

April 4th 2010- The Rev. Scott Pittendrigh  
Easter Sunday and at the Baptism of Nardis Ivens, Catherine Rose and Ethan Rigler  
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Let us pray:  
Gracious and loving God,  
may it be your word that is spoken here;  
may it be your word that is heard;  
and may it be your word that is received into our hearts  
through the one who breaks the bonds of death this day,  
Jesus Christ our Risen Lord. Amen.

You probably don't know the name Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin nor should you. But during his day, he was a powerful man on this earth. A Russian Communist leader, he took part in the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, was editor of the Soviet newspaper Pravda, and was a full member of the Politburo. Although Communism in Russia is long dead and buried, we should not forget how aggressively Communism sought to undermine, and even destroy the faith (the Christian faith of the Russian people) and replace it with atheism – seeking to make the entire country an atheist state. In fact, the Soviet Union was the first state to have as an ideological objective the elimination of all religion. As a result, the Communist regime confiscated church property, ridiculed religion, harassed believers, and propagated atheism in its' schools. Russian Orthodox priests and believers were tortured, sent to prison camps, labour camps or mental hospitals, and a large number were executed. Many Russian Orthodox (along with people of other faiths) were also subjected to psychological punishment or torture and mind control experimentation in order to force them give up their religious convictions. Thousands of churches and monasteries were taken over by the government and were either destroyed or converted to secular use. It was impossible to build new churches.

There's one particular story about this man, Nikolai Bukharin, that many Russian people remember and like to tell again and again. It's about a journey he took from Moscow to Kiev in 1930 to address a huge assembly on the subject of atheism. Addressing the crowd, he aimed his heavy artillery at the church and specifically at Christianity, hurling insult, argument, and proof against it.

An hour later, when he was finished, he looked out at what seemed to be the smoldering ashes of the people's faith. "Are there are any questions?" Bukharin demanded. Deafening silence filled the auditorium, but then one older man began his slow but steady pace to the lectern.

Standing shoulder to shoulder with the communist leader, this old man surveyed the crowd first to his left and then to his right. Finally, he mustered all the strength he had inside him and shouted the ancient greeting known so well in the Russian Orthodox Church, "Alleluia! Christ is Risen!" and en masse, the large crowd stood to their feet and the response came crashing like the sound of thunder, "He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!"

I love this story. Not only because it reminds us of how even with the most oppressive efforts a people's faith could not be stifled or stamped out or silenced, but because it goes to the heart of what this Easter



Day is all about. That even when it looks like everything is gone; even when it looks like death has taken away everything that you love and everything that was precious to you, God brings new life.

We have a day today that is filled with hope. We have the great Easter story to remember and re-tell about an empty tomb and death not having the last word. We have the great honour and joy of baptizing three people today: Nardis, Catherine and Ethan. We have a day that is rich in symbolism – with water, and light, and oil, and bread and wine in the meal known as the Holy Eucharist that we are all invited to share. All of these symbols are part of our story today.

All of you here, for whatever reason, have brought your stories to merge today with the Easter story. Whether you come here every week; once or twice a year; or because someone asked you to come; or because you are the family and friends of those being baptized, your story is merging with theirs and with the great liberating story of Easter – the Day of Resurrection. It is a story that can transform us. It is a story that can make this world a better place,.....and....it is a story that needs our participation in it, if that is going to happen. Otherwise it will remain as a story in the Bible that we hear once a year and leave it at that. Those who are being baptized today are taking their first steps in participating in this story. They too, have their own stories which have led them to this important day in their lives. In Ethan's case it is his parents whose life stories have led them to bring him here today and make promises on his behalf.

So why are we doing all of this today?

Well, the church has, for nearly two thousand years, held baptism and Easter together. Baptisms are happening in Christian churches all over the world today. This is because Easter and baptisms are both about new life. They are about a new life that can only come after surrendering the present life. They are both about something dying and something new rising up from that death. In baptism, it is about an old way of life dying and a new life rising from the waters of baptism. A new life that follows God's Way – that follows Jesus' way of love and compassion, of justice and peace.

It's kind of hard to understand this when the candidate for baptism is a little baby, like Ethan. He doesn't have an "old" life yet. But Pamela and Brian, his parents, and Steph and Jim his godparents, are making the promises on his behalf today because they want Ethan to know what Christ's way—the way of love and compassion—looks like. And they will be the ones who will show him that life – who will model that life and that way for him. It's up to them.

Nardis and Catherine are choosing this new life for themselves. They have been working with Sarah in their catechism classes for many weeks now, leading up to this day. They have learned about the Christian faith and the history of the church. They have participated in the events of Holy Week these past few days – even attending the Easter Vigil service late last night. But as much as they have learned and participated, ultimately this day for them comes down to love. It comes down to them knowing how much they are loved by God. It is about knowing that it is only this love of God that satisfies their deepest longings. Jesus got this, and that is why he lived his life the way he did. At his own baptism in the River Jordan he heard God saying to him, "You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased." After this event in his life, this blessing was the lens through which Jesus looked at the world. Because he truly knew he was loved by God, he was able to see that those around him were also loved by God.



You see, we live what we know. If we have been cursed – whether that be by a parent, a teacher, or a culture, what we have received we pass on to others. That curse is the lens through which we look at life. Conversely, if we have been blessed, by a parent, a teacher or some other mentoring figure, we have a greater ability to look at our world with the eyes of Christ – and the eyes of Christ see blessing and goodness and hope and possibility. The eyes of Christ also see oppression and injustice and corruption – see where the poor and the vulnerable are excluded. And once we see, we act.

This is your invitation today, Catherine and Nardis and Ethan – and it is the invitation given to every person here in this church. First, we hear God say to us, “You are my beloved daughter – you are my beloved son – in you I am well pleased.” Listen for those words whispered softly in your hearts as you feel the water run down the side of your face. And then after we listen we respond: we respond in the new way we see others, because we now see them with the eyes of Christ. We respond in the new way we treat others, because we know that they also are God’s beloved children. Our baptisms are not just for us – they are one way in which God continually transforms our world.

In our gospel reading this morning Mary Magdalen learns that resurrection is not just about a private moment of joy between herself and Jesus, but an experience that compels her to move out, tell her story, and transform the world. She shows up at the tomb after her male companions have returned home, weeping for what is gone. She obviously expects nothing to happen; she has come to mourn the loss of life, to touch a dead body, and to bid goodbye. In her grief, she can hardly think clearly. She sees two angels and does not recognize their otherworldly origins. She sees Jesus and mistakes him for the gardener. Then he speaks her name, and she suddenly knows exactly who this mysterious stranger is. She responds to the call of her name; “Teacher,” she replies. Then Jesus commissions her to go and tell others what she has seen.

The story of the resurrection is really a story about commissioning, sending believers out into the world to tell everyone that death is not the last word. If the first disciples had not done this, no one would have ever known what had happened, and Easter would be just another reunion story of dear friends with tears and hugs all around. However, Mary obeys the risen Jesus, fighting her impulse to cling to a familiar body, and leaves the garden to tell what she knows to be true. An expected ending is now a beginning. Just like the elderly Russian who came to the lectern when asked if there were any questions – a man who summed up all his courage and strength to tell what he knew to be true.

So Catherine, Nardis and Ethan – and all of us here today – we are commissioned on this beautiful Easter Sunday morning to go out into our world and tell what we know to be true:

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!  
The Lord is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

