

RISE!

Final Week of the 6-Week Lenten Series, "Prepare the Way"

Easter Sunday: April 9, 2023

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So these three atheists die, and they're at the Pearly Gates. And St. Peter tells them, "To enter, you're going to have to answer a simple question." And to the first atheist he said, "So what is Easter?"

And the first atheist replied, "Oh, that's easy! That's that holiday in November where everybody eats turkey and they're thankful." [Congregation titters]

He said, "No! That's wrong." So then he asks the second atheist, "What is Easter?"

The second atheist says, "Easter is that holiday in December when they put up a tree and exchange gifts and celebrate the birth of Jesus."

He said, "No; that's not it!" So not feeling optimistic, he asks the third one, "What is Easter?"

And the third atheist smiles and says confidently, "I know what Easter is! Easter is the Christian holiday that coincides with the Jewish celebration of Passover. Jesus and his disciples were eating the Last Supper, and Jesus was later deceived and turned over to the Romans by one of his disciples. The Romans took him to be crucified; stabbed him in the side. He had to wear a crown of thorns and was hung on a cross with nails through his hands. He was buried in a nearby cave, which was sealed off by a large stone."

St. Peter absolutely smiled with delight.

Then the atheist continued, "Every year the stone is rolled away so that Jesus can come out, and if he sees his shadow there'll be six more weeks of winter."

[Congregation laughs] And so ...

So what is Easter? What does Easter mean to you personally? How does Easter affect how you live your life today? What you believe? How you see yourself? How you show up in your work; in your relationships? And what you think is possible for you?

Traditionally, the Resurrection is seen as the fulfillment that the Messiah -- through his atoning sacrifice of his life and by his blood -- washed us of our sins that we may have eternal life. In Unity, we don't see the Resurrection as the future promise or a passport to eternal life, but we see it as a demonstration of the indestructible nature and power of God to overcome all things, including death ... and as a reminder that that resurrecting power is still alive and available to all of us.

The Episcopal Bishop of Newark, John Shelby Spong, said:

"The function of the Christ is not to rescue sinners, but to call you and empower you to be more deeply and fully human than you have ever realized that you had the potential to be. You and I emerging people, not fallen people. Our problem is not that we were born in sin, but our problem is that we do not yet know how to achieve being fully human."

And what Spong is saying is that the Resurrection of Jesus is not to save us, but is to teach us; to awaken us; to inspire us; and empower us; and to call us higher to help us rise to the highest and best that is in us. To rise to our human potential and our spiritual potential. To rise and to live at that Christ standard level in all areas of our lives.

Jesus said:

"In this life there will be trials and tribulations, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."

And he's saying be of good cheer because this resurrecting power and Spirit that is in me is in you. Easter is a time of good cheer! It is to celebrate this wonderful, amazing, incredible, miraculous thing! To celebrate the risen Christ and also to remember that that Christ in us is meant to rise, and it can be resurrected in us and in all areas of our lives.

You know, sometimes we think that the only resurrection that took place was of Jesus on Easter Sunday. And that is not accurate! There were several times that people were raised from the dead. Jesus did; Paul; Peter; Elijah; and Elisha. And also Scripture says that the tombs opened and the bodies of many saints rose.

So it isn't just those aspects of people of people rising from the dead that shows this power; if you look at Jesus' entire ministry, it was about the resurrecting and restoring and renewing and miracle-working power of God. You know, the raising of Lazarus from the dead. The healing of the woman who had been hemorrhaging for 12 years is a resurrection from illness to wholeness. The loaves and fishes was a resurrection from lack and limitation to being resurrected into abundance. The Prodigal Son -- whose own father said, *"My son, who was dead, is now alive!"* -- is a resurrection story.

Dr. Norman Vincent Peale, who wrote *The Power of Positive Thinking*, said:

"When you lose your eagerness; when you lose your ability to feel; when you no longer have dreams or hold a vision; when you have become dull and your life feels dull and lifeless, something has died in you ... and you are in need of a resurrection."

The Resurrection really -- when you think about it -- is the ultimate overcoming. It is the ultimate transformation; the ultimate healing. It is the ultimate of an expression of hope and unlimited possibilities.

So this great Resurrection of Jesus is wonderful, and it is also an invitation to help each of us rise to the highest and best that is in ourselves.

So this week concludes our six-week Lenten series that we called, "Prepare the Way." And we've been looking at the 40 days of fasting and prayer that Jesus did to prepare himself for his ministry, and to achieve this miraculous experience and event. And the truth is that, for any one of us who wants to have a breakthrough or to transform our lives, there needs to be preparation -- a spiritual preparation -- to be the foundation; to be a springboard for something greater.

Basketball coach Bobby Knight said, "Everybody's got the will to win; everybody wants to win. But everybody doesn't have the will to prepare." Everybody does not have the will to do all the necessary work before that is needed to have greater success or to become a greater version of ourselves.

We'll just go through the previous five weeks. The first step to prepare for a breakthrough is to **RETREAT**. Sometimes we think it's to go full-steam ahead, but sometimes stepping back to reflect; to create some space and quiet; and to connect to our breath, to our higher self, is an important starting place.

Second, we talked about **FASTING**, which means to abstain from. When we abstain from food, the energy that it normally takes actually gets to be reinvested into deepening our relationship with God. We talked about fasting, or abstaining, from negativity. Fasting and abstaining from clutter. Those things take a lot of energy, and when we abstain from them, it frees energy to help us deepen our relationship with God.

Third week was about **FEASTING**: feasting our heart and our mind on thoughts of God. Feasting on love and especially compassion and kindness to all people.

And then the fourth week was **BELIEVE**: to believe that, with God, all things are possible. To believe that your life has a purpose. And to believe in ourselves.

Last week it was about **EMBRACING** everything. To welcome everything into our lives ... not to run or avoid or hide. That even in the difficult things, we have to hold our head high and enter in a consciousness of God, whatever challenge is facing you ... because that's a part of our lives. And it is there to help us grow and develop into who we came here to be.

So the last one we're going to talk about is to **RISE**. And so to experience a breakthrough or a transformation -- a resurrection -- we're going to talk about three practices we need to do to help us rise.

And the first one is to **DIE TO THE OLD**. You know, for there to be a resurrection, there had to be a crucifixion. For us to be born anew into something, we have to die to something that is old. And so we've got to die to some old way of being to be born into some new experience.

You know, everybody wants to be the butterfly, but nobody realizes that part of being the butterfly is the caterpillar had to die to itself to be born into this greater version of itself. Lizards and lobsters have to shed their old skin so they can grow into who they came here to be.

Paramahansa Yogananda said:

"Dying to the old is fundamental to transformation."

Dying to the old is fundamental to transformation. If we want to be transformed into something greater -- something better -- we have to die to some old idea or thought or limiting belief. Dying to an old belief is necessary to be born into a greater awareness; a greater perspective; a greater level of understanding. And so whether it is dying to a mindset of lack to be born into an awareness of abundance; or dying to a mindset of failure or unworthiness to be born into a mindset of success and confidence; or dying to a mindset of blame and bitterness to be born into a mindset of accepting full responsibility for ourselves. These things are important! To be born into the new, we must die to something of the old.

In 2 Corinthians it says:

"Old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new."

And even in that Bible story of the wine and the wineskins, it says you can't put new wine into old wineskin. You can't introduce new ideas into an old mindset and an old belief system.

The Apostle Paul broke it down even more when he said:

"I die daily."

And what he's saying is: When he lives this life, he's not going to keep dwelling and get stuck and stay in the past. He's going to die to those things -- no longer be attached to those things -- so he cannot just have a new day, but he could have a new experience and develop new possibilities.

When we don't die to the old, guess what? We keep repeating certain things. Ever have the same arguments, or feel like you're having the same problems, or just feel stuck? It's because we have to die of the old to be born into the new.

So my question is: What limiting mindset or limiting image of yourself is it time for you to die to be born to something greater? To be born to something new?

Lao Tzu once said:

"We must let go of who we are to become who we are meant to be."

And so I have a friend who -- it wasn't until she was in her 50's -- realized or maybe even just acknowledged that everything she did in her life she did for her mother's approval. And it was a life-changing thing to come to that awareness and just own that truth. And when she was able to die to it -- and to let it go and be freed by it -- it not only changed her relationship with her mom, but it changed her relationship with herself! She saw herself in a different way and was able to live more freely and to achieve the things that she wants.

Whatever we want, we have to die to the old thing that keeps holding us back. And whether it's a mindset or belief of lack; or unworthiness or fear or shame; or the thought that, *"I'm just not good enough,"* it's important for us to be aware of that old mindset and to have the intention and the desire to die to it. To let it go. To free ourselves from it.

And it's important -- and it sounds kind of simple! But it's really important, because our beliefs run us. What we believe affects how we see ourselves, the world, what we do, and how much we think we are worthy of.

So again: What is it that you want to free yourself from? What is some limiting belief or image that it's time for you to die to so you can be born to something greater, something new?

The second thing to have the best in us rise is to **SURRENDER TO SILENCE**. In 1 King, Chapter 19, it says:

"... After the wind, an earthquake ... and after the earthquake, a fire ... and after a fire, the sound of sheer silence."

Sheer silence is not a sound that we hear very often in our lives. Our lives are so busy; they're so active; they're so noisy. Physically, externally, as well as internally. So it's hard to hear the silence. And God is in the silence! God speaks to us through silence!

The writer Rumi said:

"There is a voice that doesn't use words. Listen!"

Spiritual greats have always gone to mountain tops or gone into the desert or gone into caves ... all with a desire for one thing: to listen to silence, away from the distractions; away from the pull to action and doing something. There is a deep yearning and desire for silence as a means of tapping into a greater level of peace or wisdom or inspiration to the intelligence and the mind of God.

Jesus was in the tomb for three days. And when you think of a tomb, it's dark, cold, not very inviting. But in looking at it over time, I realized that the tomb wasn't just dark and cold; it is a place of silence. And it's not just a place of silence but is a place of ultimate surrender. And it was in that silence and that surrender that something happened. We don't know exactly what happened, but we know that it went from dead to alive. That it went from darkness to light. Something happened in that silence that turned what was a tomb into, really, a womb. That it brought life instead of death.

And it is powerful and amazing that, if we were to enter the silence, something amazing and miraculous can happen in us. Because we've created that foundation, that environment, to facilitate it.

The Apostle Paul ... you remember? He was angry; he was hateful; and he didn't believe. And he was blinded, and something happened to him in that dark silence in those three days. He was able to finally surrender to the silence, and he came out joyful and positive and preaching the Word. And he's credited with the spread of Christianity throughout the world. Something happens in silence! And it's not just in that silence, but it's fully surrendering to the silence.

Notice it was three days. I mean, if it was God, it could have been like three minutes! Jesus could have been in there Friday morning and out by Friday night. But why three days? Because I think the message

is to say: It's not just silence, but it's to surrender into the silence ... and that takes time. For every one of us, we need to ask ourselves: Am I ready to enter the silence and stay in it long enough to surrender myself fully to allow that environment to go from a tomb to a womb to bring forth some new life; some new possibilities; some new version of myself?

Some of the most powerful words in the Old Testament are:

"Be still and know that I am God."

Because it is only in the stillness that we can know, feel and experience the fullness and the goodness and the allness of the Divine. Sometimes we're uncomfortable with silence, but it's one of the most powerful, underutilized resources that we have.

Blaise Pascal said:

"All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone."

So my question is: How much time do you spend in the silence? How much do you value silence and stillness in your spiritual practice? And would you be willing to invest more time in the silence? And to spend enough time that you enter that process of surrendering to the silence so that something new could be born in you.

The last thing to rise is to **BRING FORTH OUR BEST**. How many people know that there is a better version of you? A happier version; a more loving version; a more positive version; a more successful version still in you that you haven't fully expressed? How many people would agree with that? We all would!

The Prodigal Son squandered and made mistakes, exercised bad judgement. He was lost; he felt disconnected. You know, he was not living his best life. He was not living his best self. And then Scripture says, *"And then he came to himself."* And then he came to himself! And he was able to rise up and go back to the father.

And so, to me, that is in all of us. We're not always living our best. But we need to come to ourselves and realize, *"I'm more than this. God has called me to do more and be more, and to express more than this!"* And to make the choice to let that which is within us rise up and come forth and be expressed and be brought to live in our lives.

The Gospel of Thomas says:

"If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you."

Anybody remember that old book by Og Mandino called *The Greatest Miracle in the World*? Anybody? A few people recognize it. What he called the greatest miracle in the world is what he called returning from the living dead. He said, *"Just because you're breathing doesn't mean you're living!"* [Congregation titters] Just because you are walking around doesn't mean ... you're only existing; you're not really living.

Sometimes we have areas in our lives where we just get stuck. Where we feel like we're stagnant; where things are just not progressing. Where we're discontent and we just don't know what to do. And the truth is: the greatest miracle is for us to rise and resurrect that aspect of us and bring it to life! Bring it into full expression!

So I ask you: What in you needs to and is calling to be awakened and to come alive? What in you is calling to be healed and transformed and changed? What in you wants to rise up? If you were to embody one quality that would absolutely change yourself, your life and how you showed up, what would that one quality be? That just shifting it and bringing it to life would change you and your life?

How many people ever heard of Leonard Kim? I hadn't, either. [Congregation laughs] But I read about him and I was inspired! Young man: he was kind of struggling. Grew up with his grandparents; he didn't grow up with his parents. And when his grandfather died, he was just devastated. And he got so ornery that his grandma kicked him out, and he had to go live with his mom. And that didn't go well. And he's practically homeless, and he's just struggling. He's selling shoes; selling cars. And he kind of survives, but he's just not happy.

And then he starts finding a little bit of success and he kind of has everything he wants in that moment: making six figures; doing well. But he is just not happy. He always feels like he needs more. Always feels like it's never enough. Always feels like he's not good enough. And he keeps chasing this.

Finally, he breaks his ankle, and it just grounds him for a bit. And he has to have a real look at himself, and really look at where his life is and why it's that way. And he realized it was that way because of him: the way he was living; what he was thinking and believing. And he kept putting on this air of success and trying to pretend.

And so what he started doing was writing a blog about success and his struggles for success. And so he started writing all these things about what it's like to go from failure to failure and different work plans; or depression; family issues. I mean, he wrote everything around the "humanness" of being in business. And within six months, there were two million people following his blog. Within a year-and-a-half, 10 million people following his blog! His career started taking off!

And the reason is: He realized he kept chasing and pretending and doing things to impress, and feeling like it was never enough. And he realized what he needed to do was just be himself. And to work and have a plan, but be true to himself. Be honest with himself. Be more present and here, and *not* "Where am I going to be in three years and five years?" And it absolutely changed him.

And so his type of branding and marketing is teaching people to brand themselves authentically. To not buy into what everybody says or even what you think success is, but be true to yourself, and then success will come ... whatever version that is. You're more likely to be happier and fulfilled if you're true and honest to yourself. He wrote a book called *Ditch the Act: Revealing the Surprising Power of the Real You for Greater Success*.

And so, to bring forth the best in us is to be true and honest and authentic with ourselves, and to bring forth whatever version of talent and ability and things that bring us joy. That will change our lives! That will transform us! And that will help us rise to the very best of who God sent us here to be.

Easter is a beautiful season. It's miraculous; it's exciting; it is joyful! As we celebrate the risen Christ -- as we celebrate the Resurrection -- let us also remember that it is calling for us to bring forth the best in ourselves. To fulfill the potential of our humanity and our spirituality.

And the way to do that is to die to the old: to those old mindsets. Die to it so you can be born into something new and greater. Surrender to the silence: spend time in the silence, and long enough so that you can surrender to create an environment for something miraculous to happen through you. And finally, bring forth your best. Be the most authentic, honest version of yourself, and that will bring you the greatest success in the world.

The final practice to prepare ourselves for a breakthrough is to RISE!

God bless you all!

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