

Thank you so much for inviting me to share this special Sunday in Women's History Month with you. It's a very appropriate time to remember the Women of the church who came before us ... and to acknowledge the women who continue the work of the church today.

And such a wonderful hymn. It's not one I was familiar with, but I was especially touched by these words of the hymn:

"Come celebrate the women who brought the church to birth  
The teachers, aunts, and mothers who lived and died unsung;  
Kept faith the gospel story and taught it to the young;  
The Christ child Mary cradled, the living Word to be,  
Was crucified for pleading this peace and unity."

Such beautiful words from today's hymn, written by New Zealand's premier, contemporary hymn writer, Shirley Erena Murray. By the way if you're researching Shirley Erena Murray, make sure you include her middle name, which is a form of the Greek word for "peace". And Peace, coincidentally, is the theme of several of her hymns.

Now if you forget and google just Shirley Murray, you'll end up reading about the late Dr. Shirley Murray, the popular evangelist whose sermons often centered on women of faith and peace.

Either way you'll read about women of the church whose messages focused on and highlighted peace, unity, and diversity.

Well, today is the fifth Sunday in Lent which means you have about two weeks to buy your Easter candy. Yes, that candy that tempts us and beckons us in the grocery stores ... when we are really only shopping for vegetables and fruit.

The grocers make us walk past bins full of a variety of jellybeans – big jellybeans, mini jellybeans, flavored ones, sparkly ones. Then there are chocolate candies – milk chocolate, dark chocolate, white chocolate, chocolate with crispies, malted chocolate, chocolate with almonds, chocolate covered marshmallow.

And then, of course, there are the shapes - the classic eggs ... the bunnies ... the chicks ... the candy kisses ... and just so no one will think that candy makers have forgotten the reason for the season ... you can also buy a cross ... milk chocolate, dark chocolate, white chocolate.

The cross, of course, has become the most prominent symbol of this holy season of Lent and Easter. To Christians it represents the crucifixion of Jesus ... dying for our sins so that we might have eternal life. But it is also a symbol of hope because we celebrate Christ's resurrection and triumph over Death ... and that is the **crux of our faith**.

It's that Easter story that we know so well but so rarely share with non-believers. Why is that? Well, probably because many non-believers think it sounds like a crazy, foolish story ... that it can't possibly be true.

The New Testament scripture reading that I read today was part of a letter that Paul sent to the Church of Corinth. That new church was having some problems and Paul's letter was an effort to resolve those problems and to answer questions some of the church members had, and it was an attempt to establish unity within the Church of Corinth.

In the passage from I Corinthians, I read, "God's way seems foolish to the Jews because they wanted a sign from heaven to prove it is true. (It being that Christ was the Messiah) And it is foolish to the Greeks because they believe only what agrees with their own wisdom."

Let's remember that at that time, people thought the Messiah would come to them as a warrior- type of king, someone strong in battle who would

defeat their enemies, but Jesus, of course, came as a gentle, compassionate man, speaking of love and peace. And after all, everybody knew Jesus had been crucified as a criminal along with two other criminals. No wonder some of those non-believers doubted that Jesus was the Messiah!

The Good News about Jesus Christ, about his death and resurrection, seemed foolish to non-believers then, just as it sounds foolish to non-believers today.

The passage continues with, “So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Greeks say it’s all nonsense.” Not too far from what we hear non-believers say today ... those who do **not** believe think the story of the cross is just plain foolish and some are offended that anyone even has the **right** to share the Good News with them.

Paul sums up this passage by saying, “But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the mighty power of God and the wonderful wisdom of God. This ‘foolish’ plan of God is far wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is far stronger than the greatest of human strength.”

Paul was telling the members of the Church of Corinth that the story of the cross, their belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ was central to the

message of hope and unity the church needed to proclaim ... and it was their story to tell.

A few years ago, I participated in a Lenten series using the book, *Why?*, by Adam Hamilton. He's the senior pastor of the United Methodist Church of the Resurrection in Leawood, Kansas. The book is subtitled, *Making Sense of God's Will*, and one of the themes of the book was an understanding of that age-old question, "Why do the innocent suffer?"

Pastor Hamilton gave an Easter sermon several years ago loosely based on this book. In that sermon, he challenged Christians to think about what he called their Defining Story. He asked the congregation to think about what story or anecdote might sum up who they are? He asked, "What is your plan or purpose in this world? What's the story that shapes who you are?" And then he asked, "what story defines you as a Christian?" He said, "I bet it's the story of the cross and resurrection. And that would be the story of Easter."

Part of his sermon message was that a Christian's Defining Story **is** the story of Easter ... the story of the cross, the story of Jesus dying for our sins so that we could have eternal life in God's kingdom. He says it is the story of **good triumphing over evil**. And he stressed that the story of the cross

was not the **end** of the story. It's really just the beginning of the story of the church.

When my youngest son was 17 years old, still in high school and had a part time job, he announced that he wanted to get a tattoo. He had even saved the money he needed for it. He asked if I would sign the permission form ... I said no. He said he wouldn't need my permission once he was 18 ... and I replied, "Well then there you go ... problem solved."

The following school year when my son was a freshman at CMU, he went ahead and got that tattoo ... and I was not a happy mama. I didn't even want to see the tattoo ... and I **didn't** see it until several months later as Tim and I were on our way into church. I finally asked to see the tattoo. He rolled up his shirtsleeve to show me. To my surprise it was a crown of thorns with a cross in the middle.

I didn't know what to say. I just looked at it for a while, saying nothing ... I stood there on the sidewalk in front of the church and looked at his tattoo. Finally he said, "Because we all carry our cross every day, Mom."

I think Oprah would call that an "Ah,ha moment". That moment at which I realized the depth of my son's personal relationship with Jesus Christ, that moment I knew that **he** knew what it took to be a Christian in today's

world. That at such a young age, he had taken a stand and that stand was at the cross.

Now I would never suggest that we all run out and get our arms tattooed with a cross just to let people know where we stand on the Christianity issue. We can, however, carry our cross in so many other ways ... but no way is necessarily easy.

When I was still teaching English Literature in Shepherd, I used to give my senior students an assignment near the end of the school year, just before they graduated. The assignment was to respond to this quote by Maria Shriver, "Everyday we tell the world who we are and what we stand for." They had to relate what they thought they "stood for" and then critique themselves as to whether or not they honestly felt had they done a good job of showing others what they stood for. It was eye-opening for some and confirming for others.

After the assignment was turned in, I told them that they were so lucky to be at that point in their lives ... where they were about to embark on a new phase in their lives. They were fortunate to be able to cast off "ideas" about themselves that they didn't like and "take on" the challenge of reflecting who they really wanted to be and what they truly wanted to stand for. That assignment held them to nothing ... they had a clean slate to start again.

And we do, too, as Christians. Our goal every day should be to tell the world who we are and what we stand for. We do, however, tend to fall short some days, don't we. We can sometimes be critical of others or short-tempered with those we love the most, or impatient and negative when things don't go our way.

We need to remember that Jesus paid the price on the cross for us, so we can get back up as many times as we fall down. We can start all over again every day, if necessary. Giving up on our salvation is just not an option. We've been called.

In this book, Adam Hamilton shares this story, "Every year" he writes, "I end my Easter sermon in the same way. After twenty years the people anticipate it. I note that people ask me, 'Do you really believe this story about resurrection? Do you really believe that ultimately good will triumph over evil and God's plan will ultimately prevail?' And, he says, "My answer is always the same. I not only believe it, I am counting on it."

We are now two-thirds of the way through the Lenten season and we're headed toward the holiest week in the life of the church.

The season of Lent is often referred to as a journey ... a journey to the cross. So now would be a good time for you to decide what you want to stand for.



Now, during Lent would be the perfect time to take on the Christian persona you want to be.

Do you want to be the quiet Christian who keeps your light hidden from others, or do you want others to know, without a doubt, that you are a man or woman of faith and hope who believes in the promises God has given us... who believes in the story of the resurrection and that believes God's plan will ultimately prevail? It's your story ... your Defining Story.

May we all decide to reflect God's love in this world, to strive to be more Christ-like even and especially beyond this building ... to give thanks for the gift of the Cross ... and to take moments **every single day** to reflect on our Defining Story ...