

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham

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“Deliverance is Ours”

April 20, 2014 Easter

Jeremiah 31:1-6; Matthew 28:1-10

The man looked like his seventh uncle. Pha had been playing out in the street when this somewhat familiar looking man walked up to him, asked him if he was Gef, which means parrot in Vietnamese. He hugged Pha and asked him to take him to the place where his mother worked. Pah did so and when they entered the tailor shop where his mother was employed in a small hamlet in rural Vietnam, he watched as his mother dropped everything, leaped into the man's arms and began to kiss him passionately. This confused Pha a bit. In a moment Pha's mother walked over to him and said, “This is your father.” Pha's father had been a Commander in the South Vietnamese Navy. When the war ended he was interned in a concentration camp. The family assumed that he had died. His return was a moment of joy, yet all was still not well. The police would regularly come by to see him and want to know where he had been and what he was doing. If he could not answer their questions to their satisfaction they would threaten him with prison, or worse. His nightmares returned. Pha's father knew that he needed to leave, but such was impossible and if he were caught it would mean death. He was looking for deliverance from this oppression and into freedom.

What I hope we can do this morning is to take this story, which by the way I will later tell you where you can listen to it online, and translate it back two thousand years to Judea where Jesus and his followers lived. Though like Pha's father, they were living in their homeland, but they were not free. Though they could pretty much worship as they pleased, they were surrounded by the signs of Roman power and Greek culture. In some ways you could sense that the people of God were under both political and cultural attack. The Greek culture with its baths, Olympic Games and religious traditions were slowly but surely pushing the Jewish religion to the brink of extinction. The power of the elites aligned with Rome was driving generational farming families off of their lands and into poverty and tenant farmer status. The Temple itself was controlled not by the Aaronic Priesthood but by political appointees. Rome's taxation was heavy and constant. The people yearned for deliverance. They yearned to be delivered from Rome and its corruption into the freedom of God's kingdom.

This yearning meant that they were always looking for a deliverer; for someone who could set them free both from and to, from oppression and to deliverance. Thus thousands gravitated toward Jesus of Nazareth. He appeared to be the one; the one who could deliver them. He was charismatic. He had this power about him that drew people from all walks of life and from every corner of the nation. His teaching was unlike anything they had ever heard before and he was always talking about how the Kingdom of God was coming, perhaps even in and through him. He was a miracle worker. He had healed lepers, given sight to the blind, helped the lame walk and even raised someone from the dead. He was a descendant of David. Though raised in Nazareth everyone knew that his father was from Bethlehem, the city of David. So the people came and looked for deliverance. But it was not to be. Jesus would end his life as had all other would be deliverers, on a Roman cross, cut down like any other rebel.

It would be difficult then for us to imagine the pain felt by those women on Sunday morning as they approached the tomb where Jesus' body had been laid. They were suffering the pain, not only of the loss of this man who had been their friend and teacher, but of the dream of the possibility of deliverance. All of that was now gone, vanished in the sound of the nails that had been hammered into his hands and

feet. But then something happened that morning that no one was expecting. When they arrived at the tomb the ground shook and the stone in front of the tomb was rolled back. Then one, who appeared to be a messenger from heaven, spoke to them telling them not to be afraid; that Jesus, whom they sought was not dead but alive. They were to make a quick inspection of the tomb and then go to tell this good news to the other disciples. Filled with great joy they quickly left, only to encounter the risen Christ. Jesus told them to go to tell the disciples about this and that he would meet them in Galilee. In that moment the women knew that deliverance had come; deliverance from the powers of Rome and deliverance into this new, in-breaking Kingdom of God.

I realize that for anyone taking an objective look at that moment, my statement that they knew that deliverance had come would seem to be a bit optimistic. But I don't believe that it is...and here is why. Those women knew that Rome had lost. Rome believed that because of its political and military might that it was the chosen nation and had the right to impose its will on all other human beings, including the Jews. Rome believed it controlled its future. But Rome had now lost. The one they crucified was alive. The one whose message of love and forgiveness they had tried to end was raised from the dead. Rome lost. Sin had lost. For Jews, sin was the power behind the powers. It was what stopped God's people from becoming who they were supposed to be. Sin corrupted and controlled humanity in and through death. But now sin had lost its power because death had lost its power. The resurrection by God of humanity had begun in Jesus of Nazareth. Though Rome would remain intact for hundreds of years; though people would still sin; though people would still die, they had all lost and God and God's people had won. There was deliverance from those powers and into God's new kingdom.

Pha's father knew that that he and his family had to leave the nation they had loved so much. In a turn of fate, or providence is you like, the father had been able to trade his skill as a sailor for the right to take two people with him as they attempted to escape from the communist powers and into freedom. So one day Pha and his mother began a series of travels which would eventually lead them to a port, where under the cover of darkness they would move from a tender to the boat which might deliver them. As they huddled inside the darkness of that ship and the motors hummed, they heard gunfire all around them. But then it stopped. After what seemed an eternity Pha's father opened the hatch and they emerged into open ocean and blue sky. But they were not yet free. They would avoid Thai pirates, survive a refugee camp, learn a new language amidst trials here in the United States; yet in the end they found deliverance from and to; from oppression and to a new and wonderful life here. Pha's parents have a home of their own. Their sons are all college educated and Pha is a physician. As Pha put it, deliverance comes to us all in many ways; some through divine intervention, his through his father who never surrendered.

This is where we find ourselves this Easter morning, being delivered from and to; from the powers of this world who think they control us, but do not; from the power of sin and the fear of death, which think that they control us, but do not. We have been delivered from them into a moment of endless possibilities of being fully alive to God and to neighbor; of being fully alive to God's present and future. We have been delivered because Jesus never gave up on the world; never gave up on us, believing that God would indeed raise him from the dead and bring about a new and better world. The challenge for us then this morning is to embrace our deliverance; to embrace the possibilities and promises that have been set before us by a loving God and a faithful son. So here it is, the challenge for this Easter week...to ask yourselves how am I living the deliverance I have been given?