

“The Founding Story”  
Acts 8 & I John 4  
Gordon Wiersma 5/6/12

This 150<sup>th</sup> year at Hope Church has us thinking a lot about the past and a lot about the future – and since the present is the time we are always living in, to be focusing on both past and future seems like a healthy balance. Although it’s usually quite a bit easier to know about the past, since it’s already happened, and that’s what I’ve been thinking about mostly this week – thinking about the past a little bit regarding Hope Church, and then mostly in connection to the Scriptures we’ve heard this morning.

But first Hope Church – there are many much more well versed than I in the history of Hope Church, and we’ll have a Hope Church history book published this summer by Judy Parr that will be a treat for all of us. I’m not the expert, but I do know that as you study the history of a place or organization or cause, one of the dynamics that can be instructive to look at is how it began – which seems pretty obvious, I suppose, but it’s not just that there are certain facts to report about a beginning, it’s that the way something starts can often continue to have an impact on a place throughout its life. Take Hope Church: how many of you know that at its founding, Hope Church was established as the first English-speaking Reformed Church, rather than Dutch-speaking? That’s right, most all of us do – and if you didn’t or you’re new or you’re visiting – don’t feel bad. It’s a story we keep telling here and now you know! And that’s the thing – we don’t just keep telling that story because it’s a piece of data, a fact, to report – it’s told because it is seen as a founding story that has remained formative ever since – for 150 years and counting. It’s seen to express a pioneering spirit, a progressive tone, a faith in Christ open to being called in new directions. That founding story is part of the spiritual DNA of this living body that is Hope Church – it is part of what continues to make Hope Church what it is and to keep it alive and lively.

OK – so that’s Hope Church – my exhibit-A of a founding story that is formative. But let’s step back, take a broader perspective and ask: ‘what is the

founding story of Christianity?’ What do you think? – is that obvious? Is it the birth of Christ? Jesus’ baptism? The crucifixion? The resurrection? The whole life of Christ? It would seem to have to have something to do with Jesus Christ, from whom Christianity bears its name. Here in the season of Easter you could certainly make the case that the resurrection of Jesus is the founding story – it’s an interesting concept, as it comes after Jesus’ life and death, but can be seen as a beginning in its own right. We spend a lot of time with the resurrection – as Pastor Jill said last week, we need a whole season of six Sundays to take in all that the resurrection means. I’ve heard the case made that the resurrection is the founding story of Christianity – I think I’ve made that case before. It’s a good answer.

But let’s try a different answer – which I’ll try out on you in a little bit – but I want to get there by observing something with you. I noticed in the lectionary passages for this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, that the resurrection is not mentioned. If you want to check again for yourself you can, but it’s not. The resurrection story has been present from Easter and the past several Sundays – either stories of the Risen Christ or mention of it in the Acts or Epistle lessons. But not this week – and I’m not trying to make TOO much of that – it’s not like the resurrection story is being excluded or denied – it’s just kind of interesting. As we hear Acts after the resurrection, and the gospel of John goes back before the resurrection into the life of Jesus – what does the church hear in these non-resurrection stories in the season of Easter?

Well, I was thinking one way to listen is just to do a little founding story wondering about each of these passages – to see what comes before these stories. In Acts we hear about Philip meeting up with an Ethiopian eunuch – Philip explains a Hebrew scripture passage and shares the good news – the eunuch is baptized a Christian. Simple enough – or joyful enough – or interesting enough a story in its own right. But think of who and what is present in the story, and think of the past story that it points to. Here’s what I mean: Philip meets up with an Ethiopian eunuch – and it’s indicated this is a person with some authority and wealth in his work...but he is a

eunuch. Do you know what that means? As an adolescent he had his genitals castrated just so that he could serve the women of wealthy families. That is awful – his body mutilated, his gender warped, his life used for the convenience of others. And clearly this defines this person – he’s not even given a name in this story – he is ‘a eunuch’ – it defines him as an outcast, really; as someone not fully accepted in society or religion or relationships – this is his founding story? Isn’t it interesting that a fledgling Christian faith in telling its story in order to tell the world what it is about, chooses to record a story about a eunuch? Someone on the fringes of the human community; a life seen as diminished. Not what you might expect. And what Hebrew/OT story is the eunuch reading? It is a suffering servant passage from Isaiah – a poem of a person who is the victim of violence and injustice and a humiliating death, and suffers this in silence. We’re told Philip then shares the good news of Jesus (and you could say there is a resurrection reference there ☺ ), but what is the story that leads them there? A founding story of one who gives up his life in the face of suffering and injustice. This is the kind of story you want to focus on to lead someone to faith? Not what you might expect. This Ethiopian eunuch story tells of an early convert to Christianity – but it tells much more – it speaks of a faith that knows stories of diminishment, injustice, suffering.

Look at the Gospel story – a beautiful, powerful, challenging passage of this image of Jesus as the vine. Vine and branches and fruit – ‘abide in me to bear much fruit’ Jesus says. Some powerful poetic teaching from Jesus. But what is the context for this story? This happens just after the last supper and then Jesus says that he will be betrayed and the disciples will deny and abandon him. That’s the mini-founding story for this vine & branches passage –Jesus speaks of vine & fruit and abiding, yet does so having named the realities of betrayal and denial and death.

And what if I just throw in the Psalm quick for good measure?! Psalm 22 today gives praise to the LORD and proclaims that all will turn to worship the God of all the earth – that’s starting at v. 25; start at Psalm 25:1 “my God, my God, why have you

forsaken me?” This Psalm of praise and worship, begins with a story of ultimate despair and doubt. What do you make of that? –remarkable – contradictory; but certainly interesting: the good news has a back story of brokenness.

So what I’m thinking, with these non-resurrection passages in the season of Easter, is that they can be an important reminder where the amazing joyful, life-victorious resurrection story comes from – it comes from a very difficult story: of injustice and violence, suffering and death; and it comes in a world that is very familiar with diminishment, violence, suffering, death.

And what all that prepares us for, is to hear a most important founding story, which goes like this: God is love. Have you heard that story? God is love. That’s the story the epistle in I John told us today: said it two times precisely, and says it throughout – God is love. Have you thought of THAT as the founding story of Christianity? As the founding story of Scripture? As the founding story of your faith? What it means is that God loves this world, and loves everyone and everything in it – and God loves you. Do you know that is your story? What that means? God is love...?

I John says God’s love looks like this: Jesus came into the world as the Savior of the world. So the birth of Jesus is about God’s love...the life of Jesus is about God’s love...the crucifixion, death of Jesus is about God’s love...the resurrection of Jesus is about God’s love... Jesus Christ is the incarnation and communication and action of God’s love – because God is love. But let’s keep going – God is love means creation is about God’s love; means God’s judgment is about God’s love; means salvation is about God’s love. This founding story is the spiritual DNA present in all the stories of God. And I just wonder, if we do remember that this is our founding story – our story – the story of this world...I wonder if ‘God is love’ sounds mushy or sentimental or weak to us, when it is actually powerful and profound and miraculous.

Because ‘God is love’ is the story for this world that contains those other founding stories we’ve heard today – a world of diminishment and injustice, of sin and violence, of waywardness and need, of victims and violaters, of doubt and death –

'God is love' is the only story that can save such a world. And yet I wonder if that is the story we really tell: God is love. It seems we might get nervous that is too simplistic, or too easy, or maybe too difficult. But we're told that this is our story to tell – and to do: God is love – God loves you – so...love God? Well, OK – that's nice (God forgive me for being slightly sarcastic about loving God) but mostly, if you love God...love others! Love, love, love – it's all you need – too simple or sentimental or mushy? Love others like God loves us and the world: love that stands with the victim, with the outcast, with the violated; love that speaks to injustice and suffering; love that speaks to doubt and death; love that serves and sacrifices and gives its life (not just spiritually – literally – people die for this love). Love that says life is about loving others as God in Christ loves us. How is that for a story to hear and live?

'God is love' is a story to explore for a lifetime – and plenty of theology to explore about it – but mostly in this Easter season it grounds us in who the Risen Christ is: Jesus Christ is our God – and God is love – and that is the saving good news for us and our world; it is the truth what will allow us to hear the stories of pain within and around us, and speak to such a life and world the good news of love that brings new life. So today, let's get our story straight: God is love – that is our founding story; you love others – that is our present calling; let's live that story and see what kind of a future that makes – I believe it will be quite a story to tell. AMEN.