



Grace Church

The Rev. Dr. Matthew Calkins
Rector

Hero's Journey 5: Good News and Saints

Sermon for Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

Readings: Acts 10:34-43; Colossians 3:1-4; Matthew 28:1-10; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24

Sermon text: On this day the Lord has acted; we will rejoice and be glad in it. Psalm 118:24

Finally, we get to shout our Easter acclamation: Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia!

Good news indeed. We have come to the end or at least a triumphal stop on our hero's journey. Jesus has returned from the land of the dead—where he preached to and freed the captives and put them on Paradise Road, as the poet Denise Levertov put it.

Presumably Jesus preached to the dead the same liberating message he had preached in his ministry on earth, following the forerunner John the Baptist (the latest of a long run of prophets and sages). “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”” (Mark 1:14-15; cf. Matthew 3:2).

To this fundamental proclamation—the kingdom of heaven is at hand (yet never in hand), turn and believe!—we now add another, not less but even greater, for it removes the barrier between God and us—and that is: Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord has risen indeed, Alleluia!

What wonderful good news: **the kingdom of God is near, and Christ is risen**. We have in this twofold message both **a mission given for this mortal life**—to hasten the coming of the kingdom by loving God and neighbor and striving for justice and peace, following the Way of Jesus—**and hope for eternal life after death**. For if Christ is risen so will we.

Therefore any defeat in this life, any falling short of the kingdom life—and we will fall short and the world will fall short, Palm Sunday parades will lead to Good Friday crucifixions, though the kingdom comes ever nearer—is not a final defeat. For if Christ is risen so will we.

And the great conviction and courage given through the Holy Spirit (and this is the subject of another sermon on Pentecost Sunday) will enable us to follow the Way of Jesus and transform the world. Already the world is transformed. Though there are many twists and turns ahead, we are on Paradise Road.

Look around the color of the grass has begun to turn bright green. Life given light and energy will always grow. Witnessing Jesus risen from the dead, the apostles announced Christ is risen! and history took a turn.

So the continuing proclamation of the good news is up to us. We are the heirs of the apostles, the latest in many generations of disciples. And we can learn a good deal about how to witness to the gospel through the lives of the saints, the heroes of the church in their generations.

If you followed the tongue-in-cheek competition of the saints on the online Lent Madness site then you know that the winner of the Golden Halo this year was Florence Nightingale. She defeated a real Cinderella saint, Franz Jägerstätter. Two umlauts. Jägerstätter. A name to remember that very few had heard of before.

The story of Florence Nightingale is more familiar. Her story is told by Ann Fitch Courie:

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Known as “The Lady with the Lamp” for her work as a nurse during the Crimean War, Florence Nightingale was born in Florence, Italy, in 1820 to a well-connected British family. Despite her upper-background, Nightingale heard a call from God in 1837 to serve and care for others. Nightingale was expected to marry well, produce children, and carry on the family legacy. Instead, she boldly answered call she heard from God and became the founder of modern nursing practice.

out of her experiences of tending the wounded during the Crimean War, Nightingale began documenting effects of sanitary conditions on wartime injuries. Nightingale is said to have reduced the mortality rate during the war from 42 percent to 2 percent by addressing hand washing, water contamination, and sterilization of surgical materials. These ideals of sanitary care continue to this day in modern healthcare practice.

Nightingale documented her theories on nursing care in numerous publications—the most famous is her treatise, *Notes on Nursing*. These theories led her to establish the Nightingale School for Nurses at St. Thomas’s Hospital in London (now part of King’s College, London). This began a process of social reform that opened the door for women, providing them with skills that led to careers outside of

domestic service work or factory positions. By providing a skilled nursing force, Nightingale improved healthcare disparities in London and implemented workforce healthcare (now occupational and public health nursing practice); she also advocated for hunger relief in India and worked to abolish prostitution laws that targeted women.

Nightingale was raised in the Church of England and was greatly influenced by Wesleyan ideals. Nightingale believed that her faith was best expressed through the care and love of others. A believer in universal reconciliation, Nightingale is said to have comforted one prostitute who was concerned about going to hell. Nightingale said, “Oh, my girl, are you not now more merciful than the God you think you are going to? Yet the real God is far more merciful than any human creature ever was or can ever imagine.”

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Hansen wrote the description of Franz Jägerstätter’s life:

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in the military. When he was conscripted in 1943, Jägerstätter ignored their sensible, practical advice and declared himself a conscientious objector. He was subsequently jailed by the Nazis.



short life of Franz Jägerstätter (OFS) is an underreported example of quiet faithfulness and unswerving conviction. Jägerstätter was born in Austria in 1907, the illegitimate child of a chambermaid and a farmer. He was raised by his maternal grandmother for much of his early life; his biological father died in World War I. Jägerstätter’s stepfather adopted him and gave Franz his last name.

1936, Jägerstätter married Franziska Schwaninger on Maundy Thursday, followed by a pilgrimage-as-honeymoon to Rome—a sign of Jägerstätter’s spiritual awakening and commitment to his faith. While working the family farm to provide for his family, Jägerstätter served as the sacristan for the local parish and received the eucharist daily. He embraced the simple life of Franciscan spirituality, becoming a member of Third Order of Saint Francis (hence the OFS after his name).

1938, Jägerstätter was the only person in his village to cast a vote against the German annexation of Austria. He became increasingly outspoken about his anti-Nazi views, seeking out the advice of his spiritual community leaders about how to respond when he would eventually be conscripted into military service for the Third Reich. Jägerstätter’s spiritual advisors—local priests and the bishop—asked him to consider his wife and daughters. How would they survive if he were arrested? Perhaps he should swallow his objections and serve

Jägerstätter spent his time in prison devoted to prayer: “There is practically nothing to do here in the prison, but that does not mean that I have to let my days pass by without putting them to some use. As long as I can pray, and there is plenty of time for that, my life is not in vain.” On August 9, 1943, Jägerstätter was tried for undermining military morale and executed by the Nazis. His conscience was firmly rooted in his faith and life of prayer. This ordinary farmer lived out an extraordinary faith, witnessing to the importance of standing up to evil in our world for Jesus’ sake.

Now Florence Nightingale surely deserves all the honors humans can bestow. Her faithful service and innovative techniques saved countless life and changed medical practice around the world. Jägerstätter is another story. He stood alone and died apparently in vain, almost completely forgotten, without touching the course of a war with tens of millions of casualties. Yet his story somehow touches me deeply—and clearly not me alone, for in hearing this story thousands of people have had to consider what they might have done in his shoes—and to realize that just as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has grown immensely in stature as a theologian and prophet for his courage and defiance of Hitler so this common man, a simple farmer, shows that

that not all need to join the mob rejecting Jesus and choosing the apparent man of action Barabbas. Hitler is the name for evil, now, on a near par with Satan. Those who saw him clearly even in the flush of his early success now and who stood with courage in opposition—how great they have grown in stature. Jägerstätter has been proposed for canonization. He is an example of a true saint.

And if he could do it, so can you and I. He could stand up against evil and fight and give his life for the sake of the kingdom because he believed in the good news that you and I proclaim this day. Alleluia, Christ is risen. You can take this gospel to heart and build a new life and change the world. Not just Nightingale or Jägerstätter but you and I.

For the hero has conquered the dragon of death and returned to the land of the common people. He has brought a great boon back for the community: hope, faith, love. Now the community is empowered by the new fire of Spirit to follow the hero's Way and fight for the kingdom against all the forces which oppose it. Generations will come and go, and the good news will be proclaimed to every generation and to all the nations of the world. Those who take the message to heart and learn the Way of Jesus will be like leaven in the dough, like light in the darkness, like a seed planted that will grow to become the very tree of life. This is the day, my beloved friends, this is the day of celebration. The kingdom of God is at hand. Take heart, rejoice.

Alleluia, Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed, alleluia!

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