



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “Flipping the Script”

Matthew 28:1-10

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This true story starts in Washington, D.C., on a warm summer night. There are eight friends gathered around a backyard dinner table. They are toasting family and friendship. There is lots of good food and French wine. It is a magical evening.

Until, suddenly, it isn't. Someone else is standing there, a man holding a gun. “Give me your money,” he says, “or I'll start shooting.”

But no one has any money. So the group starts grasping for some way to talk the man out of his plan. They try guilt.

*What would your mother think of you?*

And he says:

*I don't have a mother.*

“This is headed towards a very bad end,” one of them thinks. “Someone is going to get hurt.”

But then one of the women at the table says something unexpected. She says,

*You know, we're here celebrating. Why don't you have a glass of wine with us?*

The look on the man's face changes. He tastes the wine – and says:

*This is a really good glass of wine.*

They offer him some cheese. And then he puts the gun in his pocket. The man drinks his wine, eats his cheese. And then he says:

*I think I've come to the wrong place.*

For a moment, they all sit there together, stars overhead twinkling, sound of chirping insects in night air. And then the man says:

*Can I get a hug?*

And so everyone gets up and forms a circle around the man. Then the man says:

*I'm sorry.*

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

And then he leaves.<sup>1</sup>

So, what happened that night?

Sociologists call it non-complementary behavior. It doesn't happen that often because we naturally mirror each other. When someone is hostile to us, we are typically hostile back. Friendliness inspires friendliness. And breaking this pattern – say, being kind to someone after they have been mean to us – that is non-complementary behavior. And it's incredibly hard to do.<sup>2</sup>

When people do manage to behave in non-complementary ways, it often completely shakes up a situation. It flips the script and can transform intractable situations. This works on a small scale in marriages and workplaces. It works, too, on a bigger stage: most famously, perhaps the decision of Martin Luther King, Jr. and other activists to meet prejudice and violence with peaceful resistance.

The march in Selma, nonviolence in India, offering a man with a gun at your head a glass of wine all illustrate non-complementary behavior.

The poster child for all of this is Jesus. Jesus is the master of non-complementary behavior. He constantly flips the script. People who expect condemnation receive compassion; those who flatter him are rebuffed. He invites those who follow him to turn the other cheek and to love their enemies. Jesus disarms people and situations with his unexpected, non-complementary behavior.

And this morning we celebrate what I believe is the greatest single act of non-complementary behavior in the history of the world. We usually call it the resurrection.

It's another true story that could have turned out differently. That should have turned out differently.

God sends love into the world. When love grows up, love feeds people, love heals people, love turns things upside down. This does not sit well with the people in charge. They warn love to leave well enough alone. Love goes on loving, which gets love arrested and gets love killed.<sup>3</sup>

And the one who sends love into the world – God – could and should respond in a corresponding way. God has every right to destroy us or punish us. Or at the very least to walk away, to wash God's hands of us. But that's not what God does. Instead God flips the script and reaches into that tomb of death and hopelessness and pulls out reconciliation and redemption. God meets rejection with acceptance, violence with love, betrayal with forgiveness, death with life.

God flips the script. Not for a day but for eternity.

It's a hard thing for us to grasp, let alone emulate. Non-complementary behavior does not come naturally for us. Newton's Third Law of Motion states, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." In the physical world, when one body pushes against another, the second body pushes back just as hard. This law of motion is reinforced by the culture we live in. Every movie we watch, every video game we play, every sport we take part in conveys the same message. When we are challenged – physically, emotionally, politically – we are taught to push back. Give as good as we get. Complementary behavior is the norm.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.npr.org/programs/invisibilia/485603559/flip-the-script>

<sup>2</sup> IBID.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons on Suffering*, p. 125-6.

And, so often, it doesn't work. In the U.S. Senate, in our family life, on Facebook, in the workplace, fighting fire with fire, responding in kind so often doesn't work. And we find ourselves like that man that summer night saying, "I think I've come to the wrong place." We find ourselves in the wrong place. A place we do not want to be.

The way out... the alternative... is non-complementary behavior. It is so hard to initiate, so hard to pull off, but I have to say that being on the receiving end of it can be an amazing thing.

Which brings me to another true story, a story of my experience with the Social Security Administration. I was trying to get a social security number for my then newly adopted child. I first went to the office nearest my home. I took a number and sat down. I had brought something to do. I was ready to wait. Even an hour or two. The numbers were being called at a brisk pace. This wasn't going to be so bad. I mentioned that to the person sitting next to me. He asked to see my number.

*You have a red number,*

he said.

*They are calling the green numbers now. After that the blue numbers. Then they will get to the red numbers.*

*"When do you think that will be?"*

I asked.

*Probably sometime tomorrow afternoon,*

he said. I went home.

I did some research. I found out which office had the shortest wait time. I learned that arriving a half hour before the office opened was the best strategy. My wait time was less than two hours. By the time I got to the front of the line, the wait time was probably double that. I handed the man behind the window the application and paperwork. He looked it over carefully and said,

*You are missing a document.*

A document that I hadn't brought. A document that was on my desk at home.

I lost it. I was so angry and so frustrated and so exhausted and I don't remember what came out of my mouth but I do know that it wasn't pretty.

The poor man who had to listen to my rage could have and should have responded with anger. That's what I expected. No, it's what I wanted because then I would feel justified in my rage.

This is what he said:

*I know how frustrating this can be. I'm sorry for that. So, here's the plan. Drive home, get the document, and when you return don't get back in line. Come straight to this window and I will take care of you. We're going to get this done today.*

*We are?*

I asked.

*Yes, we are,*

he said.

All of that anger and frustration left my body. I bounded to my car, big smile on my face. Non-complementary behavior does that to a person.

Non-complementary behavior changes us. It alters relationships. It transforms societies.

That's what we celebrate this Easter day.

I wonder if instead of "Happy Easter" we should say:

*Happy non-complementary behavior day!*

*Please join us for/I hope you enjoyed the non-complementary behavior day egg hunt.*

*That's a lovely non-complementary behavior day bonnet you are wearing.*

O.K., that's really hard to say and it's not going to catch on. Which is too bad because non-complementary behavior is transformative.

It all starts with God. God meets our brokenness with healing. Our cynicism with hope. Our self-centeredness with an invitation to community. Our stinginess with generosity.

God flips the script. Not for a day but for eternity.

As people shaped by resurrection, as Easter people, we are invited to do the same. So this week, thank someone for cutting you off in traffic. That difficult person in your life, shower them with kindness. That person who is offering an opinion that you find unacceptable, listen with compassion and empathy and try to understand why they hold that opinion. Flip the script. Return evil with love. Respond to cynicism with hope. When someone has a gun to your head, offer them hospitality.

I'm not talking about rolling over – giving up – being a fool – this non-complementary behavior – it's strong and powerful and maybe it's the only force that actually can change the world. That has changed the world. That continues to change the world.

God flips the script. Not for a day but for eternity.

You see, Christ is risen. Christ is risen indeed.