

The Story Series
Week 27: The Resurrection
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It's a tad odd, I would admit, that I have scheduled an Easter celebration three weeks before the beginning of Lent. It seems like I have put the cart before the horse. For the last six weeks we have been reliving the life story of Jesus Christ in chronological order. In order to do that, you have to talk about the cross and Christ's sacrificial death on our behalf. That was our focus last week.

And in order to be true to the Bible story, we can't leave Jesus on the cross. We can't even leave him in the tomb, because that's not what happened. We heard the Good News proclaimed once again in the video and in the Scriptures. On the third day, God raised Jesus from the dead, conquering the powers of sin and death. God has the last word in the Bible story, and the last word is LIFE.

Such Good News is worth celebrating not just on Easter Sunday – not just one Sunday out of the year – but it's worth celebrating every day of our lives. The early church fathers had that figured out. During the Sundays in Lent, when the focus is upon Christ's death and suffering, the church fathers knew that Lenten Sundays still must be mini-celebrations of the resurrection – the day the Lord rose from the grave. And so they didn't count Sundays in Lent as part of the 40-day period of repentance and prayer.

True, today is not Easter Sunday, but knowing that we gather on the day of the week that Christ was raised, it is right – indeed, our duty and our joy – to celebrate Christ's victory over everything that separates us from God. This ordinary Sunday in February should still be filled with celebration and hope, knowing that our lives have been claimed and redeemed by One who is more powerful than anything else in this world.

St. Paul in the book of Romans proclaims it so boldly: "For I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." Paul can boldly say such a thing because Christ has conquered our greatest enemy: death itself. If Christ has overcome that one, ultimate thing that has the ability to separate us from God – namely death – then what have we to fear? If God is for us, who or what can ever be against us? Since God did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't God also give us everything else? (*Romans 8:31-32*)

The first disciples of Jesus weren't as certain as Paul was. In fact, in the Bible story, if you take a look at what's going on Saturday – the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday – the disciples are having a kind of a melt-down. As Jesus hangs on the cross, the disciples scatter out of fear that they would be next. Then we discover that the disciples have found a secret hide-out. And they have locked the door and only whisper so that no one on the outside will discover their location. There was no courage, no hope, no joy. None of the

disciples were asking one another, “So what are you going to say to Jesus when *you* see him tomorrow?” No, they saw Jesus die with their own eyes. All hope was lost. Jesus was gone.

You would think that one of the disciples would have remembered Jesus promising that he would rise from the dead on the third day. Jesus says it over and over again. “I will be betrayed into the hands of my enemies. I will be killed, but three days later I will rise from the dead.” (*Mark 9:31*) Count on it, Jesus says. Be on the look out for me.

But let’s not be too hard on the disciples. Who can blame them? No one after being dead for three days comes back to life. That’s not the way life works. Dead is dead. That is, unless you’re Jesus, the One sent by God to overcome sin and death – the two things which separate us from God, our Father.

But the disciples of Jesus just couldn’t see it. They were stuck on Saturday: stuck on all the suffering, stuck on all the problems of everyday life. They were unable to see the glorious, life-giving things that God was doing in their midst.

Does your life ever feel like you are stuck on Saturday? Like nothing is going right? Anything good is hard to come by? Yeah, we can relate to those first disciples, can’t we? At times it is terribly difficult to muster up anything that resembles courage, hope, or joy. Life is difficult.

The Good News about the resurrection of Jesus is all of that stuff of life that pulls us down will not have the final say in our lives. God is stronger than all of that stuff. God is more powerful than anything that grabs hold of us and attempts to pull us down. God refuses to leave us stuck on Saturday, because God has something incredible waiting for us on Sunday morning.

Anything that weighs us down, anything that makes us question our worth or our significance, anything that zaps our hope for a better tomorrow is overcome as the Risen Christ emerges from the tomb of death.

Easter offers a promise to every believer. The burdens and afflictions of this world are not a dead end. There is an exit ramp, one that will lead us to a highway that leads to heaven, to that place where the goodness and glory of God reign eternal. This is why all of the Easter hymns that we sing this day are so full of joy. They invite us into that place where all of the promises of God are fully realized. That place where sin and death no longer have any bearing on our life. That place where “Alleluia” (a word that means “Praise God”) echoes everywhere. That place where God intended us to be all along – walking side by side with God in Paradise.

As the old hymn puts it, “This world is not my home; I’m just a-passin’ through. My treasures are laid up somewhere beyond the blue...” Or as St. Paul expresses it in the 8th chapter of Romans: “With eager hope, we look forward to the day when we will join all of God’s children in glorious freedom from death and decay.” (*Romans 8:21*)

Because Christ has been raised from the dead, we can face life and death unafraid. Because we have been claimed by Christ in the waters of Holy Baptism, we have nothing to fear. For God is watching over us, providing and protecting us each and every moment of our lives. Bad things will come, yes, but they will not have the last word.

Through Christ's resurrection, God moves us from a Saturday mentality to a Sunday reality. God transports us from Saturday (where death defeats life) to Sunday (where life defeats death). God invites us into the tomb of Jesus to remind us that Christ is not there. And because Christ is not there, everything has now changed. This transformation is seen so clearly in the Easter story of Mary Magdalene.

Listen to the story once again: Mary was standing outside the tomb crying, and as she wept, she stooped and looked in. She saw two white-robed angels sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying. "Dear woman, why are you crying?" the angels asks her. "Because they have taken away my Lord," she replies, "and I don't know where they have put him."

Mary is stuck on Saturday. She cannot see beyond her despair and grief. She cannot sense the power of God at work in her midst. She turns to leave and sees a man standing in front of her. It is Jesus, but Mary doesn't recognize him. She assumes he is the gardener and says, "Sir, show me where you have put the body of Jesus and I will go and get him." Mary is stuck on Saturday. Jesus stands right in front of her and she still can't see it.

I wonder how many times in our lives God shows up in whatever shape or form, and we don't recognize God's presence? We miss the miracle of what God is doing in our midst. We make ourselves believe that God is not powerful enough or concerned enough to enter into our misery. And yet, all the while, God is there.

Mary doesn't recognize Jesus until he speaks her name. "Mary!" Jesus says. At that, Mary is instantly transported from Saturday to Sunday, from her own conflicted world into the presence and peace of God. Mary finally senses what God is up to, and all of her problems, which seemed so overpowering, simply melted away.

I know so many of you are going through difficult times right now. Declining health, devastating results from medical tests, financial and unemployment issues, loved ones going through difficult times, feelings of loneliness and despair, regret and grief. For so many, the world seems to be closing in on you. That which weighs us down seems so overwhelming, so final. We get stuck on Saturday. Sunday never seems to come.

We should ask, "What does Jesus do during such times in our lives?" What did Jesus do for Mary Magdalene when she was stuck on Saturday? Jesus came and stood before her, calls her by name, and asks, "Woman, why are you crying?" Jesus is not upset that Mary is crying, he just doesn't understand why. It's very tender language. Why are you crying? Talk to me about what is going on.

Jesus is ever-patient, ever-caring, ever-present. Not just with Mary Magdalene, but with us as well. Jesus comes to us, calls us by name and asks, "Why are you crying? Talk to me about what is going on." Jesus' greatest desire is to transport us from Saturday to Sunday, to take away all of that grief and despair that has made its home in our heart, and to replace it with the peace of God that passes all understanding.

The good news about the resurrection of Jesus is all of that stuff of life that pulls us down will not have the final say in our lives. God is stronger than all of that stuff. God is more powerful than anything that grabs hold of us and attempts to pull us down. God refuses to leave us stuck on Saturday, because God has something incredible waiting for us on Sunday morning. The illnesses of our lives will not have the last say. Our dysfunction will not end up defining us. Death will not win.

Jesus comes to us this day and reminds us that Saturdays are always followed by Sundays. Or as the Psalmist puts it, "Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning." God will make sure of it. God has guaranteed it by raising Christ from the dead. That's the good news of Easter. Christ has triumphed over anything that seeks to destroy us. God wins.

God has transported the world – indeed our very lives – from Saturday's sadness to Sunday celebration. We've been transported from a world of sin and death into the reality of hope and eternal life. It is finished, Christ declares. A new day dawns. Life will never be the same. And neither will death.

It's indeed Good News. Alleluia! Amen.