



ELIZABETHTOWN
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

Easter Sunday
Rise and Shine!

John 20.1–18

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Message from April 21, 2019

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¹Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes. ¹¹But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” ¹⁶Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

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Some time ago there was an intriguing article in the *Huffington Post* religion section—“How Easter and Passover Can Make Your Family Happier.” We are all about happy, healthy families, so I pulled it out of my files. And it said that now is the season when tens of millions of people will do something so familiar, that it’s easy to forget how radical it is: two faith traditions, it says, will commemorate the worst moments of their past. For the Jews, it’s Passover, in which they relive their four centuries of slavery in Egypt. For us, as Christians, it’s Easter, part of which is the suffering and execution of Jesus. Of course both of these stories have hope-filled endings—the Jews ultimately escape slavery and eventually make it to the Promised Land. And for us, the Easter story is one of resurrection and new life. Still, it says, the larger question is worth considering: Why are these stories, maybe the darkest of days, at the center of our faith stories?¹ And their stunning answer to this question? These stories help us to be a people who can survive. And I would add—they not only help us to survive, but to thrive...to be a people of resilience, of strength and of hope.

The author did thorough research, trying to figure out the secret for strength in families. He talked to

- cutting-edge scholars,
- innovative brain researchers,
- world leaders of business, sports and religion, as well as countless everyday families who struggle to find the time to ask those big questions in life.

He found that children and adults who know more about their family’s history have higher self-esteem, a stronger sense that they control their lives and a deeper belief that their family functions well. Those who know the stories from their family’s past consistently display emotional health and happiness, and prove to be more resilient. And it isn’t just the fun and happy stories, but also includes failures, setbacks and even painful times. You know...like the story of...

¹Huffingtonpost.com, *Huffpost Religion*, March 22, 2013.

The Story of Uncle Sam

Uncle Sam was as 10 year-old boy who loved to play basketball with his big brother. Not just any basketball, he liked to dunk the ball. Although big for his age, he didn't have extra powers. He did have a special technique for dunking...he'd climb on the garage roof and lean over the backboard. His brother would feed him the ball and Uncle Sam would stuff it—never missing a bucket. Until—as he was leaning into the backboard, it gave way, sending it and Uncle Sam to the macadam below. While he was fortunate in not having injured himself severely, he did break both wrists. And the breaks necessitated a cast on each arm—over the elbow. Which means that he couldn't feed himself or do a lot of other basic things involving hygiene. Not one of the most positive stories in our family narrative. But the story isn't over...

It was early spring and the daffodils on the farm were just opening! Welcome harbingers of spring! The day after Uncle Sam broke his wrists he brought a big bouquet into the kitchen as a gift for his mother. She was delighted until it dawned on her that his casts had barely had a chance to harden. And the daffodils were in a fenced-in meadow. With both arms in casts up to here, Uncle Sam had climbed a farm fence to pick the bouquet.

Telling our stories is important—the good, the bad and the ugly. The important factor seems to lie in a person's sense of being part of a larger family, of something bigger. It is discovering that they are part of a larger narrative. They have a strong sense of “intergenerational self.”

And that's where religion comes in, according to the article. Meaning can be found in history. The sheer act of telling and retelling the biblical stories helps us to understand God's role in the world as well as our own position in a long line of ancestors who were not so unlike us. **When we tell the story we are extending a line from our children and our children's children and ourselves, to our past.** And our stories include not only positive moments, but moments of hardship and

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pain. And the resiliency and hope that emerge in the face of those difficult times.

We watched with the world this past Monday, as “Our Lady” Notre Dame succumbed to a massive roaring blaze that devastated the Parisian landmark. Flames burst rapidly through the roof of the centuries-old cathedral and engulfed the spire, which collapsed, quickly followed by the entire roof. President Emmanuel Macron said the whole nation was moved. “Like all our compatriots,” he tweeted, “I am sad this evening to see this part of all of us burn.”

I think that Notre Dame, has for centuries extended that line, connecting millions to their past/our past, telling the story of a place that for centuries has been significant, whose beauty has served as a respite and reminder that there is something better, even something holy, and that what matters survives and lives on. It is thought that Paris will rebuild Notre Dame, this time in a globalized world that needs it’s symbolism, it’s significance more than ever. That generations can continue to know the stories, to extend the line, and find themselves a part of that narrative.

And so, on this Easter morning, we revisit the Easter resurrection story, our story, of Mary and Peter.

They were on their way—there was no happily-ever-after promised. They didn’t yet have the “rest of the story.” They had never heard of Easter. A risen Savior wasn’t even on their radar. They had no foresight of the angelic beings or an empty tomb. This was no high, holy and spiritual trip they were making. These sojourners, Mary and Peter, were compelled by hearts that ached with grief and separation.

Alone, Mary had come to mourn a loss—she longed for a body to touch and to say her good-byes. She came out of a deep need to be where Jesus was. Perhaps she came partly to convince herself that it was really true. How unbelievably difficult to lose a person whose life has so dramatically impacted yours. Who has shown you the grander meaning of things, and who has shown you your place at the center of it.

It is hard to lose someone so cherished, an extraordinary man who woke you up from the pettiness of the everyday and led you beyond yourself. Someone who said that you are not merely a convenience...you are the beloved.

And Peter—joined in some kind of a boyish footrace to Jesus' tomb. After he had spent the past few days running in the other direction...away from Jesus. Maybe he was feeling so guilty and he was could hardly wait to say he's sorry,

- for denying Jesus, after boasting about his loyalty,
- for not being present at the most important time,
- for not being there for Jesus when he needed him most.

Maybe he was jealous of the “the other disciple,” the favorite, the faithful beloved disciple. Maybe he harbored petty resentment for others who seemed to be so much more blessed by God, for those who were full of confidence and joy, not the gut-wrenching guilt and shame that he felt.

Whatever thoughts, whatever feelings consumed their hearts and minds, Mary and Peter were on their way, early in the day, before even a beam of sun streaked the sky. **Separate sojourners at different places on the same road.** They both knew that Joseph of Arimethea and Nicodemous had taken the body of their beloved raboni, and had placed him in a cave, into a new tomb, and as was the custom, had sealed it with a stone. A very big stone, which they both knew stood in their way. There was no doubt that stone would be a major hurdle.

And maybe here is where we, too, can draw a line...a line extending from Mary and Peter, to us. We, too, are sojourners on the road and we, too, know about stones. We have our own stones in our path. Every one of us has a “stone story” to share.

- The stone of pain and illness and grief grips our heart.

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- The stone of failure and loneliness fills our spirit.
- The stone of wayward children and of restless spouses, interrupts sleep in our nights.
- The stone of drugs and alcohol imprisons our families and our communities.
- The stone of diminishing strength and aging limitations holds us in its grasp.
- The stone of meaninglessness and helplessness looms large.
- The stone of violence around us and around our world leaves us fearful.
- The stone of exclusion and separation saddens our heart.

But that is not the end of the journey for Mary and Peter... and it's not the end of our journey. When Mary arrived, she saw...the stone had been rolled away. And when Peter heard the news and arrived, he, too, found the stone had been rolled away. And Jesus was not in the tomb. Neither was he gone. His mission was among the living, to whom he appeared in new and glorious form, not once, but four more times in the Gospel of John. Every time he came to his friends, they became stronger, wiser, kinder, more daring... people of resilience, of strength and of hope. Every time he came to them, they became more like him —

And this morning...this Easter morning, we remember that the stone now is gone—Jesus is not in the tomb. But he is not gone. In new and glorious form, he is with us. Jesus' mission is among the living. And each time we encounter Jesus, just as with Mary, he calls us by name. He is calling us to a new creation, an unimaginable future, which is only the beginning of an ongoing revelation of what resurrection and new life and its implications might mean. Every time we encounter Jesus, we, too, become stronger, wiser, kinder and more daring. We

become more like him as we see him in the faces and lives of those we meet.

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And our early morning darkness gives way to light. Death and evil do not have the last word. God has the last word. Jesus is alive in new and glorious form and each time we encounter him, we remember that we are part of a larger narrative—a narrative that is about peace, justice, mercy, reconciliation, enlightenment, transformation and openness to all. And that together we can move mountains, banish fear, love even our enemies and change the world.

So rise and shine, sisters and brothers. Christ is Risen. Christ is Risen Indeed.

