

Happy News  
Mark 16:1-8  
April 12, 2009 (Easter)  
St. John United Methodist Church  
Anchorage, Alaska  
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Do you ever get tired of the bad news we hear every day? Apparently there are news outlets who are trying to balance this reality with some positive news. One of them is happynews.com. Here's one of their uplifting stories.

In Massachusetts Robert Lemire was on the sidewalk talking on his cellphone when something caught his eye: a child's toy falling from an upper window of a large apartment house. Then, he heard a cry and looked up where he saw a small girl dangling from the window and two children inside desperately clutching her arms. Lemire bolted across the street, dodging a car. His heart pounding, Lemire ran to the front door, yelling "There's a baby out the window!"

Alex Day, a 23-year-old trucking manager, heard the yelling while sitting in a first-floor apartment with his wife and a dozen Sunday Bible study regulars. He jumped to his feet and ran out. "I thought maybe there was a fire," he said. But as soon as he turned the corner, he saw Lemire standing below the window, looking up. He followed the man's gaze to the girl dangling above. She was slipping. As he rushed to Lemire's side, Lemire spoke: "Here she comes." The toddler fell with her body tilted toward the ground. "He pretty much got the top and I got the diaper end," said Lemire. Alex Day said, "She looked at me and had a weird look on her face as if to say, 'Wow, all of a sudden I'm down here.'" He carried the toddler back upstairs to her home. On the stairs the baby actually started chuckling.

Here's another example of the kind of positive stories reported on happynews.com. It was a teenage custom in one community for girls to have really big parties for their sixteenth birthday. But Ashley Bissel decided to give back rather than ask for gifts at her Sweet Sixteen bash. The 10th grader, who attends Holyoke Catholic school, asked party goers to make a donation to a cancer organization. Bissel said, "Instead of having gifts, I decided for everybody to donate, because my mom is a breast cancer survivor." Bissel's classmates were very receptive to the idea, and two others have decided to do the same thing at their own Sweet Sixteen celebrations.

Now some might claim that such news ignores the hard realities of life. I don't think the message here is to deny anything. Rather it is to celebrate the good news that often goes unreported. When Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome head to the tomb on Easter morning, they aren't expecting to be uplifted. They are bringing spices to anoint the stone-cold, dead body of Jesus, a dismal and depressing task. As they walk in the early-morning light they are worrying about how they will manage to muscle the heavy stone away from the entrance to the tomb (Mark 16:1-3).

What a surprise it is to see the stone already rolled away. They enter the tomb and spot a young man, dressed in white, sitting on the right side. Who is this guy? A guard? A gardener? A grave robber? It is the not knowing that creates fear in their hearts. "Do not be alarmed," says the mystery man; "you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here" (v. 6).

There's happy news and there's Happy News. This was capital letter Happy News. He is risen! But that's not all. Here's a piece of the Easter story that many people miss. In verse 7 we read, "But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee," continues the white-robed messenger; "there you will see him, just as he told you." Jesus is going ahead of them, and he will be waiting for them in the future. That's a second piece of truly upbeat information. Not only is Jesus alive. Jesus is ahead of us. That's the HappyNews headline for the story of Easter.

But many people struggle with the resurrection and do not yet feel the hope that God is ahead of them. It's not that they have rejected the reality of the resurrection. It's more likely that they haven't heard the story in a way that helps them make a personal connection with it.

During the Second World War, an 18-year-old German named Jürgen Moltmann was drafted to serve in Hitler's army. Assigned to an anti-aircraft battery, he experienced the horror of watching fellow soldiers being incinerated in firebombings. After surrendering to the British, he spent three years in prison camps, and saw how other German prisoners "collapsed inwardly, how they gave up all hope, sickening for the lack of it, some of them dying."

Moltmann had not grown up as a Christian, but an American chaplain gave him an Army-issue *New Testament and book of Psalms*, signed by President Roosevelt. He read the Psalms and found something he desperately needed: hope. He became convinced that God was present with him, "even behind the barbed wire." After being transferred to a camp run by the YMCA, Moltmann learned Christian beliefs, and experienced the love and the acceptance of the local population. They "treated me better than the German army," he told journalist Philip Yancey.

Jürgen Moltmann found new life in Christ after seeing only death in the Second World War. The gospel was life-giving good news for him, and it can be for us as well. But we need to take our hopelessness, our vulnerability, our need for love and make a personal connection with our Easter God of power so we can live a transformed life. Do you really want Easter to be real in your life?

The risen Christ was moving ahead of Moltmann, leading him into an unexpected future. After the war, Moltmann became a Christian theologian and focused on the ideas that God is present with us in our suffering, and that God is leading us to a better future. Both ideas come out of the story of Jesus, and both come out of Moltmann's personal story as well. Easter Sunday is the beginning of the "laughter of the redeemed," he says; it is "God's protest against death." God is not satisfied with the way the world is today, and he intends to make all things new.

The founder of HappyNews is convinced that good news has been trumping bad news for some time, and he wants the world to know it. We may live in a Good Friday world but we are Easter people. Our message is that good news is trumping bad news, and we want the world to know it.

We can be grateful that the Bible reports the good news of the resurrection for us, because you won't find this story in any of the other publications of the day. Look at the records of Jewish leaders and the reports of Roman generals, and you won't find any account of Jesus rising from the dead. As far as the official writings of the era are concerned, there is nothing particularly newsworthy about the first Easter morning. It's a day like any other: criminals are being crucified, uprisings are being squelched,

businessmen are bribing politicians, the poor are being ignored. It isn't a big news day for anyone outside the small circle of disciples.

You have to wonder if the same can be said today. Is Easter a big news day, or a day like any other? Yes, there are the cultural rituals of Easter eggs in brightly colored baskets filled with candy that make this day special. But will this day, the holiest day of the Christian year, change anything about how we will live from now on?

I have no doubt that you have your own happy news stories. But you likely have moments when you focus on your sad news. Maybe the good news of the resurrection hasn't sunk into your heart just yet. Or perhaps you are the kind of person who easily dwells on bad news. The good news is right here but you can't see it because you can't seem to stop thinking about bad news.

How do you stop this kind of thinking? A month ago my wife and I received the news that she may have breast cancer. Further tests did not yield good news. When you hear the doctor looking at an ultrasound and she says, "This doesn't look good," you pay attention. Yes we were tempted to go to the "scary" place, that place of very bad news. But we resisted. Kim's Lenten discipline was to be positive. Easter people need the kind of discipline that leads to trust not fear. No one ever did themselves or their loved ones any good by worrying about something over which they had no control.

What are your scary places? What are the worries in your life? Worry is assuming a responsibility God never intended you to have. Easter people have within them a God-power that enables them to leave some responsibilities with God or with others who are supposed to have them. This is part of what we mean by gospel or good news. It's not just an inspiring story. There is a strength God gives to those who trust in God.

The good news of Easter is that Jesus is alive, and he is leading us to a better future. It was true when the women visited the empty tomb, and it is true today. Whether we are facing a time of grief, a period of personal pain or an experience of hopelessness, we can look to the Lord who is alive and well and inviting us to follow him.

The Christ who was crucified knows our deepest personal anguish. The Christ who was lifeless knows the complete desolation of death. The Christ who was raised knows the life-giving power of God. The Christ who goes ahead of us knows that the future is full of promise and possibility.

This news, the good news of Easter morning, trumps all the reports of death and destruction that tend to dominate our normal morning updates. Christ is risen! Christ is ahead of us! Christ will lead us forward! This report is real, compelling and positive — the happiest news of all. Amen.