

April 24, 2011
Easter Sunday

Rev. John C. Minihan
Matthew 27:62-66; 28:1-7

LIFE IN BETWEEN

“He is not here; He has risen, just as He said.”

Long before the world ever heard of Billy Graham, there was another “Billy” crisscrossing America sharing the Gospel message and helping lead people to faith in Jesus Christ.

“Billy Sunday” was his name – and he burst on the scene a little more than 100 years ago with a unique blend of revivalism and showmanship.

A former ballplayer with the Chicago White Stockings, Billy hung up his cleats in 1891 and began preaching full-time. Over the course of his career – which spanned five decades – Billy Sunday preached to millions of people.

And, as a result, an estimated 300,000 men and women ultimately gave their lives to Christ.

Now, most of Billy Sunday’s revival meetings were held in huge tents or temporary wooden structures, he called “tabernacles,” built just for these occasions.

And, a special feature of these revival meetings was Billy Sunday’s famous “Sawdust Trail.”

The Sawdust Trail was a wide aisle leading from the front entrance of the tent all the way back to the pulpit where Billy preached.

It was covered with several inches of thick sawdust – which mostly served to keep the dirt down during the hot summer months and to soak up the moisture and the mud when it rained.

Row after row of folding chairs were lined up on either side of this “Sawdust Trail.” And, at the end of his sermon when Billy issued his altar call, he urged

folks in the congregation to get up out of their seats and walk down the “Sawdust Trail” to the front – repent -- and give their lives to Jesus Christ.

Billy Sunday’s influence on American culture was so great at the time that “Hitting the Sawdust Trail,” became synonymous with repentance and conversion and starting a new way of life.

Now, Billy Sunday’s ideal version of the Christian life was pretty simple and he repeated it quite often.

Hit the “Sawdust Trail,” he said. “Fall on your knees and receive Jesus Christ as Savior. Then walk out of the revival tent into the streets and get hit by a Mack Truck and go straight to Heaven.”

And, when you think about it, it’s admittedly got a certain appeal.

Oh, not the getting hit by a truck part. I’m sure we’d all agree that’s something we can do without!

But, this idea of “instant eternity!”

No hassles – no sweat – no dealing with the pesky problems of life!

Just conversion and immediate reward!

Author Eugene Peterson says – tongue in cheek – that...

...it’s a wonderful formula for getting to Heaven the quickest and easiest way. And virtually foolproof. There is no time to backslide, no temptations to bother with, no doubts to wrestle with, no spouse to have to honor, no kids to put up with, no enemies to love, no more sorrow, no more tears. Instant eternity.

You receive Christ as Savior and go straight to Heaven without anything *in between*.

Problem is...

There’s always “something” *in between*.

And, that something *in between* is simply “Life!”

You know – ordinary, everyday “life” where there *is* time to backslide – and temptations to trip us up – and doubts to wrestle with – and spouses to honor – and kids to raise – and enemies to love – and sorrows and tears to endure.

Fact is, there are no shortcuts to Heaven and authentic Christianity often feels a whole lot more like the “Saturday” in between Good Friday and Easter than it does an instant scratch-off lottery ticket.

What I mean is this...

Back when I was in Seminary a group of friends and I formed a partnership – of sorts – to help us get through our Ordination Exams.

“Ords,” as we called them – are something of a rite of passage in Seminary!

They’re two brutal days of comprehensive examinations in which you’re supposedly tested on everything you’ve learned the last few years.

So, there’re tests in Hebrew or Greek...

Theology and Worship...

Polity – basically understanding how the church is governed – and Bible Content...

And, you’ve got to pass these exams, or else you can’t become a minister!

Well, needless to say, getting ready for “Ords” is a pretty big deal. And so, my friends and I, actually sequestered ourselves in a house on the Jersey Shore where we studied and took practice exams and grilled one another just to get ready for these tests.

And, when, the day of reckoning finally came and we took the tests and turned them in hoping for the best.

Now, we might have figured that was the hardest part. Just getting the exams over with and out of the way.

But, maybe the hardest part was actually waiting the six or eight weeks until we learned whether or not we'd passed.

We'd worked hard and put our noses to the grindstone.!

And, weeks later when the results came back we all began to celebrate.

But, *in between* was this long drawn-out period where life simply had to go on.

Where things didn't look or feel any differently than they did before – but we had to believe they were anyway.

Well, this is the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter!

And, I believe Saturday – a mostly silent day in Scripture – generally mirrors our life experiences now living between the Good News of Easter and its final culmination.

A time when nothing seems or feels any differently.

But, when in fact, everything has changed!

Now, the Scriptures don't tell us much about that Saturday – this day *in between*.

Two of the Gospel writers skip over it completely.

Luke makes only a passing reference to the women who'd followed Jesus, "resting" on that Saturday in obedience to the commandment (Luke 23:56).

Only Matthew really has anything to say. But, even here, he's mostly interested in squashing conspiracy theories.

So, it's virtually silent – this day *in between*.

But, even though we're not told much – we still have a pretty good idea of what was going on.

For example...

Utter shock and complete numbness could have been the only thing Jesus' disciples were feeling!

I mean, they'd bet the farm on Jesus...

Banked everything on their belief that He was God's Chosen One and would lead them to freedom like a modern-day Moses and David.

The disappointment and despair they felt was palpable – just like we see in Luke's Gospel where the two disciples walking to Emmaus say of Jesus, “...*we had hoped He was the One...*”

“...*that He was the One to redeem Israel.*”

Of course, by “redeem” they simply meant rescue them from their enemies – the latest of which was Rome.

But, the cross had put an end to all that – they believed.

And, when Jesus died, the dream in their hearts died with Him!

So, for the disciples, there wasn't a lot to do that Saturday except choke back their tears...

Replay events over and over in their own minds...

Curse themselves for their cowardice in abandoning Jesus...

And, wonder where it had all gone wrong and what they were going to do next!

You see, it wasn't just that they'd failed to realize their dreams.

People deal with failed dreams every day and still go on to live productive lives.

My own dream of becoming a pilot, for example, crashed during take-off when my father brought me down to the airport to sign me up for flying lessons when I was 12 or so.

I had always wanted to be a pilot and now I was “this” close to actually getting in the cockpit and seeing those dreams come true.

But, when my dad found out the cost, he literally put his hand on my head, turned me around, and marched me straight out of the door back to the car!

And, just like that, my dream was over!

But, that’s all right! I had other dreams!

But, you see, for the disciples it was more than that.

It wasn’t just that their dreams had crashed and burned.

It was that by all reasonable estimations, the powers of evil were still at work – and, in fact – looked like they were more in control than ever before!

Jesus was dead and the “powers-that-be” were determined to keep Him in the tomb...

Even going so far as requesting Pilate’s help and throwing the full weight of the Roman Empire behind them.

And, that’s what makes this Saturday *in between* seem so much like today – the days we live in.

The appearance that nothing at all is any different!

That the world’s still a crooked place where good folks who “buck” the system get steamrolled...

And, nothing ever really seems to change!

I mean, that's how it seems – doesn't it?

Last fall, Faith and I planted some tulip bulbs in our front yard.

This was after we'd had some professional landscaping done to fix things up a bit. And, the thing about professional landscaping is that you can see the results right away!

The truck pulls up and dumps potted plants and decorative trees in the soil and instantly “transforms” the yard!

It's kinda nice!

But, that's not only the way we want our yards to be. It's how we want our lives to be!

Immediate payoff! Instant eternity – like Billy Sunday suggested.

But, life defined by the Resurrection is something different!

It's more like those tulip bulbs Faith and I stuck in the ground ourselves.

Planted on a gray November day and then covered with dirt, nothing seemed to have changed.

Everything looked exactly the same – just as bare as it did before!

But, *in between*, something important is happening.

Life's at work...

Until one day when it had almost been forgotten, we suddenly noticed green shoots coming up out of the ground where we hadn't noticed them before.

And soon, an array of colors was blooming for everyone to see.

Everything's different!

Well, this is the message of Easter!

Jesus Christ is Risen from the dead and because of that everything's different!

Oh, it may not seem so – at least not yet. Just like that Saturday *in between* Good Friday and Easter didn't seem any different.

But, God was still at work!

And, that's what we've got to remember these days *in between* when nothing seems to have changed around us...

When evil still seems very much in control...

When we're not sure if we've got the strength or the fight to go on...

Or, whether it's even worth it...

We remember that God's still in control and we know how the story ends!

When I was younger I was – what you might call a “nervous reader.”

What I mean is that I'd often skip ahead in whatever I was reading just to see how it ended.

You see, I'd get too anxious and didn't have the patience to wait till the end...

To see how the story turned out.

So, I'd thumb through the pages and find out what happened – say -- to the Joad family in Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*.

Did they make it to California?

And, what happened when they got there?

Or, I'd skip ahead in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* wondering whether or not an all-white jury could actually convict Tom Robinson in the face of overwhelming evidence of his innocence...

And, what happened after that!

I couldn't wait!

I had to find out!

And, while some might say this could spoil the novel -- for me it served a very practical purpose.

By knowing how the story ended, it calmed me down and allowed me to enter into the experience of the story more fully because I knew where we were heading.

And, I knew where we were going to end up!

It's like that Japanese soldier – Hiroo Onoda – who was left behind in the Philippines during World War II.

He'd received orders to never give up.

So, he didn't!

He stayed hidden on that island for 29 years -- fighting a war that had long been over.

All because he never knew!

Because he never knew how it all ended.

But, we know!

We know how the story ends!

Jesus Christ is risen from the dead!

And, although nothing seems different – at least on the surface -- everything has changed because of the Resurrection.

Sin and death no longer have the final word!

The final word is God's!

And, God's final word is Life!

Not “instant” – “immediate” – no more hassles to deal with kind of Life.

But, Life *in between* where there are trials to endure...

Temptations to overcome...

But, also victories to be won!

So, the end of the story is really about a new beginning for us and how to live these days *in between* the Resurrection and God's final fulfillment of His Kingdom!

In J.R.R. Tolkien's classic *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the story appears to end with The Ring of Power being destroyed...

The power of Sauron broken...

The throne of Gondor returned to Aragon – its rightful king...

And, all the little Hobbits living happily ever after in the Shire.

But, what seems like the end is really another kind of beginning because, in the novel, Samwise – Frodo's best friend – and, according to Tolkien, the real hero of the story – returns to the Shire where he finds the story goes on.

As one person put it...

For Sam and his family, the destruction of the Ring and the end of Sauron's power was not the end of the story – rather, it was the beginning of something new and glorious. Life – mundane life – would go on... and yet, it would go on in an entirely different way that it would have had Sauron not been defeated. There is still a lot of hard work ahead: Sam had to raise a family; he had to tend to his farm and garden; he had to provide leadership to the Hobbits in the Shire in the wake of the recent crisis.

For Sam, this was not a time to escape the Shire; rather, it was a time to help renew and redeem the Shire.

Well, just as Tolkien depicted Sam's life afterward, Easter's not the end of our story either!

In fact, Easter's not the end of the story at all!

Easter's the start of something new!

It's the start of God's New Creation through Jesus Christ His Son!

And, while life *in between* the Resurrection and the final culmination of the Kingdom can, at times, still seem pretty chaotic and as though nothing's really changed...

Because of the empty tomb we know everything's different!

We know that Saturday – the day *in between* – eventually gives way to Sunday...

And, we're reminded that through it all God always has everything under His ultimate control...

We know it because...

Because Jesus Christ is Risen!

He is Risen Indeed!

Amen.