

"Extreme Makeover: Life Edition,"

27 March 2005
(Easter)

Bible passages:

Luke 24:1-12 (*The Message*)

At the crack of dawn on Sunday, the women came to the tomb carrying the burial spices that had prepared. They found the entrance stone rolled back from the tomb, so they walked in. But once inside, they couldn't find the body of the Master Jesus.

They were puzzled, wondering what to make of this. Then, out of nowhere it seemed, two men, light cascading over them, stood there. The women were awestruck, and bowed down in worship. The men said, "Why are you looking for the Living One in a cemetery? He is not here, but raised up. Remember how he told you when you were still back in Galilee that he had to be handed over to sinners, be killed on a cross, and in three days rise up?" Then they remembered Jesus' words.

They left the tomb and broke the news of all this to the Eleven and the rest. Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them kept telling these things to the apostles, but the apostles didn't believe a word of it, thought they were making it all up.

But Peter jumped to his feet and ran to the tomb. He stooped to look in and saw a few grave clothes, and that's all. He walked away puzzled, shaking his head.

John 20:19 (*The Message*)

Later on that day, the disciples had gathered together, but, fearful of the authorities, had locked all the doors in the house. Jesus entered, stood among them, and said, "Peace to you."

Acts 4:13-14, 31 (*The Message*)

They (everyone at the court hearing) couldn't take their eyes off them—Peter and John standing there so confident, so sure of themselves. Their fascination deepened when they realized these two were laymen with no training in Scripture or formal education. They recognized them as companions of Jesus, but with the man right before them, seeing him standing there so upright—so healed!—what could they say against that?

While they were praying, the place where they were meeting trembled and shook. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak God's Word with fearless confidence.

I don't know if any of you ever watch some of the reality shows on TV. Apparently, a show called "Extreme Makeover" is one of them. I've only seen bits and pieces of the show, but what I've seen is a home that's badly in need of repair. Typically, the home is owned by someone who's not able to do those repairs themselves, so a whole team of folks invade for a week or so, send the owners away in an RV for a defined period of time, and they go to work. They tear down walls, rip up flooring, re-do the entire house and add all the exterior trimmings like flowers and shrubbery. It's always a rather powerful moment when the family returns to the home, and sees everything that's been done. They're teary-eyed, awed, and overwhelmed, It's as though they have been given a whole new lease on life.

In a very real sense, that's what Easter is all about. It's an "Extreme Makeover: Life Edition." Although we don't totally understand all that happened on that first Easter morning, it's clear that something significant occurred that radically transformed those who were closest to Jesus, and that life-changing power continues to transform us today.

While there is conflicting information in the Bible about what the followers of Jesus experienced after his death, we know from history that something within each of them changed. In our Bible passages, we have snapshots of this band of faithful followers.

The first story you heard about was the version we find in the Gospel of Luke. Now Luke is thought to have been a physician, and he was the only non-Jewish writer in the collection of writings we call the New Testament. In this story, it is the women who go to the tomb to care for the body of Jesus. That was very much in the tradition of the day, but when they arrived, the body was nowhere to be found. Instead, they encountered two men, or so it's described, who tell them not to look for the living among the dead. They run to tell their friends, and in this story, Peter runs to the tomb, sees what they have told him, and walks away. We're told that he walked away puzzled, shaking his head. In other words, he doesn't quite know what to do with this new information.

Our next scene is of the disciples hiding out. Apparently, after the arrest, trial and execution of Jesus, they were scared to death! It's clear that they thought they, too, would be subject to arrest, and might meet the same fate. They were hovering together, which is a good thing, seeking solace, and keeping a low profile for fear of being found out.

It's when they were together behind locked doors that they experienced the powerful presence of their friend Jesus in their midst. According to our version of the Bible, Jesus said, "Peace to you." He wanted for them to find peace and comfort in the midst of their grieving and confusion. The sense of his presence seemed to assure them that all was not lost, that the darkness had turned to light, that hope had replaced despair, that life had triumphed over death.

Because of that and other significant experiences of the presence of Jesus among them, these disciples were changed radically. Now remember, they were uneducated, unsophisticated, and actually a rather motley crew of folks, but instead of hiding away in fear and trembling, they began to speak out more boldly. They felt inspiration they had never dreamed of feeling.

In our last Bible passage, we discover that they had gotten into the healing business, and wound up being arrested and spending a night in jail. There's no mention of fear that now, they too, would meet the fate of Jesus. No, when they came to their court hearing, everyone who was anyone was there, and they were amazed to realize that these two—Peter and John—were companions of Jesus and were acting boldly in his name. After their release, they joined the others and once again, experienced the power of God's Spirit lifting them to new heights. We're told that they went on to speak God's word with fearless confidence.

Those disciples were transformed people, and they were transformed by the power of a loving God who would not, who did not, leave or fail them in their time of need. They were changed inside and out. In a sense, when they had once been running away, they now stopped, turned around, and ran toward God.

*For years now, I have really appreciated a book entitled *The Easter Moment* by Bishop John Shelby Spong. In that book, he talks about the reality of the transformation of the disciples that turned them from cowards*

hiding away to spokespersons for the faith that has spread throughout the earth. Spong says this: **"I see God when I look at Jesus. But more than that, I see what life can be beyond our brokenness, our fragmentation, our ego needs, our defense systems, our security barriers."** He continues by saying that meeting God through the person of Jesus causes him to glimpse a vision of a whole humanity (in his words) **"calling me to risk my own security by entering life..."** Spong concludes with these words: **"When the depth of a relationship is experienced, when true community is found, the same transforming, transcending reality touches life and calls each of us to grasp a new being."** We become new people, totally transformed and changed by the power of God's love.

I suppose it would be easy enough for us to hear the Easter story today and think, "Well, that was then and this is now. We're much more astute and know the ways of the world. They were naïve fishermen; what did they know?" Yes, that was then, and this is now, but the reality of God's love is still here.

Easter isn't just one day of the year; the power of Easter is an everyday opportunity. God's love reaches toward every one of us every moment; we have only to stop running away, and turn around toward that love, and it can and will encompass us, and fill us completely. Then we are changed; we are transformed.

*Len Sweet wrote about transformation, saying **"To be transformed is to live inside out."** His point is that God reworks us from the inside out, and that is truly what metamorphosis or transformation is all about. And trust me—when we are transformed and live inside out, everything changes. It is a total and complete transforming experience, and we discover the courage to live in a way we never believed possible.*

I can't think about the power of transformation without thinking about a story I heard about two caterpillars that were crawling across the grass when a butterfly flew over them. They looked up and watched it, then one of them nudged the other and said, "You couldn't get me up in one of those things for a million dollars." That's sort of the way I picture the followers of Jesus, and some of us, too, before experiencing true transformation. We are often filled with fear and unable to move.

*But then there's something else I think of when I think of caterpillars and transformation. It's not anything I remember from science class, although it probably should be. It is something I know because of a little book that I used to read to our daughter when she was little—a book that tells the story of metamorphosis. It was called *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, written by Eric Carle.*

The story begins with a little egg that lay on a leaf. Once the sun came out, out popped a tiny and very hungry caterpillar. The caterpillar immediately went on a search for food, and he got into an eating frenzy. He indulged in everything he could find: an apple, pears, plums, strawberries, oranges. Then he moved on to chocolate cake, ice cream, a pickle, cheese and a myriad of other things. He ate so much that he had a horrible stomach ache. The next morning, after he had been eating non-stop for a whole week, he ate through a nice green leaf, and felt much better.

Now he was no longer hungry, and he wasn't a tiny little caterpillar any more either! He was a big, fat one. He built a cocoon-like pod (that I'm told is actually called a chrysalis) around himself, and he stayed inside for more than two weeks. Then he nibbled a hole in the cocoon and pushed his way out. And when he exited, he wasn't the caterpillar he had once been. He had been transformed; he was now a beautiful butterfly who could indeed fly!

That's why the butterfly has long been a symbol of a transformed life, of new life. It symbolizes the hope that Easter brings to you and to me. We don't have to hide away in fear and trembling; God's love can permeate every ounce of our being, and we are transformed into creatures more beautiful, more love-filled, stronger and more courageous, more faith-filled and faithful than we can even begin to imagine. We, too, can fly! We can live boldly! And that's Easter!

CLOSING:

*An unknown writer once said, **"What a caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls a butterfly."** What we may call death, God sees as life. When all we think of is what's missing in us, God sees all the possibilities. We, too, are being transformed by God's Easter love.*

Have a great Easter Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.