

THE ANSWER IS EASTER

A School teacher asked her class on the Sunday before Easter if they knew what happened on Easter and why it was so important. One little girl spoke up saying: "Easter is when the whole family gets together, and you eat turkey and sing about the pilgrims and all that." "No, that's not it," said the teacher. "I know what Easter is," a second student responded. "Easter is when you get a tree and decorate it and give gifts to everybody and sing lots of songs." "Nope, that's not it either," replied the teacher. Finally a third student spoke up, "Easter is when Jesus was killed, and put in a tomb and left for three days." "Ah, thank goodness somebody knows" the teacher thought to herself. But then the student went on: "Then everybody gathers at the tomb and waits to see if Jesus comes out, and if he sees his shadow he has to go back inside and we have six more weeks of winter." Some of us have some strange ideas about Easter. What does the Bible have to say about it? What is Easter really all about?

1 Peter 2:21-25 To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 22 He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. 23 When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

What is Easter all about? Jesus' death, burial and resurrection happened over three days. Friday was the day of pain and suffering and agony. Saturday was the day of loss and grief and confusion. Sunday was the day of joy, celebration and victory.

So let's look this morning at the three days – His death, burial and resurrection as a model for how you can go through the toughest days of your life.

1. The Day of Pain – people and presence of God

We begin with the day of pain. Friday was the day of pain. First he experienced physical pain. The Bible tells us that he was beaten. He was beaten, had thorns stuck into his skull and He was scourged. If you have seen the movie *The Passion of the Christ* you understand that scourging is different than just a whipping. The bits of bone and sharp metal would tear at your back to pieces. Even before the cross He was almost dead, to the extent he could not even carry his own cross. Then He was crucified. Crucifixion is death by suffocation. That's why they would often break the bones of your legs so you couldn't stand up anymore and you couldn't breathe anymore.

Jesus experienced the ultimate in physical pain. But he also experienced emotional pain. Crucifixion was a humiliating death. You were stripped naked and then left to die while everyone watched. People were hurling insults. Those He loved had run away. Peter had disowned Him. Judas had betrayed Him.

But then there was still another level of pain that none of us have ever experienced to his degree. That is spiritual pain. On the cross Jesus took on the sins of mankind. Every ugly, evil crime and sin throughout history, all that guilt on him. He went through the hell of separation from God when he cries out on the cross "My God! My God! Why have you forsaken me?"

One thing you can be certain about Jesus is this: He understands pain. He understands every pain you and I go through and he sympathizes with it. So what do you do in your days of pain? You do the two things that Jesus did just before He died.

Number one, you lean on the People of God. To prepare Himself for the cross, that is what He did. Knowing the pain of His arrest, torture and execution, He gathered his closest friends together and said, I need you guys to just hang out with me. He did not need a sermon or speech or advice. He just wanted His friends to be with Him.

Matthew 26:36-38 Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." 37 He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. 38 Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me."

This is the ministry of presence. Jesus went to his favorite spot to pray, a garden called Gethsemane. It was an olive grove on the nearby Mount of Olives. He went to the Olive Garden – not the restaurant, the place. It is funny, if you go to the Olive Garden website they have a slogan, "It's family that supports us and grounds us in what truly matters. That's why at Olive Garden, we're all family here." He took with Him His closest friends.

In His greatest hour of need, Jesus turned to others for help. Unfortunately often that is the exact opposite of what we normally do. Often when people are in pain they isolate themselves. During times of physical or emotional pain they pull away from people. That is dumb! It is a mistake to pull back from your friends in your pain. God never meant for you to go through life on your own. He meant for others to share your pain with you.

Another thing that Jesus did was that He was honest about His pain. He said "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death..." He doesn't sugar coat it. How are you doing? I'm doing fine. No. He tells them exactly how he feels.

During times of pain lean on community, don't isolate yourself and be honest about your feelings.

Galatians 6:2 Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.

What is the law of Christ? Love your neighbor as yourself. The Bible says that I am commanded by God to be there for you when you're in pain. And you are commanded to be there for me when I'm in pain. We are to carry each other's burdens and that way the load is shared. You never were meant to go through life on your own.

A gentleman was in front of a preacher coming out of the church one day. The preacher grabbed him by the hand and said to him, "You need to join the Army of the Lord!" The man replied, "I'm already in the Army of the Lord, Pastor." The Pastor questioned, "How come I don't see you except at Christmas and Easter?" He whispered back, "I'm in the secret service."

How do you do that? First you reach out to your friends. Are you part of a local church? And if you are, are you in a small group? If not, I worry about you as your pastor. Because you don't have the safety net that's going to carry you when the rogue wind comes along in life. Who's going to help you out when you have the tragedy? Who's going to be there for you? Start by reaching out to friends. Just like Jesus did.

Second, it is not just the *people of God* but also the *presence of God*. The reality is that we are all flawed, sinful weak people. Friends can fail you. Friends get tired; God never will. When Jesus was in the garden in his hour of deepest need His friends fell asleep. At least they were there. At least they showed up. But friends cannot be there all the time. But God never gets tired. So the second thing you need to do when you're in the Fridays of life, the days of pain, is you reach out to God. You don't just reach out to your friends. You also reach out to God.

How do you do that? You do what Jesus did. You pray.

Mark 14:35-36 Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. 36 Abba, Father, he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."

When you are in your worst day of pain and you need to talk to God about it, you don't use fancy language. Just say Abba... You don't have to use deep theological terms. Just pray Daddy - help! Jesus prayed three things in his day of deepest pain. These are things we need to pray as well. This is the Gethsemane Prayer. It is a model of how to pray when you are in pain.

First you affirm God's power. You pray: God I know you can do anything. I know you can take away this pain. You created the universe. I know you can do anything. You affirm God's power.

Second you express your desire. Be honest with God. Say that you do not want this pain. It is OK to complain to God. David did it all the time in the book of Psalms. They're called psalms of lament. It's okay to say, "God this stinks. I don't like this. This is terrible. I don't like this pain I'm going through right now." It's okay to do that. Jesus did it. If it's okay for Jesus to do it it's certainly okay for you to do it. God! I don't like this pain I'm in right now and I know you can change it.

Then the third thing you do is you offer your trust. And you say, but I want your will not mine. So God if this is not your will, I don't want it. I know you love me. I know you know what's best for me. I know you know what will make me happy more than I do. I know, God, that you're in control and there's no way that you don't love me. So I want your will not mine.

W. E. Sangster was a well known pastor in England in the 1940s and 1950s. When he was serving as the head of the Missions Department for the Methodist church, he began to notice some uneasiness in his throat and a dragging in his leg. When he went to the doctor, he found that he had an incurable disease that caused progressive muscular atrophy. His muscles would gradually waste away, his voice would fail, his throat would soon become unable to swallow. He threw himself into his work, leading prayer meetings throughout England and writing books. Gradually his legs became useless and he lost his voice. But he could still hold a pen. On Easter morning, just a few weeks before he died, he wrote a letter to his daughter. In it, he said, "It is terrible to wake up on Easter morning and have no voice to shout, 'He is risen!' -but it would be still more terrible to have a voice and not want to shout."

What do you do in your times of pain, lean on God's people and God's presence.

2. The Day of Confusion – the promises of God

Next we come to the second day, which are the Saturday's of life. They are days of doubt and confusion. Imagine how the disciples felt when they saw Jesus crucified. They thought He was going to get rid of the Romans, they thought He was going to establish an earthly kingdom. What happened?

We saw him heal the sick. We saw him give sight to the blind. We saw him raise the dead. We saw him walk on water. We saw him do everything.

Jesus could have come off that cross at any moment. It was not nails that held Jesus to the cross. It was love. It was his love for you that kept Him there. It's what he came to do. He said "For this cause I came into the world."

Imagine the confusion. There is grief and guilt. Probably also a lot of fear. Have you ever felt that way? Everything in life seems to be on track but then something happens that shatters your entire world. You lose your job. Your marriage falls apart. Your spouse dies. In a moment everything changes and it leaves you confused, doubting and fearful.

There are so many causes for the Saturdays of life. The days of doubt and confusion. The days of loss and grief. Jesus knew that the disciples would go through this.

Matthew 26:31 Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: " 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

Later in that same chapter we see that is exactly what happened.

Matthew 26:56 ... Then all the disciples deserted him and fled.

What do you do when you go through the Saturdays of life? You remember the promises of God. Never doubt in the dark what God has shown you in the light. You are going to go through dark days, days when it seems so dark that it is hard to see ahead of you one foot. What do you do? You remember the light.

John 16:20-22 I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. 21 A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. 22 So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.

Has anyone here ever given birth. It was not fun was it? You go through a lot of pain. At the moment of birth, I am sure that you were thinking NEVER AGAIN! But then you see that little baby and you experience all the joy that it brings, and after a while you start thinking "well, maybe one more..."

The promise God gives us here is that no matter what you go through in life, one day that pain will be replaced with joy. There are times that we will experience that joy on earth, but ultimately we will have eternal joy in heaven.

Rom 8:18 I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed.

Mother Teresa worked with the poorest of the poor in the slums of Calcutta India. She faced death and injustice on a daily basis and experienced suffering in a way that probably none of will. She once wrote "In light of heaven, the worst suffering on earth, a life full of the most atrocious tortures on the planet, will be seen to be no more serious than one night in an inconvenient hotel".

I don't know what you're going through right now but I do know this. You need to know and claim the promises of God. In the Bible there are over seven thousand promises of God to you. The way you get through the days of confusion and doubt is you hang on to the promises of God. Maybe you are facing difficult days right now. Let me just remind you of this promise;

Isaiah 61:1-3 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, 2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, 3 and provide for those who grieve in Zion-- to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

But how can we know that the promises of God are true? The Date for Easter moves around each year. This year 2018 (and again 2029) it will land right on April 1st --April Fool's Day. A lot of us have played April Fool's jokes on others, or have had these jokes played on us. But what if history's worst joke turned out to be that we were counting on a salvation that didn't exist?

1 Corinthians 15:16-22 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. 20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

If the dead aren't raised, then neither is Christ.

If Christ isn't raised, then we are still in sin.

If we die in sin, then we are lost.

If we are lost, then we are to be pitied because we have believed a lie.

Fortunately, Jesus DID die for our sins. The empty tomb proves it. Jesus is alive. The bible is true. The Good New is that,

Christ is risen from the dead. (v. 20)

Our resurrection comes through Him. (v. 21)

We are made alive in Him. (v. 22)

The world is full of religions whose spiritual leaders have all died and are now buried. Only Christianity follows a Messiah who left behind an empty tomb. Our Savior Lives! So, rather than being victims of a terrible joke, we are blessed with a living Lord, who now offers that same resurrection and eternal life to each one of us.

3. The Day of Joy – the power of God

How do you get through days of pain and confusion? You need a Savior. The only way you're going to get through life and experience joy and victory is through Savior, because you can't resurrect yourself. Sorry. You don't have that power. You need to turn to him. There was no other way.

I want you to listen very closely. I'm going to summarize everything I've shared with you.

To get through the worst days of your life you have to lean on the *people* and *presence* of God, you have to remember the *promises* of God, but then you have to rely on the *power* of God. A few weeks ago we looked at the story of Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead and we read these words;

John 11:25-26 Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; 26 and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"

Do you believe this? Do you believe that Jesus gives eternal and abundant life? How do we know that the promises of God are true. His resurrection proves it. But how do we know that the resurrection of Jesus is true. We have experienced His power.

The same power that raised Jesus from the dead is available to you on a daily basis. The miracle of the resurrection reminds us that God is a miracle working God. If God can raise a dead body, he can raise a dead marriage. If God can raise a dead body, he can raise a dead career. If God can raise a dead body, he can raise a dead relationship. He can do anything. And God still does miracles today.

A few weeks ago Naomi and I saw the movie I can Almost Imagine. It is the true life story of Bart Millard, the lead singer of the Christian music group Mercy Me. It tells the story of how his mother left him at an early age. His father was a monster. He was a mean abusive drunk. However, God got a hold of him and changed his life. He went from being a horrible person to a changed man, so that Bart Millard wrote the song I Can Only Imagine for his father after he died, because he knew that he had been saved and that he was in heaven.

As a pastor, I have seen this so many times. I have seen the power of God transform lives, including my own. How do I know that the bible is true. How do I know that Jesus rose from the dead. How do I know that Jesus is here in this place with us this morning. Because his resurrection power is here. There are hundreds who could stand and testify to that fact this morning.

How about you? Have you experienced the resurrection power of Jesus in your life yet. Maybe you have not because you have never received Jesus into your life. We're going to end with a life changing prayer. This is a verse in the Bible.

Romans 10:9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.

If you confess with your mouth. That means you make Jesus the Lord of your life, that means He is in charge. You give your life over to Him. If you believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, that's what Easter is all about. You need to accept and believe that Jesus is who He said He is. If you do that then it says you WILL be saved.

When Nikita Khrushchev died in 1971 the Communist party who had removed him from power were against the idea of burying his body on Soviet soil. So they called then President of the United States, Richard Nixon, asking if the U.S. would take his body. Nixon had his own problems at the time and declined. Then the Soviet leaders tried the Prime Minister of Israel. She was agreeable but added, "I must warn you that this country has the world's highest resurrection rate." We may laugh but the events of Easter and the Resurrection give us hope!