

**SLD04.24.05 Fifth Easter**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**John 14:1-14**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

### **“The Story We Live By”**

My son, Christopher, recently turned 12. He’s a bright boy, a good student, and as interested as the next kid in understanding the world, in knowing what’s really going on, in grasping quickly what is the difference between what is true and what is not. This understanding of the difference between fact and fiction is important to the process of growing up, of making sense out of life, and of fitting in. It is also one of the keys to being cool. For among Christopher’s 11 and 12-year-old peers, it just won’t do anymore to believe in Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, or monsters under the bed at night.

So, often when Christopher is confronted with the unknown, the debatable, the marginally believable, he presses me with the question, “Is this true, Mommy? Is this real?”

Unfortunately, for Xr anyway, in the realm of mystery where I spend a lot of my time, the line is drawn less between what is factually true and false than between what is factually true and what is ‘truth.’ Which regrettably subjects Xr to some tiresomely long answers.

For example, when Christopher was studying Greek gods in the third grade, his assignment was to choose from among the pantheon a god about whom to construct a teaching poster. Christopher chose Zeus (naturally) and the story he illustrated was the tale of Zeus and Prometheus.

As the story goes, Zeus was so mad at Prometheus for giving fire to lesser mortals that he condemned him to be bound to a rock for all time with his liver exposed for a passing eagle to eat. Worse yet, Prometheus' liver would keep growing back so the eagle could keep eating it, for all eternity! It was just the kind of disgustingly gross story that delightfully grabs the imagination of a ten-year-old boy.

So, with a series of cartoon frames on his teaching poster, Christopher draws Prometheus bringing fire to humankind to relieve the human fear of the dark. Then he shows an angry Zeus punishing Prometheus by chaining him to the rock. "Help!" reads the speech bubble erupting from Prometheus' mouth. "Mmmm, Dinner!" read the words bubbling from the eagle's beak.

In the final frame, Christopher drew the hero, Heracles, or 'Hercules' as he is better known by us today, unchaining Prometheus from his rock and delivering him from his excruciating destiny. "Yeay!" cries Prometheus, "I'm free!", as Hercules displays the universal sign of the victorious strong man.

Completing his masterwork and laying it out on the dining room table, Christopher comes in the kitchen and asks the inevitable question: "So, is this true, Mommy? Is this real?"

I hesitate. After all, this is no fairytale written for amusement, nor even a fable composed with moral instruction in mind. This is a story of Greek gods designed to reveal something about the nature of the divine ones to the community from which the story emerged. Having a healthy respect for god-stories myself, I had no doubt but that this one was true to the ancient Greeks.

But was it true in any factual sense? Wasn't that what Christopher really wanted to know? Was there really ever an immortal-livered Prometheus chained to a rock by an indignant Zeus? Well, I doubt it.

But for the early Greeks who worshipped the pantheon of Olympian Gods, whose days and nights and seasons and rhythms of life were ruled by Zeus and Poseidon, Aphrodite and Artemis, Hermes and Hades, did the story of Zeus and Prometheus and Heracles hold truth? That is, did it hold meaning, shed light, offer revelation? Did they learn from it something about their gods and how to be in the world in relation to them? Was it a story they lived by? Well, I imagine so.

So, was the story true? Yes or no. That's all my kid wanted to know, and he was still waiting for the answer.

Now I learned a long time ago not to ask my father such a question unless I had *plenty* of time to listen to the answer. A passing query such as 'what time is it?' could lead to endless pontification on the nature of time, who invented the sundial, how hour glasses were used in medieval times, the relative advantages of drip clocks over mechanical time pieces, who constructed Big Ben, and why, the importance of a time piece to the discovery of longitude, and a thorough description of the gears and springs of a self-winding watch. With a footnote on the notable difference between *kairos* and *chronos*. From a variety of secular and religious perspectives. Including his own unique insights.

And as may have become obvious to some of you, I often think just like my Dad. However, fortunately for Christopher, I'm a lot more conscious than my

Dad was of the effect that kind of answer has on a kid. So the pressure was on: in 25 words or less, was the story about Zeus and Prometheus true or not?

“Well, sweetie,” I said (and already he looked bored). “Sometimes ‘truth’ seems different than facts, and it’s always more important. (He rolls his eyes and makes himself comfortable.) I imagine that to the ancient Greeks this story held some truth. And that it was important to them because it told them something about the gods they worshipped. As Christians, we don’t worship those gods or really know very much about their stories. We worship the one true God who is revealed in a different story, the story of Jesus Christ. *That’s* the story we live by.”

Okay, so it wasn’t the ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer Christopher was looking for. And maybe I used a few more than 25 words. But that conversation got me to thinking about the importance of the stories people live by; the story we live by, and the power those stories have for us. A power that facts can’t touch, really; can’t seem to alter or diminish in any way. For people of a story, facts aren’t dismissed; they just don’t feature in the same way.

There’s this great book written by Sue Monk Kidd called The Secret Life of Bees. It’s a novel about bee-keeping, and racism in the sixties, and a young southern white girl, abandoned early in life by her mother, who runs away from her abusive father and, through a series of serendipitous events, discovers sanctuary with three black sisters, the calendar sisters as she calls them, because their names are May, June and August.

Now the calendar sisters and their community have a story *they* live by that revolves around the figure of the Black Madonna, the dark-skinned mother of Jesus, a story that the women, who call themselves the Daughters of Mary, tell every week, and reenact every year.

They call it the story of Our Lady of the Chains, and here's just a sketch of the tale so richly- and powerfully-told in the book:

“Back in the time of slavery,” explains sister August, “when the people were beaten down and kept like property, they prayed every day and every night for deliverance. ...One day, a slave named Obadiah was loading bricks onto a boat that would sail down the Ashley river” when he discovered, washed up on the bank, a wooden figure of a woman, a black woman, with her right arm raised and her hand clutched into a fist.

Remembering how they'd asked the Lord to send them rescue, Obadiah knew who'd sent the figure. He pulled her out of the water and set her upright and heard her speak to him “plain as day in his heart. She said, ‘It's all right. I'm here. I'll be taking care of you now.’”

Directly Obadiah brought the figure to the praise house of his community and everyone wondered who she was. “Now the oldest of the slaves was a woman named Pearl. She walked with a stick, and when she spoke, everyone listened. She got to her feet and said, ‘This here is the mother of Jesus.’”

Now everyone knew the mother of Jesus was named Mary, and that she'd seen suffering of every kind. That she was strong and constant and had a mother's heart. And here she was, sent to them on the same waters that had

brought them here in chains. It seemed to them that she knew everything they had suffered.”

“And so, the people cried and danced and clapped their hands. And went one at a time and touched their hands to her chest, wanting to grab on to the solace in her heart.”

Well, what happened in this community was that their Black Madonna “filled their hearts with fearlessness and whispered plans of escape. The bold ones fled and those who didn’t lived with a raised fist in their hearts.

“When the master discovered this, he hauled the figure off in a wagon and chained her in the carriage house. But every night, without any human help, Mary escaped and made her way back to the praise house. Fifty times the master chained her in the barn, and fifty times she loosed those chains and went home. Until finally he gave up and let her stay there.”<sup>1</sup>

This is the story that the Daughters of Mary reenact every year, this story of Our Lady of the Chains. Every year the Daughters of Mary chain up their figure of the Black Madonna and haul it into an outbuilding. And every year, with songs and chants and sensuous ritual, they bring her back into the main house and unchain her, declaring with loud confidence and determination the truth of her, and their, story: that “what is bound will be unbound. And what is cast down will be lifted up. This is the promise of Our Lady.”<sup>2</sup>

Never mind that the statue found by Obadiah back when was really the figurehead of a ship. And never mind that, at least during the reenactment, those

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Monk Kidd, The Secret Life of Bees, Viking Penguin, New York City, 2002. pp 107-110.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 228.

chains on the figure of Mary did *not* magically release but required human hands to unleash them. And never mind, either, that the Daughters' Lady of the Chains spoke only through human voices any more. "What is bound will be unbound. What is cast down will be lifted up." That was the promise of The Lady of the Chains, and the truth of the story by which the Calendar sisters and their community lived.

Now, today is the fifth Sunday of Easter, the fifth Sunday we're celebrating the central images of the story we live by, the story we reenact each year. Of course, every Sunday is a mini-Easter for us, a mini-celebration of the 'greatest story every told,' about the mystery and the power and the hope of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. But during the season of Easter, we 'specially remember and reenact the particulars of our story – the empty cross, the rolled away stone, the risen Jesus, the life-giving breath of the Holy Spirit, and hollar halleluia a lot.

But don't you know that there are those both outside and inside the church who wonder if the story is really true. Seekers who lose sleep over whether Jesus was really born on December 25<sup>th</sup> in the year 0, or five years earlier. Scholars who spend their lives sorting through the facts of the matter, trying to figure out which words actually fell from Jesus' lips, which miracles really happened, which parables were truly his.

And then, of course, there's the rest of us, believers and non-believers alike, who can't help but wonder whether Jesus *really* rose from the dead. I mean, *really*?

But sometimes ‘truth’ seems different than facts, and it’s always more important. Especially regarding the stories people live by. Especially in the Story we live by.

Which is what I think Jesus is trying to get across to his disciples in today’s text. The lectionary carries us back to Maundy Thursday, to the Last Supper, when Jesus is letting his followers know he’s fixin’ to leave. Understandably, the disciples want to know the particulars. When is he going? *Where* is he going? How’s he going to get there? Why’s he leaving in the first place? Understandably, Jesus’ disciples want the facts of the matter.

And is that what Jesus gives them? A timetable? A road map? An itinerary? Oh, no, it is not. Has he ever? Has he ever elaborated on the facts of the matter? Ever offered a recipe for turning water into wine or concocting eye-healing mud pies? Ever whipped up a Standard Operating Procedure for raising the dead?

Never has. Never will. Metaphors are Jesus’ argot; parables and images his lingua franca.

“I’ll be heading on out,” he says to his disciples. “But don’t you worry. ...In my father’s house there are many dwelling places, many mansions. Enough for me. Enough for you. I’m going there to prepare a place for you, but I’ll come back and get you so we can be together. ”

A house? A mansion? Where is it? What’s the address so we can find it on mapquest.

“If you know me, you know the way. I *am* the way.”

It would help if you'd show us God, Jesus.

"If you know me, you know my Daddy. See me and you see God."

Come on Jesus, we need more information. Give us some provable facts.

"I give you truth. I *am* truth. And everyone who belongs to the truth, listens to my voice." (Jn 18:37c) Furthermore, anyone who lives by my story will do greater works on earth than I did." Touch more hearts, heal more people, offer more hope, work more miracles.

In fact, "whatever you ask in Jesus' name, God will do for you – that's the power of Jesus' story, available to all who live by it. A power far more powerful than anything scholars and archeologists can dig up around the facts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Facts, after all, are limited to what we know. And the power of Jesus' story is grounded not in what we know, but in the revelation of the one true God whose love is stronger than death.

So what I want to know on this fifth Sunday of Easter is, how does that story grab you?

To the glory of God. Amen.