

Daily Devotional Guide

Monday – Read John 20:1-2. Notice, in John, Mary Magdalene is the first one to look for Jesus' body. This reveals two significant things about Mary. One, it shows how much she loved Jesus. Jesus had literally changed her life and she wanted to grieve his death. Second, it shows her courage. Where were the other disciples? They had locked themselves in a room, scared to death. Mary assumed the risk of being threatened by looking for Jesus and showing herself to be one of his followers. Do you love Jesus this much?

Tuesday – Read John 20:3-7. John gives great detail about his sprint to the tomb with Peter. John even wants to remind us that he outran Peter! Oh well, John was a little younger than Peter! Notice also the detail about the linen and the burial cloth being folded by itself. Why do you think this is significant? It gives evidence of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. If the body had been stolen, the grave robbers would not have taken the time to unwrap the linen around Jesus' body and neatly fold the cloth from his head. This detail shows us that indeed Jesus had risen.

Wednesday – Read John 20:8-10. As soon as John entered the tomb he knew what had really happened and believed. It is important to understand that John's belief did not come from seeing an angel in dazzling white or being encountered by the risen Jesus. He didn't even have the benefit of understanding the scripture about his resurrection. John believed because he already had such faith in Jesus. What tremendous faith!

Thursday - Read John 20:11-16. This is one of the most powerful scenes in all of scripture. Remember, it was dark and Mary was crying, so it is understandable that Mary could not recognize Jesus. Perhaps all she saw was a figure in the dark shadows. Notice that Mary did not recognize Jesus until he spoke her name. We can conclude two things from this. First, Mary probably wondered how a stranger would know her name. Second, the tone of this text suggests that it was the way in which Jesus said her name that opened Mary's eyes to Jesus. Perhaps Jesus said her name with a familiar tone, as he had so many times before. This text reveals Jesus' personal connection to Mary and to each of us. Jesus knows our names.

Friday – Read John 20:17-18. These two verses are significant in helping us understand the importance of the Ascension of Jesus. Jesus reminded Mary that the consummation of his work and ministry was not complete. He had to ascend to the Father. Jesus' ascension back to God confirmed who Jesus was as the human embodiment of God. It also sealed up his work of redemption in healing the gap between humanity and God. Notice Jesus says, "My Father and *your* Father, *your* God and my God." Humanity's relationship to God had been restored.



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~ Easter Sunday ~ *Rise Above It*

Sunday, April 24, 2011

Sermon by: Dr. Charley Reeb, Senior Pastor

Scripture Lesson: John 20: 1-10

Many of you are with extended family on this Easter day. It is nice to be together on such a glorious day.

Seeing so many families together reminds me of a story I heard about a man from the U.S. who took his family to Jerusalem for a vacation during the Easter holiday. While they were there, his mother in law suddenly died. So the man went to talk to someone to make arrangements for her to be flown back to the states. The official he spoke to said it would cost \$5000 to fly her back and only \$150 to bury her there in Israel. The man thought for a minute, and then decided he wanted to fly her back. The official responded, "You must have really loved her!" The man replied, "No, it's not so much that. You see, I heard a story about a man a long time ago who was buried here and on the third day he rose from the dead, and I just can't take that chance!" (If you are sitting next to your mother in law today, just shake your head in protest right now. I want you to be able to get through Easter dinner!)

Well, the man had one thing right. The story he heard was true. The person who rose from the dead is Jesus Christ. Today, we celebrate his resurrection. We celebrate the fact that because he lives, we live. The same power that raised Jesus from the dead can empower us to rise above anything that would bring us down. I believe that. Do you believe that?

Perhaps there are some of you here who are rather skeptical. Maybe you enjoy the trappings of this day, but you are still not sure about this resurrection power business. And that's okay. Maybe you are like the scientist who approached God one day and said, "God, we have the ability now to clone humans, make life, and take care of ourselves and we don't need you anymore." God replied, "Ok, that's fine, but I want to challenge you to a contest before I let you go. Each of

us has to create our own human using nothing but dirt, and the first one done wins." So the scientist agreed and reached down to start making his human. God stopped him and said, "Whoa, not so fast, go get your own dirt."

The power of God is unmatched! The same power that created you – the same power that raised Jesus from the dead can empower you to rise above anything in life. On this Easter morning I have some great news to share with you.

You Can Rise Above Discouragement

Allow me to ask you a vital question. Are you living the life you were intended to live? Is the real you alive or asleep? Henry Thoreau once said, "Most people are living lives of quiet desperation." Does this describe you today? Oh maybe you have shown up for Easter worship today and you look bright and cheery on the outside, but inside you are desperate to really live.

When God created you, he put creativity into you, genius into you, power into you. What has happened to that person? Well, you have grown up. And you have listened to other voices tell you what you should or should not do. The pressures of life and the expectations of others have caused you to become cynical. One day you woke up and realized you were numb and the real person inside you is asleep.

Arthur Caliendo remembers reading an arresting statement by Bernie Segal, the great doctor and writer. Segal said, "I see so many people who have died to stay alive." Segal goes on to describe what he meant by the statement by saying, "I see individuals who become people they don't want to be. They have allowed themselves to be forced into roles that are meaningless to them. You know, people can commit suicide without hurting themselves physically." It can

happen. Through defeat and compromise we can kill the authentic person inside of us.

The great news on this Easter day is that you don't have to live a lie. You don't have to keep your true self hidden. You can allow the true person inside you to live! Today can be a new date of birth for you. Today, on this Easter day, you can decide to be a new creation. You can decide to stop containing the real you! Don't allow your authentic self to be pushed aside. Claim the person God had created you to be!

Vic Pentz, Senior Pastor of Peachtree Presbyterian Church, talks about receiving a phone call from a minister friend in Edmond, Oklahoma. Joel Baker called Vic and said: "Vic, I want to tell you a story about my grandmother and you're going to love this story."

Joel told Vic that some years ago when his grandmother was a young teenage girl in Austro-Serbia she found herself in a terrible situation. She was being beaten by her abusive father. Finally, she couldn't take it anymore, so one day she ran away from home and caught a boat to America.

When she arrived at Ellis Island she had no papers, no family and no sponsor. So as she stood in the long line, the authorities (realizing that she had no credentials) put a white X in chalk on her arm. This meant that when she arrived at the official desk of entry she would be deported immediately.

As the official moved away to interview others, a young man next to her in line reached over and wiped out the X on her arm. When they arrived at the desk and the authorities asked for her papers, the young man put his arm around her shoulder and said, "She's with me."

Together, they were welcomed to America and a few weeks later they were married! Today, their grandson is the pastor of The First Presbyterian Church in Edmond, Oklahoma. (Story shared by Michael Brown from Vic Pentz, Protestant Hour, August 18, 2002).

Easter means we are not cast out or pushed aside. Jesus comes alongside of us and removes the X of shame, guilt, and discouragement and says, "She's with me, He's with me. This one is with me."

You Can Rise Above Despair

Our text for today tells us that on that first Easter morning Mary Magdalene went to the tomb "while it was still dark." So often we picture this scene at sunrise with the sun shining brightly on Mary. But the text says it was "early." "Early" meant between 3 and 6am. In other words, when Mary went to the tomb it was the darkest of night.

Indeed it was the darkest hour. It was the darkest hour for Mary. Mary was marginalized in life. Jesus came alongside of her and changed her life. He gave her a worth that she never knew she could have. However, they took her Lord away and beat him, mocked him and crucified him. Mary's dreams were shattered.

Later in the story, Mary is at the tomb in the dark with tears in her eyes. She makes out a figure coming toward her and she thinks it is the gardener. She can't see that it is Jesus. She is desperate and asks, "What have you done with the body of my Lord?" What does Jesus do? Does he give some great statement of insight? Does he perform a miracle? No, he calls Mary by name – "Mary, Mary." And then Mary recognizes him. Jesus met Mary at her darkest hour and called her by name.

Paul Zahl, an Episcopal priest in Charleston, South Carolina, once wrote a brilliant statement: "God raises us up by meeting us at the bottom." I believe that. I don't know how dark your life is right now. Perhaps you think your life is so low and dark that God could never reach you. Oh, you are mistaken. God is there with you. Just like the Lord found Mary in the dark and called her by name, God can reach you and call you by name. You can never go so low that God cannot find you and raise you up. God can pull you up from whatever is dragging you down.

Michael Brown talks about a true story from one of his favorite writers, Walter Kennicutt. Kennicutt wrote of accompanying a group of young adults to a county jail to host a worship service. Before the service, they walked the halls of the jail distributing things like soap and toothpaste and other toiletries to the inmates. As they passed by one cell, the man behind the bars shouted obscenities at them. He also said, "I challenge you to show me one thing Jesus could ever do for my life." Kennicutt was not sure how to respond and felt that no response at all probably made the most sense. Several of the young people in the group were obviously frightened, and he just wanted to hurry them along. But, Kennicutt said that he will never forget what happened next. A certain young man in the group slowly walked over to the bars, unbuttoned his sleeve, rolled it up and showed the inmate his arm. "You know how I got those scars, don't you?" the young man said. The inmate didn't answer, but he knew. He knew those were scars from shooting up heroin. The young man rolled his sleeve back down and said: "Jesus got me out of a cell just like yours, and out of a habit that was going to kill me. And that is what He can do for you."

What is holding you captive today? Is it a bad job or relationship? Is it a destructive habit? Maybe it is guilt over something you did? Whatever is causing

your despair today, I know one thing is for sure – the risen Lord can help you rise above it. Jesus can free you to live the abundant life. This is the message of Easter.

You Can Rise Above Defeat

The first thing Mary saw when she went to the tomb was the stone which had been rolled away. I am sure Mary wondered how a sealed stone that weighed tons could have been rolled away. The gospel of Matthew tells us that it was the power of God through the angels that rolled the stone away.

Whenever I visualize the scene of the rolled away stone it always makes me think of the people I know who remain in tombs of defeat and they can't roll the stone away to free themselves. Some remain in the tomb of their past and they can't get out of it. Some remain in the tomb of a mistake that they will not allow themselves to live down. What tomb of defeat are you living in? Perhaps you are living in this tomb and you have said so many times, "I have tried to roll away the stone, but I can't do it by myself! It is too heavy."

The good news of Easter is that you don't have to roll the stone away by yourself. There is a power available to you that can empower you to roll that stone away and be free forever. That power is the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

French scientist and mystic Teilhard de Chardin once said, "We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience." How true. We have the spirit of God available to us to help us rise above defeat. This is why George Bernard Shaw said, "I don't believe in circumstances!" Sure, we have set-backs and obstacles, but we have the power to rise above anything.

James Moore loves to tell the story about the great pianist Ignace Paderewski. Paderewski was Poland's most famous pianist and Prime Minister. During his long and illustrious career, Paderewski scheduled a concert in a small village to cultivate the arts in Poland. A young mother bought tickets for the Paderewski performance. Her young son had just started taking piano lessons, and she wanted to expose him to one of the greatest piano players in the world. When the night arrived, they found their seats near the front of the concert hall. The mother spotted a friend nearby and began to chat. As she turned back from her visit, she was stunned to see that her little boy was not in his seat. He had slipped out of sight. Just then the house lights came down and the spotlight came up. It was at that moment that everyone knew where the little 10-year-old boy had run off to. He was seated at the concert piano on stage innocently picking out "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star."

His mother was mortified. The stagehands ran out to grab the boy, but suddenly Paderewski appeared on stage and waved them away. Paderewski quickly moved to the piano and standing behind the little boy, he whispered into his ear, "Don't quit! Keep playing! Don't stop!" Leaning over, Paderewski reached down with his left hand and began filling in the bass part. Soon his right arm reached around the other side of the boy, and he played another part. Together, the old master and the young novice mesmerized the crowd with beautiful music. They did it together.

You know what Easter is all about? Easter is about the risen Lord coming alongside of you and whispering in your ear, "Don't quit on life. Don't quit on yourself. Don't give up on me. I'm here to help you rise above anything. We will do it together." You can rise above discouragement. You can rise above despair. You can rise above defeat. Easter means you can rise above it. I believe that. Do you believe it? Amen.