus was about 30 years old, he began to teach and heal people publicly. He taught and healed for about three years—and in those years, he cured many people. Those who couldn't walk were able to walk again; he healed blind people and they were able to see; he made people with all sorts of diseases whole again. (9) He shared many, many meals with his followers, with religious leaders, and with people that were usually overlooked or viewed as undesirable. He gathered and talked with friends

just like you do here. He taught anyone who was interested in knowing about God, about himself, and about the way to live a good and holy life. And he taught that we should love God and our neighbors—and even our enemies, that we don’t need to worry or be anxious but can trust God for what we need, and that we should want more than anything to be part of God’s family or God’s community. He showed people that God is good – that God is love. Nothing human beings do or think or ask for could bring us into friendship with God—it’s only what God does for us – and only by trusting in him-- and trusting him to make us whole-- could we become close with God.

Jesus also told people why he had come into the world. Remember, the Christmas story tells us that Jesus was God in the flesh, God who became a human being and entered ordinary life, a baby boy who grew up to be a man. But why—why would God do that? (10) Jesus explained that he came to give us life, abundant life—life that is not hopeless or flat, but full and joyful, (11) life that is good and life that doesn’t end with death. (John 10:10b “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”) He said (12) that he was the light of the world (John 8:12 “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.”). Life and light—that’s what Jesus came to bring us. Life and light.

(13) So Jesus spent about three years traveling and teaching, healing, and sharing meals. His followers, both women and men, loved him and he loved them. He told them stories about life in the kingdom of God, and gave them hope for the future. Crowds came to hear his teaching and experience his healing. A couple of times, he fed several thousand people with only a few loaves of bread and a few fish. People thought he was amazing, though some of the religious and political leaders started to get worried. He was getting a

lot of attention, and they were scared he might take away some of their power and privileges. But they did not understand his mission—he was actually a different kind of leader—and he was not really interested in their power. His purpose was to bring good news to the people who usually only got bad news, to be and to show people the way to God and the way to life itself.

(14) Toward the end of his three years of teaching and healing and traveling around, the crowds were really enthusiastic about Jesus and the religious leaders were really worried. They came up with a plan to get rid of Jesus. They decided he had to be killed. They accused him of things that weren't true, and they made the crowds angry with him. This public trouble got the attention of the political leaders.

But Jesus knew that he had more to do; he wouldn't try to escape the rulers or become the new ruler. He had come to restore human beings to a good and beautiful relationship with God. But a God who is perfect, and completely good and completely just couldn't be in relationship with people who were not completely good—people like us who are sometimes selfish, cruel, unforgiving, envious, or dishonest. **(15)** No, there was a big separation between God and people, and Jesus was to be the bridge. He could be the bridge because he was both God and human, perfectly good, fully God, but also completely human. But it cost him his life to be that bridge—so that anyone who wanted to could be in relationship with God and could be healed of their guilt and shame about their failures and wrongdoings, and could join God's new community.

So even as the religious leaders were planning to have Jesus killed, Jesus was planning to give up his life so anyone who wanted to could be made new by the love of God. He warned his followers and friends that he was going to

die—he told them ahead of time-- but they didn't really believe him at first. They did not understand until later that this was part of God's great but difficult plan.

So the time came when Jesus was arrested, and (16) there was a very dishonest trial before the political ruler filled with false accusations and betrayals. Even Jesus' own followers were frightened and denied knowing him. It was a terrible scene. Jesus was mocked and tormented by soldiers, and declared innocent by the ruler. The ruler did not find Jesus guilty of the charges but nevertheless Jesus was executed, nailed to a cross and left there to die slowly. It was a slow and terrible death, intended to bring shame and disgrace to the person who died that way. He was crucified with two other men—one on either side of him—regular criminals being executed for their crimes. (17) That's why sometimes you see pictures of three crosses. They were being punished but Jesus had done nothing wrong.

And then he died and was buried in a grave provided by a friend. Christians call the day he died "Good Friday." You may find it strange that anybody would call the day somebody like this person died, and in such a horrible way, a "good" day. What was good about it? Certainly, the painful suffering was not good. His friends and family abandoning him was not good. So, what was good about it? Let me put it to you this way. Jesus knew all along that the reason he came into our world as a baby in Bethlehem was to one day give up his life as a sacrifice. Many times, he told his disciples he would have to suffer and die. As Jesus went through this ordeal, he knew that this was part of God's plan for his life. And it is part of God's plan for your life and for mine. Everything inside of you and me that is wrong and twisted was placed on Jesus on that Good Friday. He took our place.

Jesus' followers were frightened at his death, very frightened and terribly disappointed. They thought he was good news, he was going to make everything right, he was the leader the people needed. And now he was dead. Dead. Defeated. Hanging from a cross like a common criminal. This was not what they had expected. He was their friend, the best teacher and healer they'd ever encountered. How could this happen to him? They didn't know what to do. Many of them ran away or hid or pretended like they didn't know Jesus.

But some of the women who had followed Jesus and believed in him (18) stayed close by. The soldiers didn't pay much attention to them, probably because they were women, but these women watched Jesus' terrible ordeal, some at a distance from the cross, but others right there. Jesus had been so important to them—he had taught them and healed them and given them reason for hope. He had respected them and explained important things to them in a way that changed their lives. They weren't going to abandon him in the moment of his death. And so they stayed. And after he died, they saw where his body was placed, and they planned to prepare his body for burial in a loving and respectful way.

All of his friends were filled with grief. Seeing the one who had brought them the greatest hope die so horribly was a really terrible and traumatic experience.

But the story does not end with death on a cross. Otherwise, it would be a story that gives us no hope. When Jesus had taught his disciples, he actually talked about his coming death. He knew he would die. But he would always add, "but after three days I will rise again" (e.g., Mark 8:31). Strangely, his disciples did not understand that or really believe it. I mean, how many

people come back to life after they have died? The rest of the story is quite incredible.

It all starts early on a Sunday morning.

While it was still dark, a couple of the women went to the place where Jesus body had been laid temporarily. They expected to prepare it for final burial with spices and other things. But when they got there, there was no body. Can you imagine what would have been going through their minds? They had seen him die, they knew he was dead. They saw him laid in that very tomb. (19) And he was gone. Did someone take him away, did someone hide his body. What could have happened? The soldiers had put a huge stone in front of the tomb just so no one would steal the body. And the stone was moved away and the body was gone.

And so the women stood there—confused—unsure what to do. But messengers from God, angels, met them and asked them why they were looking among the dead for someone who was alive? (20) The angels said that Jesus was risen from the dead and that they –these women—should tell the rest of his followers that Jesus was alive. Alive! —they could hardly believe it. They ran and told the rest of his followers – who were not sure what to think when they heard the news. But over the next several days—many of them had a chance to see Jesus, talk with him, (21) even to have breakfast with him—a breakfast he cooked for them.

This was extraordinary—and no one was more astonished than Jesus' followers that somehow after that terrible death he was alive again. They had to be convinced that it was true—and the only way they could believe it was by seeing him. (22) They were skeptical, but when they talked with him face-to-face, he reminded them that he had told them ahead of time he was

going to die and be raised from the dead. They just hadn't understood what he meant.

But now they had begun to understand. Jesus, God in the flesh, had died and been raised to life. This is the story of Easter—not just that he died for his friends and followers, but that he rose again and offers this experience of new life to anyone who wants to follow him.

This was the best news of all. That by his sacrifice, by the gift of his life through which he took our sins and shame onto himself, people could be set free from their guilt and shame and be made new. Followers of Jesus believe that in his death, he took our sin and shame and gave us his righteousness, his goodness. By rising from the dead, he defeated death. That means death does not have the final word, death did not win. People can experience life fully and forever with God because of his love for us.

This is a difficult story to understand completely –because there is mystery at the heart of it. God loves us so much (23) that in Jesus he gave himself up for us and experienced death on a cross, so we could be with him forever --in this life and after we die. Through that gift, we can each be God's beloved child, precious and beautiful, whole and good.

(24) The only response God asks for from us is to trust that God loves us and to trust that the hard work has already been done by him. Trust that if we want to be close to God, it is possible. That all the things we've done that have kept us separate and distant from God can be forgiven, and we can be close to God and live forever with him.

So the story of Easter is a true story. It's the story of how Jesus died on a Friday, but he actually came back to life. He defeated death by rising on a Sunday. (25) And because of that Christians celebrate Easter on a Sunday

morning each Spring. It's also why Christians hold worship services each Sunday. Each Sunday it's like a little Easter where we thank God for dying and rising for us.

When you see crosses or hear stories and news about Easter, I hope you will remember the true story of Easter.

(26)

The story of the resurrection, the story of Easter, means that Jesus is more than a prophet or wonderful teacher who some people followed and others despised. If Jesus had not been raised from the dead, this story would only be sad or tragic, another story of a young man cut down in his prime, a visionary leader who was misunderstood and defeated by those in power. Not this story. The great miracle of the resurrection changed everything. It confirmed Jesus words, his teaching, his promises, and his identity as GOD. A God who loves you.