

It's Easter, But Does Anybody Know What's Going On?

My children find great joy and satisfaction in pointing out to me my mistakes and failures. One that has become legendary in our family happened thirteen years ago on Easter Sunday. I preached a message that morning and mentioned a story I had heard and that I had been looking for the right opportunity to preach a sermon using that illustration. I preached and felt pretty good about the message when Sarah and Rebekah pointed out that I had already used the illustration for a Christmas message I preached in 1994. Just so the record is straight, I know that I have used this story and this illustration before, for Christmas and for Easter, and now, I felt led to use it again.

A pastor friend told me about two men fighting in the middle of a neighborhood street. A crowd gathered as the two men angrily exchanged punches with one another. The pastor said, "Everyone that gathered to watch knew what was happening – two men were fighting each other – but only two people, those two men, really knew what was going on. They knew what they were fighting about. Maybe it was over a woman, maybe it was a business dispute, maybe one guy cut the other off in traffic. We all could see what was happening, but only two men knew what was really going on. There is a difference."

Much of life is lived at two different levels – the physical and the spiritual, the temporal and the eternal. When Paul said in Ephesians 6 that we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against spiritual forces of evil, he was letting us know that there was a difference between the battles we can see and the battles that are just as real but are unseen. We see what's happening with our physical eyes, but we discern what's really going on with our spiritual discernment. We can often quickly see what's happening but sometimes we need to look deeper and longer to see what's really going on.

The life of Jesus is a vivid illustration of these two realities – examples of what we thought was happening, events we could see happening, and then the reality of what was truly going on.

Luke 2 records the simple facts about a young Israeli couple. The bible says, **"So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to**

him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Luke 2:4-7. Those are the facts. They tell us what was happening. A guy named Joseph and his wife had to go to Bethlehem for the census and to be taxed. While they were there she had a baby boy. The little town of Bethlehem was so crowded that they had to sleep in a stable and when the baby was born they had to use a manger, a feeding trough to put the baby in. Unusual, but nothing too spectacular. Just another baby. That’s what was happening. But let me tell you what was really going on.

Luke 1:30-33 gives us a glimpse. The angel Gabriel appeared to that young lady who gave birth to that baby in Bethlehem. This messenger from God told her, “**Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High... The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will over-shadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God... The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.**” **Luke 1:30-35**

An invasion had begun. The invasion of God’s redemption plan. The words of the Prophet Isaiah were being fulfilled, that “A virgin will conceive and bring forth a son and will call his name Immanuel... God with us.” The world just saw what was happening – a woman had a baby last night out in the stable. But John tells us what was really going on: “the word that was in the beginning with God, the word that was with God, that word was God. And that word became flesh and made his dwelling among us and now we have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” You see the difference. We see what’s happening with our physical eyes, but we discern what’s going on with spiritual eyes.

Look at **Matthew 3:13-17.** This is Matthew’s account of the baptism of Jesus. This is what the people saw happening. Jesus came to John the Baptist and asked to be baptized. John tried to deter him saying instead he needed to be baptized by Jesus, but Jesus insisted this was part of the plan. Jesus went down into the water and was baptized and then came up out of the water, all wet. That’s what happened. Some

people then thought they heard a voice from heaven and some said they just heard what sounded like thunder to them. That's what was happening that day, but John knew what was going on.

John had told the people earlier, "I baptize you with water for repentance. But after me will come one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not fit to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire." Matthew 3:11. John told them, **"The one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit'. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God... the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."** John 1:29-34

John the Baptist knew what was going on. The Son of God had come. He was baptized to illustrate both his identification with the lost and to illustrate his being sanctified and consecrated through baptism to God and his kingdom, to "fulfill all righteousness." Some saw what was happening, but John knew what was going on.

Often in Jesus' life there were encounters with people where those around saw what was happening, but Jesus and the other person knew what was really going on. For instance, the woman at the well of Samaria in John 4. The disciples just saw what was happening. Jesus had spoken with some woman who had come to draw water from the well. But Jesus and that lady knew what was going on. She had come for water and instead found the one who told her of all her sins but who had offered forgiveness and living water so she would never thirst again.

The woman with the issue of blood in Luke 8. For 12 years she had been hemorrhaging and couldn't get well. She heard that Jesus was coming and she was determined to get to him, believing that if she could just get close enough to touch his garment she could be healed. The crowd that day saw a woman press through and touch the hem of his garment and then saw Jesus stop and declare that someone had been healed. They saw what was happening, but only two people in the crowd, Jesus and the lady, really knew what was going on.

You see, this lady's condition meant that according to Jewish ceremonial law she was unclean. No part of her life was unaffected by this. She couldn't bear children, she couldn't touch her husband. Anything or anyone she touched was considered unclean.

She couldn't go to the temple. She was virtually a prisoner in her own home. For 12 years this had been her life. The crowd saw a woman touch Jesus, but Jesus felt someone receive a divine touch. The crowd saw a woman whom Jesus said was healed of her sickness, but Jesus and the woman knew it was so much more. This lady received her life back – her husband, family, her hopes and her dreams. Her years of pain and sickness, isolation and despair had all been swept away in a moment of time as Jesus healed her physically, emotionally, spiritually. The crowd saw what was happening, but she and Jesus knew what was going on. The broken pieces of her life had just been put back together.

No where in the life of Jesus is the difference between what is happening and what's going on more striking than in the events of Passion Week or Holy Week. Luke 19 records the story of Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem – the day we celebrated last Sunday as Palm Sunday. The people that crowded around him that morning knew what was happening - Jesus was riding into town on a donkey's colt and the people were shouting praises to him and placing palm branches in the road in his path. Anyone could see what was happening. They saw the political significance and possibilities associated with his entrance into Jerusalem. Perhaps he would prove to be the Messiah that would liberate them from Roman oppression. They could see what was happening, but we know what was going on. We know that His kingdom was not of this world. He was not a political figure or just a popular teacher and miracle worker coming to town in a parade. He was the Prince of Peace coming to the city of God. They did not recognize the true significance and eternal importance of his coming, but God was visiting their city that day.

Don't miss his visitation in your life! Some times we just see the physical events and circumstances around us and we don't realize that God is visiting us. God is trying to speak to us, to get our attention, to change us. Don't just focus on what is happening, look and seek until you know what is going on. Open your eyes. Jesus is calling you today. As surely as he came to the city of Jerusalem, he has come to you, to your life. Don't miss the visitation. He is there for a reason, for a purpose. He is calling to you for a reason and purpose. Find out what's going on.

Luke 22-23 is the account of Jesus' arrest and mock trial and crucifixion. The

world knew what was happening: A man accused of being an enemy of Rome was being tried for treason. He was also accused of being a blasphemer by the Jews and worthy of death. They interrogated him for hours. They whipped him with a cat of nine tails, tearing open his back. In fact they tell us that often the whipping itself produced death in the victims because of the savagery of the blows and the loss of blood. They struck him, spat upon him. They made a crown of thorns and drove it down into his head. Finally, they forced him to carry a wooden cross to the hillside they called Calvary where they nailed his hands and feet to the cross and raised him in agony to hang there, suspended between heaven and earth, crucified upon a cross.

The spectators saw what was happening, but Jesus knew what was going on. And now, we know also.

You see, they thought he was a blasphemer getting what he deserved. In Isaiah 53 the prophet spoke of what we know as a reality, **“...we considered him to be stricken by God, smitten by him and afflicted, yet he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised and crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by the stripes placed upon his back, we are healed.” Isaiah 53:4-5.**

What was happening? A man was being brutally beaten, scourged and mocked. But what was going on? A fountain of cleansing for our sins was being opened so that all could come to him in repentance and in faith and their sins would be forgiven and washed away.

What was happening? A cruel soldier was carrying out his assignment as he repeatedly tore open the back of this prisoner with his whip. But what was really going on? Healing was being secured for us, that by his stripes we are healed.

What was happening? A soldier was driving a spear into the side of the Lord, making sure that he was dead. But what was really going on? Redemption's plan was being fulfilled. A fountain of forgiveness and mercy was opened for all who will come to Christ in repentance and faith.

What was happening? Jesus cried out, “It is finished.” We know what was happening. His life had come to an end. He died. But what was really going on? The work of salvation was done. Jesus' blood now would atone for our sins.

What was happening? The curtain that separated the outer court from the holy of holies in the temple was torn from top to bottom. But what was really going on? Access was being given through the atoning sacrifice of Christ so that through faith in him we can now come boldly to the throne of God to receive the help and mercy we need in times of trouble.

What was happening? Jesus died and now his lifeless body is taken from the cross and placed in a borrowed tomb belonging to Joseph of Arimathea. But what was really going on? Plenty! Jesus descended to the place of the dead and preached deliverance to the captives and then in triumph over death itself, he led a victory procession, ascending as the conquering king and leading the righteous dead to be with him in the presence of the Father.

What was happening? Some thought an earthquake had caused the massive stone that covered the entrance to the tomb to roll away. But what was really going on? Angels were there to announce that the tomb couldn't hold him, that Jesus had risen from the dead, triumphing over death, over hell, over Satan, over sickness and disease and the grave. What was going on? Hell lost its victory, the grave lost its grip. Death was swallowed up in life. Jesus is risen from the grave! Hope is given to everyone who will trust in him as Savior and Lord. Eternal life is offered to all who place their faith in him and his saving grace.

What's happening? Darkness had covered the land in the middle of the afternoon. The forces of hell were shouting and dancing with glee as they watched the Holy One, the Light of the World, breathed his last. The forces of darkness thought they had won, but we know what was really going on? Spiritual darkness was about to be rolled back. Hell's victory was short lived as Jesus rose in power and made a public spectacle of the devil and the demons of hell. Satan couldn't kill him, death couldn't handle him and the grave couldn't hold him. That's what was going on!

I know some days we start looking at what's happening and we get discouraged. Imagine what the disciples felt on Friday as they watched their friend, their Lord, the one they believed to be the Messiah, crucified, executed, dead and buried.

Imagine what they felt on Saturday, this day of enormous silence. Jesus' body lying in the tomb, held in death's grip. They must have been overwhelmed with

sadness, confusion, despair. Hopeless because Jesus was dead, lying silent in the grave.

Perhaps you feel that way today. I mean, you know he is risen, but you are living in silence right now, like the disciples on that Saturday. No word from Jesus. No answers. Hurting. Confused. Let down. Disappointed with how things have turned out. But you know what? You've been looking at what's happening. It's time you started seeing what's going on!

Jesus rose from the grave and that means all things are possible through him. He holds the keys to life and death and everything in between. He has conquered and will conquer every foe. He stands triumphant over all and all things hold together in him, by him and through him. Don't give up because of what's happening, be encouraged because of what is going on! Jesus is still in control.

You see, we can look at the world around us, the wickedness, the failure of the global economy, the political changes taking place around the world, the stress, violence, men's hearts failing them for fear. We can see what's happening and be frightened, worried, panicked even. But don't just look at what's happening, remember – we know what's going on!

Folks around this world are worried. Experts are trying to figure out what is happening to the culture, to the economy, to the world. They want to know what is happening, but we know what's going on. Jesus said, **“When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Luke 21:28**

Scientists are trying to tell everyone what is happening to the planet we live on. They can tell you what is happening, but the bible tells us what is going on. The bible says, **“We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Romans 8:22.** And we also know the Bible said we are moving towards a day when **“...creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God.” Romans 8:21.**

One of these days, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, the trumpet of God will sound and the risen Lord himself will descend from heaven with a shout and the

Bible says the dead in Christ will rise first and we who are alive will be caught up together to meet the Lord in the air and we will forever be with the Lord. Those who are left behind will start explaining what's happening. "The earth has purged itself of hatred and those right-wing extremists and religious zealots and now it is a new day of cosmic heaven with only good vibes left on the planet." Or they will come up with some other crazy explanation of what's happening.

But we will know what's going on. We will be in the presence of the Father. We will be bowing at the feet of the one who gave his life for us on the cross of Calvary so we could be saved and have eternal life. We will be adoring the one who declared in Revelation, **"I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and the grave."**

Revelation 1:17-18

Thank God by his grace, we know what's happening and we know what's going on. Christ is risen today in power and we have peace for today and hope for tomorrow and eternal life for eternity.

What's going on in your life on this Easter Sunday morning? I can only see what's happening and it all looks good to me, but you and Jesus know what's going on. Are there some things that need to be dealt with? Sins that need to be confessed and turned away from? Are there needs that only Jesus can meet? You've been looking at what's happening and now you realize you need to see what's going on. God's at work. He has something good in store for you. Trust him. He is the risen Savior and he is here to help you today. Come to him in faith. Come to him in repentance. Come to him with your needs. The one who rose triumphant over death is waiting and able to meet your every need.