

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of life and love, today is the day. We welcome another beautiful Easter day to celebrate your life and love shown anew through the empty tomb. The empty tomb reveals your gospel of love and goodness to all the world, bar none, while showing that the focus is not on the tomb but on the Christ; the Lord is once again in the world, just as much today as he was in the past. He calls us now and always to be in ministry as the Body of Christ, moving and loving throughout the world.

On this day, Christ calls us at the end of this journey towards the beginning of another journey. We often feel that Easter is an ending, but Easter is another beginning. You remind us that Easter is the calling to move forward in new life as you so graciously give us. New life requires a death in our lives for that new life to take hold. Allow us to see where you call us to die. We have parts of our lives that need renewing, that need pruning, that need refreshing, for we often grow complacent and settled. Your calling is not a calling to remain the same but to grow and change to meet new challenges. Show us where to go and show us how to submit ourselves to where we need to die and be born anew, growing closer to you evermore. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of Life, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

OK, brace yourselves. I'm going to say the most absolutely disgusting, dirty word you can ever say in church. It may be difficult, but you have to hear it. OK, ready? Here it comes! Change. Whew. OK, it's over...really it is. I noticed you all shirked in your seats, but it's OK. It's all over now, friends.

In all seriousness, it's a scary thing to say. New. Change. Different. These can especially be bad things to say in a church. If I jumped out and said, "Hey everyone, we're gonna change something in worship!" I might get kicked out of town. But when we seriously think about change deep down, it is uncomfortable because we think it threatens our comfort, individually and communally. We think that we are going to lose the anchor that holds us to something. We think that what we have grown accustomed to may not be anymore. Those may be true but may be overblown. But change is necessary because it allows us to live into new life. We can talk all we want to about Jesus and the resurrection today in a pie-in-the-sky, wonderful way, but the resurrection is a wonderful work of God that requires work from us in return. It is not stagnant; the resurrection is not about the same thing over. We may say we celebrate it every year, but that's not to promote the same old thing time and time again; it's to give us another opportunity to discover what newness is about. Like a butterfly emerging from a cocoon, it's about some of the most dramatic change ever. It's about a new reality that seeps into earth, and even the disciples didn't want to believe it. They thought, "oh, those silly women," and went on with their lives as usual. Indeed, the resurrection was an ending, and, at the same time, a beginning. Let us celebrate today what it means to end, which means what it means to begin something anew.

There are four accounts of the resurrection from the four gospels, and each one says something unique about the first encounters with the resurrected Jesus. Today, we looked at Luke. We start off with many women, among them Mary Magdalene, Joanna, and Mary the mother of James, visiting the tomb to bring spices. Obviously, all does not go as planned. The stone is rolled away, and Jesus' body is gone. Two men in dazzling clothing,

the text says, appear beside them and recount Jesus's words to them that yes, these things would happen, and they remembered it. The disciples were a little more thickheaded and wouldn't believe it. "It seemed to them an idle tale," scripture says. At this time in history, they were probably dismissed as "foolish women," although they had seen something new and miraculous. Yet another case in the Bible where the women had it together and the men were behind the times. Perhaps at least Peter believed them or at least wanted to disprove what they were saying. He went to the tomb and found it just as empty as they did. Something new had happened, and nothing was the same anymore.

The empty tomb is a beacon of life and light; the resurrection opens new life to all people. In this story, the women had to encounter something new, as did the disciples. Any newness has to come with a loss, a death in a way. Christ had to die to what he was in order to fully attain what he was meant to be. The women who came to the tomb died to an old reality and lived something new, something better. The disciples, on the other hand, remained in the way they thought it should be, perhaps a comfort zone, and were later surprised when confronted with how things had changed. In the same way, we are faced with the same kind of reality. We have to leave behind some things as well to become more fully ourselves, who we were meant to be. Perhaps it's old perceptions; maybe it's old habits, but new life requires that some things die. That's not easy or comfortable. Sometimes we want to deny the possibilities of new life by resting on old arguments. In their day, it was "Jesus couldn't possibly have come back from the dead." That was comfortable. In our day, I've heard the same kind of denial time and time again: "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." That's nothing more than a cop-out. We just want to remain comfortable, and we'll twist our logic to fit that any way we can.

New life can be simple or dramatic. I've heard of some who take dying to old ways and coming back to new life a bit literally. There are actually several scientifically documented cases of people coming back to life after they were declared medically dead, called the Lazarus Syndrome. Obviously named after the bible story from John, this condition has been observed at least 25 times since 1982. Someone is given CPR and other life saving measures, but is declared dead after these fail. Soon after, the dead person seemingly resuscitates on his or her own. Many recover fully. I've read the cases of a 49-year-old woman who was literally dead for 45 minutes before breathing again on her own. A 61-year-old woman was given several shocks and shots but would not respond to treatment. She was later discovered in the morgue, breathing. She later sued the hospital where she was treated. Imagine being there at the time, seeing someone you thought dead actually sit up, fully alive. Could you believe it? Would you be able to stay awake or faint? No doubt, these people had new life in a way that we probably can't understand unless we've been there.

Put another more common way, one of the greatest rites of passage in life today is graduation. Whether it's graduating from high school, college, grad school, or even Kindergarten, graduation signals that one period of life is done, and the next has begun. Most importantly, graduation ceremonies mean gifts. Often this transition means new realizations, new ideas, new responsibilities. Graduations are, no question, a time of great rejoicing, but they are also a time of great reflection and reorientation. They are a push forward to grasp something new more than a reflection backward to what has been. We have to die to an old life and pick up a new one. High school is ended, and we either have to go into the workforce or accept the new privileges and responsibilities of a college student.

In a way, you die as a high school student and claim a new identity. I had to die to my life as a graduate student at Iliff before I could become a pastor. I will die to my life as a single person to get married. New life comes at a cost, but new life is ultimately more fulfilling.

New life always seems like a great idea, to get a fresh start. That emotion turns to us when we realize we must give up the old to claim the new. Scripture confirms it: "He is not here, but has risen!" is how the men at the tomb greeted the women looking for the body of Jesus. It was more than a redirection: it was a calling to go beyond the past and into the future. It requires that we do something to claim a new reality. New life is always a choice, and we choose whether to claim the many possibilities or remain in the old situation. We can look back, or we can look forward. Instead of looking ever-longingly in the tomb to see what is past, what is familiar, the calling is to look outwards into the risks and rewards of newness. In our lives, the tomb is confined, which makes it comfortable. We know all about the past, we know all about what has happened, we know how to navigate these things, so it's easier to live there. The greater world is much, much more difficult. You don't know what exactly is out there, you don't know what's gonna happen next, you just know that the familiar comfort is gone. But it's exciting. It's about looking forward to what we can become in the future. Something obvious changed, and nothing would ever be the same anymore.

We realize that today is the beginning of a kind of new life, just by virtue of the church calendar. We recognize the empty tomb. Today is the end of one journey, completing the season of Lent and Holy Week, and we come to the pinnacle of the Christian life. This is the end of those things, but it's never just the end. Easter is the time to find new life in all the ways it presents itself. We then die to the old understanding and look to

the possibilities of the future. Graduation is never celebrated as purely the end; it is celebrated as the gateway to a new status and place in life. We rest in the trust of resurrection after we pass, but resurrection is not just a far off, distant concept. The tomb is empty; he is not here. He is risen! Your waking up is a resurrection to a new day. Your coming and going brings new possibilities. Jesus' resurrection tells us that new life is here and to come, but we cannot forget what we do here in favor of what is to come. It's not a matter of "you can't teach an old dog new tricks." No matter where we are in life, Christ is calling us forth to new life; to die to old things and to live into new realities. The tomb is our comfort zone, but the tomb also means death. Going out from the tomb means life. How often are we continuing to look in the tomb? Which will we choose life in every moment that God presents new life? Amen and Amen.