

Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

Easter Reflection by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, based on Luke 24. 1-12

Old South Church is on the cusp, on the very tippy edge of turning 350 years old. So, how do we look?

We will celebrate our 350th Anniversary on Sunday, May 12th, the exact day in 1669 that our founders (candidly a rebellious lot...and we like to think we've inherited some of their spice) first gathered.

We will celebrate on May 12th with proper pomp and circumstance. And, then, we will party! Ice cream, music, dancing and games. You are all invited.

What's in a name? At our founding, we were given names, branded with names: the *dissenting brethren*, the *schismatics*, the *heretics* and, my favorite, the *troublers in our Israel*. Yet, within a short time, our reputation was such that we'd earned normal, if less colorful, names. First, the Third Church in Boston. Later, the South Church in Boston. Still later, the Old South Church. And when we moved here in 1875, the New Old South Church. But, as we're among friends today, you can just call us Old South.

What's in a name? Today, on Easter Sunday, I'd like to honor two members of our church whose parents thought Easter was a very big deal, such a big deal they named their daughters for it.

On April 13 in the year 1818 a woman joined our church whose given name was Easter. That's a nice first name. A promising start. But it goes decidedly downhill from there. Her last name, hyphenated: Flint-Pinks. "Flint" as in the hard grey, rock. "Pinks" as in the color of a pig, only plural. Easter Flint-Pinks. Doesn't really roll off the tongue.

Three years earlier on July 9, in the year 1815, another Easter joined this church. Her last name is a happier one: Bliss. Easter Bliss. Imagine that. It makes you wonder whether Bliss was her maiden or married name. Were her parents the Basketts? Or the Days? Did she live her childhood as Easter Baskett, or Easter Day? And then, did she happen to marry a Mr. Bliss? Easter Baskett Bliss? I bet everyone who met her, upon introduction—*May I introduce Easter Bliss*—couldn't help but smile.

While Easter Bliss and Easter Flint-Pinks are just two examples, the real point is that people, lots and lots of people, with all kinds of names—names like James Otis and Samuel Adams and Phillis Wheatley and Pompey and Scipio—were members of this church, upheld this church, and have fueled it and operated it across three-and-a-half long, hard adventurous centuries, all because of today's story. Because of the Easter story.

Not because of the Christmas story. Now, the Christmas story is a good story, a great story. God sure got our attention with an infant. Turned our heads, did God. Made us take notice. Who doesn't like infants? Everyone loves the Christmas story: what with all the angels and shepherds, a young mother, and a babe in arms. It's a no brainer. A slam dunk.

But we're not here today, Old South Church isn't here today, isn't on the cusp of our 350th anniversary because a baby was born, even a remarkable, miraculous, and mystical baby. No, we're here today, and Sam Adams supported this church in his day, because of the Easter story. (Sam Adams who sang in our choir, attended church meetings, and, who, as Lieutenant Governor, while a busy man, a man of consequence with many responsibilities... Lt Gov. Samuel Adams mounted his horse and rode to New Hampshire representing this church, rode to New Hampshire and other places too, to represent Old South, at regional churchly councils.) Because of the Easter story.

Not because of the Christmas story. Nor because of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, although the Sermon on the Mount is arguably the single most profound ethical treatise in human history. We're here today, Old South Church is up and running today, is open for business today—its members across three-and-half-centuries laboring for this church; planting this great stone edifice here on the corner of Boylston and Dartmouth – not because Jesus walked on water, not because he healed the ill, or preached great sermons. We're here today—I'll just say it as plain as plain can be; and I know how it sounds, how preposterous is sounds; we're here today—because God raised Jesus from the dead. Amen?

We're here because Jesus appeared to his followers on multiple occasions long after he was crucified, died and was buried. He appeared in the flesh, in person. That's what they tell us. That's what they experienced. They were convinced of it. Convinced! They bet their lives on it. Time is divided because of it.

And because of it—because of the Easter story— nothing will ever be the same again: We shall lose our share of battles, you and I (we will, and we have) but the war is won. We shall not escape our share of grief or fear or pain (we will not, we have not escaped) but on the far side of death all tears shall be wiped away and death is no more. This is our faith. This is our Easter faith.

And, here's the kicker: the Easter story proclaims that Samuel Adams and those members of our church from the 1600's and 1700s who were enslaved—members with names like Moses and Scipio, Mingo and Pompey, Brill and Cornwall— the Easter story proclaims that Samuel Adams and Cornwall receive the same inheritance from God. Imagine that!

Easter proclaims that what Samuel Adams gets is no different than what Easter Flint-Pinks gets; there's no difference between what Mother Goose gets than what Pompey gets. Heaven has no best seats; no back of the bus; no reserved seating; it's no gated community; there are no corner offices in heaven, not even for Founding Fathers and Lieutenant Governors. God lets everyone in. Amen?

If you read about the early Church, that's the thing that stands out. Everybody gets in: women, the poor, the enslaved, transients, outcasts, foreigners, exiles, strangers, nobodies. The early church is a community of nobodies who become somebodies in the presence of God. Imagine that!

For three-hundred-and-fifty years the people of Old South Church – people like Mother Goose and Easter Bliss, William Dawes and Easter Flint-Pinks, Phillis Wheatley and Neesima Jo, Pompey and Mingo—for three-hundred-and-fifty years the people of Old South Church (all kinds of people: widows and orphans, immigrant and native, enslaved and free) have cradled, cherished and ferried the Easter story; cradled and ferried it and passed it on and passed it down across the centuries; passed it down, generation to generation, person to person, parent to child, teacher to student, through the making of a new nation, through bloody wars, economic crises and struggles for civil and human rights; cradled and ferried and passed it down through storms and illness, at times of great national decision, and through personal heartache, grief, and tragedy

This is the reason we are here today, open for business today. It's not because of Christmas, but because of Easter. We are here today, still at it today, because of the mind-bending, laws-of-nature-flouting, death-defying, mortality-up-ending story of Easter. We are here because of the story of an empty tomb and a risen Jesus; the story of God's defiance of death and God's throwing open wide the doors of heaven.

Take or leave it. Believe it or doubt it. That's up to you. As to the members of Old South Church: it's our story and we're stickin' to it.

BENEDICTION

Because of Easter, because death is dead: Walk bravely into this new week. Shun the hollow. Hallow the good. Forgive those who wound you, wound not in return. Encourage the discouraged. Cherish times with the lonely. Pray in private crannies about all things. Be found celebrating. Practice rejoicing. Encourage laughter in your soul. And may the blessing of God: Creator, Christ and fiery Spirit be with you and remain with you always.