

“What is the Message of Easter?”

John 20:1-18

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What makes a story great? No doubt we would answer that question in a variety of ways based upon our personal tastes. For me, a good story is steeped in emotion and has some unexpected twists and turns. Stories like those make a lasting impression upon me. Perhaps this is why I love the Easter story. It is packed with emotion and has several surprises.

Evidently, others have felt the same way because it has been labeled, “The Greatest Story Ever Told.” I cannot imagine a better one. Let me share the story with you again and the message behind this great story.

Jesus was crucified on a Friday. Because the Sabbath was quickly approaching, his body was hurriedly prepared for burial and placed in a cave with a stone over the entrance. Soldiers were stationed at the entrance to the tomb to prevent anyone from tampering with the corpse.

Early on Sunday morning, some women made their way to the tomb for the purpose of finishing the burial process. His body was so quickly taken off the cross and prepared for burial that some of his followers felt that he was not given a proper burial. They went to complete that process.

Upon arriving at the tomb, the women were met by an angel that told them that Jesus was not there but that he had risen. They returned to the eleven disciples and reported what they had seen and heard. Peter and John ran to the tomb and found it just as the women had said. Jesus’ burial clothes were there but he was not.

Mary remained at the tomb even after the disciples left. In this atmosphere of fear and confusion, the unexpected occurred. Jesus appeared and told her to go tell the disciples that she had seen and talked to him. She wasted no time in going back and telling them the good news. That very night, Jesus appeared to the disciples and validated all that Mary told them. He was alive and had conquered man’s greatest enemies, sin and death.

This is the Easter story that has been repeated for two thousand years. I never get tired of hearing it or telling it. It truly is the “Greatest Story Ever Told.”

What, however, is the message of Easter. The story doesn’t always tell the message. That must be determined after much thought and prayer.

The message of Easter is this. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we can live with power and die with hope.

Easter is about overcoming. It is about love overcoming hate, light overcoming dark, grace overcoming the Law, truth overcoming deception, courage overcoming fear, God overcoming Satan, and life overcoming death. Easter is about overcoming anything negative, destructive and unhealthy. It is about overcoming adversity, temptations and challenges.

Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf, once said, “Life is about suffering and the overcoming of it.” She knew this first hand, didn’t she?

What do you need to overcome today? What are you struggling with that is dragging you down and hurting you? Is it an addiction, guilt, fear, grief, bitterness, an inferiority complex, heavy debt, poor attitude, excessive weight or an abusive relationship? The message of Easter says there is hope. It says with God's help, you can overcome it. I certainly hope you will by acknowledging your need and asking for His help.

Each year, I enjoy reading about the players in the NCAA Tournament. I especially enjoyed an article about Juan Dixon, the best player Maryland has ever had and this year's ACC Player of the Year. By the time Dixon was seventeen, both his parents, habitual drug users, had died of AIDS. He could have easily rolled in self-pity and traveled down the same road they did. Living in a rough area of Baltimore, he certainly had plenty of opportunities to become a drug addict and school drop out. Instead, he overcame his parents' influence and environment to become one of college's best ball players. As a matter of fact, he is the only player in NCAA history with 2,000 points, 300 steals and 200 successful three-pointers.

"If you love college basketball, how can you not love Juan Dixon?" Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said earlier this season. "He is a special person and player."

That's the message of Easter! Easter is about overcoming incredible odds to be everything God intended for you to be when He created you.

The message of Easter does not end there, though. It is also about dying and living again. Easter does not deny the reality of death but neither does it end the story at the cross or the sealed tomb. Actually, the Easter story has no end. The empty tomb begins another chapter that is still being written and we are now a part of the story.

Easter says that death will not have the final word in our life, God will. Furthermore, that word will be a good one. Not only will a believer live again, but the quality of life will exceed anything ever known or imagined.

I have always been intrigued by the way John described heaven to his readers. He did it by telling them what heaven was not. "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven adorned as a bride for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men and he will live with them. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' " Revelation 21:1-4.

Can you imagine life without pain, tears, disappointments and struggles? Can you imagine life without sorrow and separation from family and friends? Actually, it is beyond comprehension. On this side, we must live by faith and trust God to bring it about. I do because Easter assures me that I can die with hope. I pray you have that kind of faith, too.

As beautiful as the Easter story is the message of Easter is even lovelier. How wonderful to know that I can live with power and die with hope. No wonder the Gospel is called the Good News. I don't believe I can think of any better.