

**THEME: The Way: Walking in the Footsteps of Jesus**  
***“Your Defining Story”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton  
March 30-31, 2013 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

**John 20:19-23**

*19 That Sunday evening\* the disciples were meeting behind locked doors because they were afraid of the Jewish leaders. Suddenly, Jesus was standing there among them! “Peace be with you,” he said. 20 As he spoke, he showed them the wounds in his hands and his side. They were filled with joy when they saw the Lord! 21 Again he said, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you.” 22 Then he breathed on them and said, “Receive the Holy Spirit. 23 If you forgive anyone’s sins, they are forgiven. If you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.”*

**VIDEO      Sermon Starter – Your Defining Story**

**SLIDE      Your Defining Story (Use new side graphic for Easter)**

As we gather for Easter this year I want to ask you a question: **What is your defining story?** What is the story that shapes how you understand the world, the lens through which you see the world? What story is it that helps you understand your purpose and your place in the world? What story is it that helps you deal with suffering and adversity and what you think happens when this life is over and you reach the next? What is your defining story?

I want to ask you that question several times during our time together and I want to recognize that for Christians, our defining story is what we come to celebrate today. Easter, and what happened the week before, is our defining story as those who claimed Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

We just saw a moving artistic depiction of the life of Jesus and it helped us remember what happened the few days before Easter. Three days before Easter Jesus has just shared his final meal with his disciples in the Last Supper, which was the Passover Seder being celebrated by all the Jews in Jerusalem. He then goes to the Garden of Gethsemane to pray and while he is there he is arrested by the guards from the Temple courts. They take him before the Jewish Sanhedrin, which is a kangaroo court, where he is accused of blasphemy because he has

claimed to be the Son of God and the long-awaited Jewish Messiah. He is found guilty and then he's taken the next morning to Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea.

He is accused before Pilate of being a King that is over and above Caesar and is bound to lead an insurrection. He is found guilty and he is first sentenced to be beaten by Roman soldiers and then carry his own cross to Calvary, on a hill just outside the city gates of Jerusalem. It is there at nine in the morning that Jesus is crucified as they did with hardened criminals in the first century who opposed the Roman government. The cross is hoisted in the air and on either side of him are two men who were armed bandits, perhaps revolutionaries, who had not been afraid to kill people and steal from them.

Jesus is crucified between them and he hangs there for six hours until three in the afternoon, when he breathed his last, an excruciating death. He is taken down from the cross and hastily prepared for burial because they wanted to do it before sundown which began the Sabbath. He was placed in a borrowed tomb and as far as everyone in the world at that time was concerned, at least anyone who knew what was happening, that was the end of it. They were finished with Jesus.

Even the disciples believe this was the end. That night and the next day they hid from the authorities for fear that they might themselves be arrested and put in prison or worse, crucified just like Jesus. Their faith was in tatters and they experienced despair and hopelessness in those hours following the crucifixion of Jesus. They had lost their friend, their mentor and the person they believe would lead them to salvation. It was the darkest hour any of them could have imagined or had ever experienced.

This is part of our defining story because of what we celebrate today at Easter, and I want to linger here at the cross for a moment. The cross is a sign for us, and a very clear reminder from God, that we live in a world where there is suffering. Bad things happen to good people in the world that we live in. For some people this is the chief argument against the Christian faith, because of all the bad things that happen in the world. The argument goes that, "If Christianity were true, then all of these bad things should not happen."

The center of the Christian faith however is the acknowledgment that our world is filled with challenging and painful moments. When God walked upon this

earth in the flesh he was crucified on a Roman cross even though he hadn't done anything that would normally lead to a crucifixion. Our faith is not one that promises that bad things won't happen. It acknowledges that bad things do happen and the cross is the essence of the Christian faith which is God's response to our human condition, the things that lead to suffering and the suffering that we experience.

Why does suffering happen? Most of the time is really not that complicated. Human beings have free will and we sometimes misuse our freedom. We sometimes misuse our freedom in ways that bring suffering to ourselves or in ways that bring suffering to other people. Many times those who are in leadership in various nations around the planet will misuse their freedom and lead their own nations into war or violence against other people or against their own people. We find that much of human history is littered with stories of human beings who have brought suffering upon each other.

We also find that suffering happens because our bodies are susceptible to disease. We live in bodies made of flesh and bone and blood and these bodies can be hurt and they sometimes malfunction. Our bodies are not indestructible, however they do heal themselves when it comes to many afflictions which is more than we can say for any human made object.

Of course we also live on a planet which requires certain forces of nature to regulate it in order for it to support life. The movement of tectonic plates is the Earth's natural heat exchange mechanism and it allows this planet to support life. Those plates move around on our planet and even so, once in a while they collide and every 10 years or so they cause an earthquake which seems catastrophic. When human beings come into conflict with the forces of nature which support life on our planet, human beings will always lose.

We understand how all these things work and yet we still often say, "Well, if God is God and God is good and God is all-powerful then these things shouldn't happen." Of course, for these things to not happen God would have to take away our freedom, and most of us are willing to fight and die for our freedom. God will have to give us bodies which were very different from these bodies which are fearfully and wonderfully made so they would be indestructible. I can't really imagine what an indestructible body might be like, but it certainly wouldn't be the kind of body that most of us enjoy and love and that brings us thrills and chills.

How grateful we are that God created a planet that regulates itself and has forces of nature which allow us to have life on this planet?

God is not going to take those things a way and the essence of the Christian faith is not a fairytale promise that God will make everything okay. How could it be, when the central story of our faith is that when God walked on this planet he suffered and died a horrendous death?

Instead, the Christian faith is an acknowledgment that suffering happens and it is God choosing to walk in and among us and experience that suffering for us, so that when he died on the cross part of what God is saying to us is, "I know and I am with you. When you walk through hell on earth, I am still going to be with you. Look at me. I am walking with you now."

Part of the purpose of the cross is God saying to us, "In the midst of your suffering and your pain please remember that I know and I understand what it means to be human."

Jesus cries out from the cross, "Why have you forsaken me oh God?"

He knows what it's like to feel separated from himself and from all people and all of creation.

Yet at the very same time we find Jesus on the cross taking upon himself the evil and the brokenness of humanity. In that moment he is carrying the weight of the brokenness that we all struggle with in our own lives. The cross becomes a redemptive instrument for God's forgiveness and mercy for us. It is also a sign of the depth of God's love. A love that is willing to suffer and die for us. We understand that when someone gives their life to save another human being that is the highest form of love that we can see. We admire that and we stand in awe of it when someone lays down their life for another. On the cross God is saying, "This is the kind of love that I have for you. I would give my life for you."

What makes the cross such a powerful image of redemption and grace is that we know that the cross is not the end of the story, which is what we have gathered to celebrate today. Christianity acknowledges that suffering happens and this is part of our defining story—that God came and he didn't make it all better. Instead, he took the suffering on and he chooses to walk with us and communicate his love to us. He redeems that suffering and gives us hope.

There is a recent commercial for the Marine Corps that captures this idea in a powerful way. In this commercial you hear the sounds of battle and you hear the cries of people in need of help. You see smoke off in the distance. The voice of the narrator then begins:

**SLIDE        "Some people run towards the chaos."**

You then see the Marines running into battle. This is precisely the Christian story of the cross, and that is that when God came among us he didn't run away from the chaos or try to overwhelm the chaos, but he ran towards it and embraced the cross. God walks with us in our suffering and our hurt.

Over the past several years I've received e-mails from men and women who have been part of the congregations I have served who were in active duty in Afghanistan and Iraq. At one point we had one young group of men who would gather around a laptop computer and watch our services every week from their tent in the desert. I have often received e-mails from them asking me to pray for them because while they mostly are trying to help the people in the region where they are serving, they also are actively fighting and dealing with people who want to kill them and set bombs in their path to blow them up. On more than one occasion I've received e-mails asking me to pray for a comrade who died in the line of duty and his family would be being notified that week.

What is the defining story of people who wake up every day knowing that there are people not far from them want to kill them? What kind of defining stories sustains them? What kind of defining story leads them to run into the chaos and give them hope in the face of death? What kind of defining story gives their families back home the strength to deal with the chaos that their loved ones are facing in a country far away? What kind of defining story brings them hope for when they return home and have to deal with the demons of their past?

I know that for many of them, the defining story that sustains them is the cross and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is a story which says that evil and hate and even war will not have the final word. It is a story which says that God walks with us all the time. It is a story which says that there is a God of love and mercy and peace and grace who never leaves us. This story says that Christ ran towards the chaos, not away from it. That story brings strength and hope to many who are in the line of fire.

I want to ask you this question again.

## **SLIDE      What is your defining story?**

What leads you to March towards the chaos that gives you hope in the face of the chaos, if not this story? I know that we have some men and women serving overseas who will worship with us online this week and I want us to pause for 15 seconds and pray for them. I want to pray for these men and women whose lives are on the line and who are running towards the chaos and not away from it. Let's pray that God will strengthen them and bless them and encourage them this Easter, and then to pray for peace in Afghanistan and other parts of the world where there is conflict.

*Pause for silent prayer... Lord, grant strength and grace and peace and hope to those who run towards the chaos. Keep them in your care we pray. May they draw strength from your story of running towards the chaos—knowing that you ultimately triumphed over the grave. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

Again I would ask you: what is your defining story? We know that the cross is not the end of the story of Jesus. If it had, then we wouldn't be here today. The disciples were so discouraged and their faith was in such tatters, that they would not have gone on proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. They might have seen in him a wonderful martyr and a great example. They might have seen a beautiful picture of someone who laid down their life for their friends. But if the end of the story was the cross then evil would have prevailed. Hypocrisy, hurt and sin would have triumphed in the end if that was the end of the story at the cross.

But on the third day, on Easter morning, the women went to the tomb. They arrived and they found that the stone had been rolled away. They were shocked at first, thinking that someone had stolen the body of Jesus. I want us to think about this for a moment. The truth is that Jesus didn't need the stone to be rolled away in order to get out of the tomb. We read in the other resurrection accounts that Jesus passes through walls. The disciples were locked in a room after the crucifixion of Jesus and Jesus appeared without going to the front door. He could have passed through that stone in front of the tomb. Why was the stone rolled away?

It was not rolled away so that Jesus could get out, but so that we could see in and understand that he was not in the tomb but was risen from the grave. Jesus was raised from the dead but the women don't believe it until they see him

and are able to touch him and talk to him. The women then run to tell the disciples, "Jesus is risen! We have seen him!"

The disciples tried to brush them off saying, "We know that you are grieving and we understand that it's hard. We know that you are emotional but we also know that Jesus could not have risen from the grave."

The women insisted he had risen and the men insisted that he had not and they stayed in their room, typical men responding to women. The disciples stay in hiding in fear for several hours after they hear from the women that Christ is risen. They still don't believe and they are afraid until the late afternoon. In the shadows of that locked room, Jesus step forward and says the words that we heard today in the Scripture.

**SLIDE**        **"Peace be with you."**

When they see in that moment, when Jesus is raised from the dead, they finally understand that hate and evil and even death did not have the final word. They understand that life has conquered death, that hope has conquered despair, that grace has conquered sin, that love has conquered hate. In that moment they rejoice because they saw that all of the things they had come to believe because their faith was in tatters and they felt like there was no hope, suddenly was shattered and there was hope. God had triumphed. Good had triumphed over evil. Life triumphed over death.

This is our defining story, not only the crucifixion of Christ, but the ultimate triumph over the grave. Therefore, we always have hope. No matter what circumstances you are walking through, God says to us through this story that there is still always hope.

You may be walking through one of those moments right now. Your marriage may be coming apart and there are some marriages which don't get put back together again. It requires two people and a whole lot of work to bring a marriage back together once they fall apart. Some marriages will be put back together and there is always hope because God is able to resurrect dead things. God can resurrect relationships and finances and health. God specializes in resurrecting those things which seem to be dead.

Sometimes it means that we will experience resurrection in ways that we didn't expect or hope for. We get a sermon series at the beginning of the year around love, sex and marriage. For a number of you that sermon series was

difficult because you were going through a time when the relationship that was important to you had ended. One man came to me and he was so discouraged because his wife had left them and he felt like it was the end of the world. Recently he came to see me again and he told me, "You were right pastor Jeff. There is hope and I'm discovering new life when I thought that life was over. Be sure and remind other people to hold on because it gets better over time. Healing can happen and you can find love again. I haven't found love with another person but I have found that God does love me in a way that I never understood before."

I don't know what that resurrection will look like for you, but I know that when Jesus came down from the cross and he appeared to his disciples, suddenly they saw that there is always hope. If we are honest with ourselves then we recognize that we need this message to be true. This is God's response to the human condition. You might be here and you might be saying, "**I don't know if I believe all the stuff about resurrection.**"

I get that and I understand because the disciples didn't believe at first either. It's okay for you to have questions and for you to wonder if this story is true because even the people who lived it struggled to believe. But somehow inside, we instinctively know and we desperately want good to triumph over evil, life over death, grace over sin.

My family I like to go to the movies. Over the last eight years the most popular film series in the history of filmmaking has been Harry Potter. I know that some people have struggled with the Harry Potter books and movies because there is magic and there are witches, but J.K. Rowling who wrote the books was inspired by Tolkien in the *Lord of the Rings* series and CS Lewis and the *Chronicles of Narnia*. The final installment of the Harry Potter series was done in two parts and the final film was *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* part two. We saw the film in the theater and it was packed. There were people waiting in line for days to see the film when it was released last year. It was one of the best-selling DVDs this year when it was released on video.

Here's what I find fascinating. All throughout the Harry Potter books I kept thinking to myself, "I've seen this story." I recognize this story of a young man who willingly sacrifices his life to try and save his friends. It is the story of a young man who will lay down his life in the hopes that they will have life after that. It is the story of a young man who appears to be dead and all of his friends think that there is no **more** hope. Just about the time that the evil one, Voldemort, is

proclaiming victory, Harry Potter opens his eyes. The final battle is waged and Voldemort is destroyed.

Does this story sound at all familiar to you? This story sounds strikingly like the central story of the gospel which is our defining story. Harry Potter destroys Voldemort. Life conquers death. Good destroys evil. I found it interesting that as I looked around the packed movie theater and Harry was giving his life, the people around me were weeping. You could feel the sorrow and the theater. When Harry opened his eyes they broke out in cheers. When he finally defeated Voldemort the audience broke out in applause.

As I was watching this it struck me that this wasn't just about Harry Potter. This was about life and a desire that each one of us have inside of us for good to triumph over evil. This is about hope that people who give themselves sacrificially, that that will not be the end of the story. It is about the idea that in the end we need good to conquer evil and life to conquer death. This story was first lived out not on a Hollywood soundstage from the pages of a best-selling novel in the last 15 years.

This story was lived out in Jerusalem at Calvary, in a tomb and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We need this story to be true and there is something inside of us that knows it.

There are three things I want you to take with you from this Easter Sunday that we find in the Scripture passage before us today in this resurrection story of Jesus. Jesus comes out of the shadows and the upper room and he looks at his disciples and he says these words.

***"Peace be with you."***

Immediately after that they began to rejoice because their sorrow gave way to joy in the light of the resurrection. This is one of the ways of the resurrection is meant to affect us. In the midst of our sorrow we find joy. Because of the resurrection we find hope.

This idea of peace being with them is lived out because now if they look back on the cross they begin to see it differently. The cross was a symbol of torture and execution in the first century, and Jesus' resurrection turns it into a symbol of redemption and reconciliation. God took something that was horribly ugly and he turned it into something beautiful.

Let's remember that God still does this today. Part of our defining story is that God takes the pain from our past, and if we put it in his hands, he will use it to create something beautiful in us and through us. I think back to the hardest moments in my life, moments that seemed horrible at the time and felt like they would be the end of me, and I can look back today and see how God took all of those things and he forced them to accomplish something good. God didn't cause those things but he took those painful moments and may be more compassionate as a result. He took this thing from my past and gave me a heart for this kind of ministry. Most every good thing in my life that is happened are a result of what God did with the horrible things in my life. God transforms those ugly moments in our lives into beauty if we will let him, even when we feel there is no hope in the middle of those moments. That's how God works.

I know some of you that were abused as small children. We can let that be our defining story or we can let the defining story be that God took that pain from your childhood and he is using it in some powerful and beautiful way in your life. Your spouse left and for the rest of your life you can deal with anger and hurt and let that be your defining story, or you put it in God's hands and God does something beautiful with it.

A number of years ago you heard the story of Steven Curtis Chapman, one of the most famous contemporary Christian musicians and songwriters today, whose youngest child was accidentally run over by his teenage son in the driveway of their home. After that experience he wrote a number of songs using the Scriptures.

**SLIDE**      *It was the day the world went wrong  
I screamed til my voice was gone  
And watched through the tears  
as everything came crashing down  
Slowly panic turns to pain  
As we awake to what remains  
and sift through the ashes that are left behind  
But buried deep beneath  
All our broken dreams  
we have this hope:  
Out of these ashes... beauty will rise  
and we will dance among the ruins*

***We will see Him with our own eyes  
Out of these ashes... beauty will rise  
For we know, joy is coming in the morning  
...in the morning, beauty will rise***

Pain is a part of life. Suffering is a part of life. But putting God's hands these moments can be redeemed which is part of the message of the cross. That can bring us joy and hope when we trust that. So we pray, "God, take this and do something with it, please. It hurts. Please heal this and bring something good from it." That's what God does to the cross and it's part of our defining story.

**SLIDE      "Peace be with you."**

When Jesus utters these words they are meant to sustain us in our own dark moments that we struggle with in our lives. The disciples had been terrified before this and in light of the resurrection Jesus wanted them to experience peace. I think about how many people I have met who have illustrated this in their own lives, facing something terrifying and yet finding peace through Christ.

One of the persons I got to see live this out was Claire. Claire was nine years old when she was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. There had only been 12 other cases like it in the world and they all had been fatal. I visited Claire in Children's Hospital several times over the course of her illness and the surgeries in the procedures they tried. I was constantly amazed at how all of the people around her were asking the question, "Why," and yet she never really asked that question. Most days when I went to her room I would find her reading this Bible which had children's stories in it.

She especially enjoyed reading the story of the young girl who had died and how Jesus said, "Talitha Koum," which means, "little girl get up." We prayed for a miracle and that her body would respond to treatment and we also recognize that miracles are rare. We talked about how our bodies are not perfect and how they are not made to last forever and sometimes they get sick and we can't fix them.

As we got towards the end of her journey with cancer, I came to her room one day and several family members were there along with a doctor and some nurses and all of them were tense from having to decide whether to continue treatment or not. There were tears and there were angry outbursts and then I sat with Claire she handed me her Bible and it was open to this page, which had the

picture of the empty cross. She said to be quiet, sweet voice, "Jeff, remind them that it will be okay. Show them this."

Claire found peace through this defining story that says that Christ suffered just as those who suffer with cancer. He suffered to give us a clear picture that he knows what it's like to suffer and that we are not alone. He suffered so that we would understand that we are redeemed and saved. He suffered to show us that he could use suffering for good and for God's glory. Finally, he suffered so that we would know that sin and hate and cancer and death do not have the final word.

Claire lived that she knew that she would see her family again one day and she found peace even in the midst of one of the most horrifying experiences anyone can endure. Not only did she find peace, but she shared it with those of us who were blessed to share those moments together.

I was struck by the fact that her doctors and nurses were affected by Claire's faith. They drew strength from her and they were inspired by the peace that she exhibited in those final days. Nobody was with Claire during her battle with cancer and found their faith weakened after being with her. They found their faith strengthened by having been in her presence, because they saw how she lived her life with grace and peace.

This is what our defining story does for us. Let me ask you again.

**SLIDE      *What is your defining story?***

How do you face the battles that we face in life? How do you walk through suffering and what is your source of hope in the midst of that? Easter is our defining story and my hope is that you will claim it as your own.

The second thing that I want you to notice that Jesus does in this passage is that he gives the authority for his disciples to forgive sins and to retain them. Luke makes it even clearer in his gospel when he says to them these words. "Go into the world and preach that..."

**SLIDE      *"...there is forgiveness of sins for those who repent."***

We know that the cross is about forgiveness, but sometimes we forget that the resurrection is how we know that God actually has forgiven us and our sins are forgiven as we turned to him. This is really important that in the accounts of the resurrection we find this idea of forgiveness.

Four times during the past week I have had different people tell me, "Pastor Jeff, I know God can forgive sins, I just don't think he will forgive mine. You don't know the things I've done. I have a hard time believing that he will actually forgive my sins."

Maybe you feel that way. I don't know all of the creepy, horrible, no good things that you've done. I know the ones that I've done. As I was having this conversation this week with someone I asked them if they remembered that as Jesus is hanging on the cross, he is looking at the people who put him there and saying, "Father, forgive them because they don't know what they're doing."

Do you know that he was praying that prayer for you too as he hung on the cross? Do you know that there is a man who murdered people who was on the cross next to Jesus and that man turns to Jesus and says, "Remember me Jesus when you come into your kingdom"? Do you remember that Jesus turned to him and says, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."?

After the resurrection Jesus turns to Simon Peter who had denied Jesus three times on the night that he was arrested by saying, "I don't even know this man." Three times Jesus reinstates him and affirms that he really is an apostle and gives Peter a second chance.

Part of the gospel proclamation is that God is the God of second chances and third chances and fourth chances. No matter what you have done, you come to the cross and you remember the resurrection and you remember that he has promised forgiveness. Jesus suffered and died to send you a very clear picture, "I love you and I want you back. Come to me. I will forgive you and give you a second chance." God is the God of the second chance.

The final thing I want you to notice in this story is that in the resurrection Jesus gave a great commission. We are not supposed to just take that gift of peace that we find in the resurrection and bury it inside. Jesus didn't suffer and die on the cross and offer us forgiveness and a second chance so that we would just keep that message to ourselves. We were meant to do something with it.

In Matthew's gospel he says these words.

**SLIDE**        ***"Now go into all the world and teach them what I thought you. Make disciples."***

The last statement of Jesus in the book of Acts is...

**SLIDE**        ***"You will be my witnesses to what has happened and what I have done in your life."***

In John's gospel we heard Jesus say these simple words this morning.

**SLIDE**        ***"As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you."***

Jesus is saying that, "I came to embody the love of God—God's mercy and grace and presence in the midst of suffering. I have lived that out for you. Now, when I go to be with my father, it's your job." If this is your defining story then your task is to embody the love of God to other people—to show them that he is with them in the midst of their suffering—to work for justice and care for the poor—to stand by those who are in need—to demonstrate sacrificial love as Christ has done for us.

This is our mission. When we accept it and live into it, when we seek to do it, then we find joy. There is something about living this way that when you have given yourselves to others as you encounter them, you feel alive—because you were made for this. This is our mission, to be Jesus Christ to the world.

I encourage our congregation every day to start your day by simply lifting your hands and offering your life to Christ in that day. "Jesus, once more today I offer my life to you. Help me to live for you and to honor you, to serve you and to bless your people. Help me to encourage people and to be the man that you want me to be." I think this is the prayer of a follower of Jesus. Jesus calls us into this life of mission and every single day there is something out there for us to fulfill if you will accept it. This is part of what Jesus shows us in this resurrection story.

When we figure this out, and this is our defining story and we live for him each day, we find life. We find what we were made for, even when we are suffering.

Every year at Easter I struggle with what I am going to say to you in the sermon. I recognize that for some of you this may be the one time that you come to church every year and I always am trying to figure out what I can say that is new and that I didn't say last year. Every preacher struggles with this and I'm haunted by the fact that several years ago one guy said to me after worship, "Every single time I come to church you are preaching on the same thing. I don't get it. Why do you have to preach the same thing every single time I come to church?"

So I asked him, "How often you come to church?"

He responded, "Well, I come every Easter."

All I could say was, "Dude, this is the story! I'm not going to change it for you so come on some other days in the year!"

William Edwin Sangster was a Methodist pastor of the largest Methodist church in England in 1940s and 50s. He was pastor at Methodist Central Hall, right across from Westminster Abbey if you been to London. The sanctuary seats about 3000 people and people flocked to come to that church both in the mornings and evenings to hear W.E. Sangster preach. He began serving a church in 1940 during World War II. His church was a place to seek sanctuary when the air raids were coming. You might remember that the blitzkrieg was 57 straight nights of the Germans dropping bombs on the city of London. Over 450,000 people slept in the basement of that church sometime during the war. Sangster and his wife would be there in the evenings ministering to people and then they themselves would sleep on the bathroom floor of the church.

He preached every Sunday morning during that time period and there was a little red light behind the pulpit and when the red light flashed it meant that there was an air raid coming and he would say to the people, "There is an air raid coming so please make your way down to the basement. As for me, I'm going to continue to preach so if any of you want to stay we will stay here and finish this sermon and worship together." They would then finish worship before he they headed down to the basement.

Sangster had a passion for reaching thinking people and helping them come to know Christ. He had a passion for renewing the Methodist Church and he wrote a number of books. In 1956 he was diagnosed with what we call today Lou Gehrig disease or ALS. He was only 56 years old and within a year he had to resign his pulpit because he could not preach anymore. Within a year of that he couldn't speak anymore. His last book was a collection of sermons, including many great Easter sermons, and his son Paul wrote this at the beginning of the book.

***These sermons are the last work of my dad, who died on Wesley day in 1960 at the age of 60. They were sent to the publisher only a day or two before he died. The last weeks of his life were spent correcting and rewriting the sermons. He was virtually helpless. He retained only a little strength in two of his fingers on his right hand with which to hold a pen.***

***His voice had long been lost and his only means of communicating left with those he loved and with the world was his pen and therefore this book.***

***Yet the finest sermon he ever preached is not in this collection, though the book tells something of it. That distinction belongs not to any he preached from the pulpit, nor to any printed word, but to the last years of his life. It was then that my dad preached his best, and preached curiously enough in silence.***

W.E. Sangster's defining story was the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus that promised Christ was walking with him in the midst of suffering, and that God could use him even as he was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease, and that there was always hope.

People ask me often, "Jeff, you're a smart guy. Do you really believe this stuff about resurrection? Do you really believe that Jesus rose from the grave?"

I tell them what I tell you every year it Easter, "I not only believe it, but I'm counting on it." I'm counting on the fact that God walks with us in our suffering. I'm counting on the fact that God's name is love. I'm counting on the fact that forgiveness triumphs over our brokenness. I'm counting on the fact that God promises to bring us hope for the future. I'm counting on the fact that life is conquered death. I'm counting on the fact that we have a mission and a calling to fulfill that will help bring about the Kingdom of God not just year before eternity.

I not only believe it, but I'm counting on it. What are you counting on? What is your defining story? Let's pray.

While your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed, I would like to invite you to pray to God yourself in the quiet. God hears you. Maybe you are here and it's been a long time since you decided to follow Christ. Maybe you have never made that decision but today you are ready to say, "I want this to be my defining story."

I'd invite you just to whisper this prayer. God hears your whispers and all you really have to do is say, "yes." So you might just whisper this prayer.

**SLIDE      Prayer (picture of Easter cross for this prayer time)**

*Yes, Jesus, I want to follow you...*

*I trust in this defining story...*

*On the cross, you offer me forgiveness...*

*You show us that you are always with us...*

*I trust this...*

*In your resurrection you triumph...triumph over the grave...over sin and hate*

*I trust this...*

*Help me to follow you...*

*Help me to serve you...*

*And help me to live with hope...*

*In your holy name. Amen*

### **This weeks Meditation Moments begins on Tuesday**

**Tuesday, April 2** – This week we will read accounts of the resurrection of Christ that we find in each of the gospels. Each of these accounts differs in the details they share. All agree that the tomb was empty, that there were angels (no wings - these are simply described as young men), that Mary Magdalene was the first to find the tomb empty, and that Jesus was raised from the dead. Beyond this they differ in specifics. Luke and John share much in common. Mark has a short ending and then a longer ending was added later to the gospel, incorporating elements from the other gospels. Remember, of the gospel writers only John and Matthew were apostles, and Matthew seems to have written an earlier version of the gospel that bears his name - hence we might expect the specific details to differ while the overall message is the same. Look for the different details and how each gospel tells the Easter story. Make a few notes throughout the week concerning Joseph of Arimathea - he's an interesting character found in all four gospels. Read Matthew 27:57-28:10. Can you picture this: The tomb is sealed and surrounded by Roman soldiers and Jesus still came forth! There is a wonderful irony in Matthew's telling of the story. How did the women feel at discovering Jesus was raised? Why?

**Wednesday, April 3** – Read Mark 15:42-16:8. This is the short ending of Mark. It appears that something is missing here - as though the first copy of Mark had a part of the text rendered unreadable or was otherwise lost. The early church, probably in the early second century, added the rest of chapter 16, written in a style different from Mark's gospel and drawing upon the other gospel accounts. Read Mark 16:9-20. Look over your notes from Sunday's sermon – what is the significance of the Resurrection for Christians? We talked this last week about the resurrection being a defining story for those of us who follow Jesus Christ. Invite God to make this your story this week as you spend time in prayer. How might you view life differently in the days ahead when the resurrection of Christ is your defining story?

**Thursday, April 4** – Read Luke 23:50-24:12. We will examine Luke 24:13-35 this coming weekend in worship, so for now, skip this section and Read Luke 24:36-53. Some in the early church insisted that Jesus had just appeared to the disciples, but that he hadn't bodily been raised. How does Luke's account address this? Notice even the disciples standing there had doubts as they saw Jesus - resurrections were no more common in their day than ours! How is the resurrection a vindication of Jesus' ministry?

**Friday, April 5** – Read John 19:38-20:23. Notice the grief of Mary. She represents all of us as we face grief at the loss of those we love. John's account of the resurrection is rich in allusions to the Old Testament. Notice the two angels sitting on the head and foot of the ledge where Jesus' body had lain. This is meant to remind the reader of the Ark of the Covenant – the symbolic throne of God which had an angel on either end and was said to be both the throne and the judgment seat of God. Jesus, in his death and resurrection, has been declared King and judge. Notice only John tells us the tomb was in a garden. This is an allusion to the Garden of Eden – in Jesus' death and resurrection humanity is being restored to the Garden of Eden – to paradise – a garden that Adam and Eve were banished from after their sin. Three times Jesus says the same thing to the disciples - pointing to part of what he offers in his resurrection. What does he say? How does Easter provide this to us?

**Saturday, April 6** – Read John 20:24-21:17. “Doubting” Thomas represents all of us. We all struggle with doubt. This story is told for our benefit. Recall how many times Peter denied Jesus on the night Jesus was arrested. How does that story fit into John 21:15-17? How does this story bring hope to those of us who have denied Jesus by our words or actions? To know more about the meaning of the resurrection, read I Corinthians 15. As a family activity you might spend some time talking about how you see signs of resurrection in our everyday lives. What do you see happening in the world around us that are like “little resurrections”, such as the sun coming up each day?