

The Shades of Easter Faith

A true story is told about a Frenchman who invented his own religion. He was proud of it, but no one would listen to him. So he brought it to a great philosopher and asked, "Why is it that everybody laughs at my religion? It's far better than Christianity. What can I do to spread it around the world?" The philosopher replied, "Go out and live and die serving the people, then on the third day rise from the dead to confirm the hopes of humanity; then the people will listen to you."

The resurrection is the one essential thing that makes the Christian faith unique. If Jesus did not rise from the dead on the third day, then he was either a liar or an idiot, and we might as well go home. The Bible itself says if Christ has not been raised, our faith is useless and we are to be pitied.

Now that's quite a statement, because the fact of the matter is, most people today have a hard time believing anyone could physically rise from the dead. Why should we believe it? We've never seen it happen. People talk today about near death experiences, but the Bible doesn't say Jesus had a near death experience. It says he died, and was placed in a tomb for three days, and then his body was raised up. Why should we believe that?

Today I want to answer that question. If I were sitting over at Starbucks with a friend who was investigating Christianity, and he wanted to know why he should believe Jesus was raised from the dead, I would tell my friend four stories about lives that were changed. These stories show how four different people came to believe in the resurrection in very different ways. Three of these stories are found right here in what was just read from John 20.

THE DIFFERENT "SHADES" OF FAITH

1. John - a simple faith: The first story is about John. John is identified as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Isn't that a great nickname? What's funny about it is that it's a nickname John gave himself. It speaks of his own sense of closeness and intimacy with Jesus.

But John wasn't always close to Jesus. John and his brother James were born into a wealthy fishing family. Jesus gave these two brothers his own nickname, "Sons of Thunder." Early on, they lived up to their reputation. One day, Jesus was looking for a place to stay. He sent messengers into a nearby village to see if someone there would put him up. But no one in that village wanted anything to do with Jesus. When John and James heard this they turned to the Lord and said, "Master, do you want us to call a bolt of lightning down

from the sky to burn up the whole city?" Needless to say, that wasn't Jesus' style.

Yet despite this, John was extremely close to Jesus. When Jesus had to choose just three men to go with him somewhere, John was always one of them. At the Last Supper, it was John who had a seat right next to Jesus. When Jesus was hanging on the cross, John was the only Apostle who was there. And it was to John that Jesus entrusted the care of his own mother.

Here in this Easter morning story we see John in a footrace with Peter. He's heard from Mary that someone had stolen the body of Jesus from the tomb and so he and Peter take off like two men given wings. John runs faster and gets to the tomb first. But John was faster than Peter in other ways too. John was also faster to believe the Lord had risen.

Did you hear the story? When John got to the tomb, he didn't walk inside at first. He just stooped and looked inside. And we are told specifically that he saw the linen wrappings lying there. It was not as if someone had unwrapped Jesus from the linen wrappings; it was as if he had passed through them, after which they depressed down like an emptied cocoon. John had a minute to think about that before Peter arrived.

Finally Peter arrives, cuts in front of John, and barges right into the tomb. Then John himself entered and the Bible just says that he "saw and believed." Isn't that great? He saw and he believed. It was so simple for John. He was quick on his feet but he was quick to come to faith in a risen Lord as well. He didn't need a lot of proof. He didn't need to see Jesus pass through walls. He didn't need to hear his voice. He didn't need to touch his wounds. He hadn't even seen the risen Lord! But, he saw the empty tomb; he saw the grave clothes; that was enough for John.

There are some of you here this morning like John. You believe like this disciple believes. Perhaps you have always believed. You can't remember a time when you didn't. Faith in a risen Lord comes easy for you; it feels natural for you to believe. It didn't take some enormous intellectual struggle to bring you to faith. You didn't have to hit "rock bottom" emotionally or morally to believe; it just seemed like the shoe of faith fit, and so you slipped it on.

I speak with people like you all the time. The challenge for you is to really make it personal. The challenge for you is to take the next step and turn that natural faith into unnatural discipleship. Discipleship means following hard after Jesus. It means allowing your faith to change the way you live. Jesus requires more than an easy faith for his disciples. He requires that we put that faith to work.

It's like coming to an old walking bridge. You look at it and size it up and say, "I believe this thing can hold me." You say you have faith in that bridge. But your faith is only as good as your willingness to step on that bridge and walk across.

John got on that bridge. This man, for whom faith came so easy, lived the rest of his life telling people Jesus was alive. As an old man, he suffered for his faith, being exiled on the island of Patmos. John never got voted off that island. His faith was simple, but it wasn't shallow.

I believe in the resurrection because I've seen people like John take that next step and follow hard after Jesus. I've seen their easy faith turn into a costly faith.

2. Mary - a grieving faith: But not everyone comes to faith that way. There are others in this story. Look at Mary.

Who is this Mary? She is called "Magdala" because she is from the Galilean town of the same name. Down through the years Mary's reputation has been stained by folklore. Some have said she was a reformed prostitute, but that's a myth. All the Bible tells us is that she was one from whom Jesus had cast out seven demons. After that, Mary became a committed disciple of Jesus. She was one of the women who provided for Jesus out of her own private funds. She was one of those devoted women with him at the cross.

And so we are not surprised that we see her coming to the tomb early Sunday morning when it's still dark. She comes to anoint the dead body of Jesus with more spices and perfumes. It is an act of love. For Mary, hope had died and faith had died, but love had NOT died. This was a way for her to mourn the loss of her Master.

But when she gets there she is shocked to find the stone already rolled away and the tomb empty. Her grief wells up into anger and she RUNS full speed ahead back to town to tell the disciples that someone has stolen the body! Peter and John take off and Mary walks back to the tomb and arrives there after Peter and John have left. She stoops and looks into the tomb and sees two angels, but through her tears she didn't recognize them as angels.

They ask her why she is weeping and she bursts out, "They have taken away my Lord...I don't know where they have laid him."

Then around and there standing before her is the risen Lord, but she thinks he's the gardener. "Why are you weeping? Who are you looking for?" he says.

And then she says something rather ridiculous, "If you have carried him away, tell me where you put him and I'll go get him."

Imagine that. Mary, who had been weeping for three days, had probably slept very little, offers to carry the full weight of a man already wrapped in about another 100 pounds of spices and perfumes! This was an impossible task, but

grieving people don't think straight. They just want to be with the one they love.

And then she heard it, "MARY!"

As soon he called her name, she knew. "MASTER!" She knew because he himself had said, "I know my sheep and they know me. I call them by name and they follow." In that moment Mary experienced her own resurrection. Faith had died, hope had evaporated, but now it all gathered again around her risen Lord.

There are some of you here this morning like Mary. Male or female, you are here. All this business about the joy of the risen Christ is hard for you because you are carrying around a load of grief or anger. Perhaps someone close to you has died or suffered a terrible tragedy and you can't understand why. Perhaps you have lost a job or the one you have is looking more and more like a dead end. Perhaps your marriage has died and all the counseling and all the seminars haven't really changed a thing. Perhaps a relationship has died; you hoped that this would be the one but it all fell apart. Maybe it's your health. You thought if you just ate right and exercised enough you would live to a ripe old age, but your doctor's not so sure.

And because of your grief and your anger you can't see the Lord. Like Mary, he might be right there with you, but you can't see him because your grief and anger have buried you. How is it that you will come to faith? In the midst of your grief and anger, how will you see the Lord?

The answer is right here. And some of you have experienced it. First, he allows you to share with him your pain. He comes to you and asks, "Why are you weeping?" And he gives you the freedom to unload. And as you share your pain with him he leads you to a place where in your heart you can hear him call your name. You're not even sure how it happens, but you come to that place where you believe that he really is alive and his victory is your victory.

I've seen people like Mary come to faith. I've seen him call out their names. Like Mary, he knows your name. He knows you. And there are many, like Mary, who come to faith and hope out of grief, and out of loss, and out of anger, because at the lowest point they have heard him call their name.

3. Peter - a struggling faith: But John and Mary aren't the only ones who believed in this story. Peter came to faith too. Strangely enough, Peter is the last one coming to faith.

Peter was a man's man. He was a fisherman. Not the modern American kind of fisherman, lying down snoozing in a boat on a summer afternoon with his pole up in the air. Peter was a commercial fisherman. His face was weather beaten. His hands were calloused. His language was as dirty as the bottom of his boat.

But everything had changed for Peter, including his name. By birth he was Simon, but Jesus renamed him Peter, which in our language would be "Rocky." After meeting Jesus there was no one as committed to Jesus as Peter was. He was zealous to the point of extremes. When Jesus said, "You will all

deny me." Peter said, "Not me. I'm different."

But, when Jesus died, Peter's hopes and dreams died with him. And so, we are told that when he entered the tomb, he saw the very same thing that John saw. He saw the linen wrappings up close. But unlike John, Peter left that tomb unconvinced that Jesus was alive. He headed back to his house as miserable as ever. Peter was the slowest of the three to believe in a risen Lord.

Why? Perhaps it was because Peter was a realist. On the surface, Peter was the kind of man who believed that when you're dead, you're dead. He was the Yogi Berra of the disciples, "When it's over, it's over."

There are some people for whom faith in a risen Lord is a great struggle. Are there any Peters here today? Are there any of you who find the shoes of Easter hard to put on? Is there anyone who finds John's faith too simple and Mary's faith too emotional? Oh, you try to believe. You try to hang out with people who believe, hoping that some of their faith will rub off on you. You want to believe. But you can't live off of their faith, and deep down you know it.

A few years ago my kids went to an Easter egg hunt. They arrived late and they couldn't find any eggs, they were all gone. As they were standing there looking gloomy a little girl walked up to them and put two Easter eggs down near them so they could pretend to find them for themselves and take them home. It worked and my kids were grateful. It wouldn't have worked, though, if she had just handed them the eggs. The joy was in finding them themselves.

John couldn't hand off his faith to Peter; he had to find Jesus for himself. You can't live off your parent's faith or your spouse's faith or your friend's faith; you have to find it for yourself. And it comes harder for you than for them.

What are the barriers that keep people like Peter from believing? Maybe it's intellectual doubts. You can be honest with him about your doubts and questions. As you honestly seek the truth, asking him to lead you to it, he will do it. He will give you all that you need to believe, just like Peter. It will still be faith, but it will be a faith that makes sense.

But there was another barrier for Peter. Peter had to deal with his own moral failure. When the heat was on and his Lord was arrested, Peter denied the Lord - not once, not twice, but three times. He cursed and wept bitterly over his failure. That's where we find Peter on the first Easter morning - overwhelmed with his own guilt, believing that if Jesus ever did come back it wouldn't be for him.

Is there anyone here who feels that way today? You feel as if you are the last person he would ever come back for. You are overwhelmed with a sense of guilt. You have heard the voice whispering in your ear, "You don't belong here. After all you have done, who are you kidding?"

Let me tell you something important. In the gospel of Mark, when this same story is told, the angel sends Mary back

to the disciples and says, "Go tell the disciples AND PETER to meet him in Galilee." Tell Peter, especially! Peter believed that if anyone would be dropped off the invitation list it would be him. But instead, he gets a special invitation. And when he saw Peter he didn't get a lecture, he got a job to do. He said, "Peter, feed my lambs." He didn't just say, "I forgive you," but he entrusted him with responsibility. That's the power of the resurrection! To take a failure and make him a leader! And that's what Peter became. In the subsequent years, no one preached the resurrection as courageously as Peter.

You see, Jesus came back especially for those who believed he couldn't possibly come back for them. I've seen it happen over and over again. Failure is not the "F" word. Failure doesn't have to be the last word. Jesus finds us in the midst of our moral failure and that failure is the raw material for a whole new way of living.

But you might say, "Well, all those people lived back then. What about now? They got to actually see Jesus. Why should I believe he's alive if I can't see him?"

4. A modern day story of faith: So let me tell you one last story, a modern day story. It's my story. I grew up going through some of the rituals of religion, but with no real faith at all. I poured my life into sports. Succeeding in sports would be my way of being somebody. It would be my way of finding approval and recognition. I was small for my age so when my friends started growing I had to work even harder to be get ahead. And I did. In high school I played three sports. In four years I missed one practice to attend my grandfather's funeral.

When my senior year rolled around I began to achieve some of the success and recognition I dreamed of. But in the middle of what should have been the best time of my life, I was totally empty. I felt dirty over the kind of life I was living. I felt lonely. I didn't know who my real friends were. I found myself during that time searching for more. I found myself hungry to know if there really was a God and if there was a God, did he really care for me? I looked for answers on Sunday morning religious programming, but had to change the channel before anyone came in the room. I ransacked our home for a Bible but couldn't find one.

Finally, one night I decided to pray. I knelt beside my bedside and just begged Jesus to forgive me and come into my life and make something out of it. I didn't really even know how to pray, but I still think it was the most genuine prayer I have ever prayed. I went to sleep that night and when I woke up the next morning, I had some chores to do around the house, and I didn't think much about the night before. But after I'd been up for an hour or so I stopped dead in my tracks and thought to myself, "I feel completely different. I feel clean. I feel joyful. And here I am helping my mom and I don't even resent it. What's different?" And then I remembered what I had done the night before, and I knew. I knew at that moment Jesus was alive. I knew he loved me and I knew he would never leave me. And just as I was serving my mother, I knew that I would spend the rest of life serving him.

That was 27 years ago. To this day my friends from that time can't explain what happened to me. But I know what

happened. I met the risen Christ. My story is different than John's and Mary's and Peter's. My story shows me that he can still prove he is alive 2,000 years later to a 17-year-old kid who should have had everything going for him, but had never given God a second thought. He can turn a life like that around.

CONCLUSION

We can know Jesus Christ is alive because he's still transforming lives. Where do you find yourself in this? Are you like John, your faith comes fast and easy? Someone tells you that Christ has risen and you say, "Of course he's risen." But you need to take the next step, and the next step isn't so easy. You need to say, "Yes, Lord, I'll follow you. I'll put your will first."

Or are you like Mary, a bit slower perhaps? Someone says Christ is risen and you need to work through your feelings of grief and anger. He lets you do that, and he calls you by name.

Or are you the last one to come to faith? There are barriers. Someone says Christ is risen and you say, "Prove it! I haven't seen him." Or perhaps you say, "If he is risen, he would never come back for me." And yet, Jesus came for you too. And you too can come to say, "He is risen indeed!"

Or are you like me? You've been going along, hardly giving God a second thought. But lately there have been some stirrings in your soul, maybe a hunger to know if there really is a God and if there is can you know him. I want you to know those stirrings are Jesus himself knocking on the door of your heart. He wants to have a relationship with you. There is no mistake that you are here today. You're drowning and he's throwing out a life preserver to you, but you have grab it, and that takes faith.

When you were a child, did you ever go on a walk with a group of friends and come to a stream? The water was just a little wider than you felt comfortable jumping across. You stood by the bank, wondering if you could make it. Then someone in your group did it. They ran and they jumped and they landed on the other side. And that encouraged you to go ahead and try for yourself.

In many ways, that's what we have in this Easter story. We have four people, four very different people, running and jumping over each in their own way ahead of us. Each one made it to the other side. Each one encourages us wherever we are at to run and jump as well.

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