

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, today is a new day. Today is a day you give us to make ourselves and our world a little better. We struggle with ourselves and our weaknesses, we struggle with the weaknesses of others, we do not focus on the positive. We focus on only what is wrong instead of everything that goes right. As a result, we find ourselves mired in negativity, dislike, and anger. We fume over insults and perceived insults for days, weeks, even months. We do not want to be people who move forward; we want to be people who live in the past more often than we realize. Forgive us our waywardness, Holy God, as we look into the empty tomb one more time and recognize all that this means for us.

The empty tomb is life. You call us forward through the empty tomb. Old bitterness is being put to bed. New possibilities and goodness await us. Indeed, we know that is the calling of Easter. We are called to be Easter people, Holy God. We are called to let the past be in the past, to grasp the new life you have given us, and to fully integrate joy into our lives. Let us move forward with these loving ideas in mind, gracious God, that you may be glorified and that we may lay aside the weights that hold us down on our journey to know you and follow you more fully each and every day. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord who lets the past be, who lived fully into new life, and who brought a new sense of joy, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray...

SERMON

After the solemnness of Lent and the ups and downs, well, mostly downs, of Holy Week, we sat through darkness for several days to find the new morning of Sunday with a twist. Jesus was dead. Very dead. He was in the tomb for three days, but when Christ's disciples came to the tomb on Sunday morning, it's empty. He is not dead; Christ is risen!

Some people tell us that we come to church on Sunday because it is the Sabbath. Sunday really is not the traditional Sabbath; that's Saturday. We meet on Sunday in the community of the Church because that was the day when Christ arose. We meet on Sunday because it is the most important day of the week for the Christian. One Sunday, Easter, is the pinnacle of the church year. This is the most important day of the Christian life. It's not about changing the paraments to white in the sanctuary or buying lilies. It's not about the grand meals we eat together. Christ is alive once again, and new life follows. I don't think I can adequately explain to you what a game-changer Easter is. This changes everything. Easter is newness. Easter means not only newness for Christ but that Christ has brought newness to us all. It means a new calling: to be Easter People. We do this through three places in our lives, for example. These are letting go of past mistakes, fully grasping new life, and focusing on joyfulness. Pay close attention, because there will be a quiz later.

We've all had that moment when we think we've said something totally and completely foolish or regrettable. You might have been in the heat of anger or were trying to make a good impression by making a joke. The words are halfway out of your mouth, and you want them right back. Sometimes we say something scathing. Sometimes we are downright bitter and will say something super negative under our breaths. Indeed, we all say something foolish now and then. We all have done things we are not proud of. There may be a hurt among former friends that may still be burning after years. These are naturally human, but they are a cancer if we do not put it into faithful check. They eat at us, they burn us inside, and we become the victim of things we have no more control over. We are locked in the past.

Let me give you an example. A secret passion of mine is the musical. Ever since I saw my very first musical on Broadway in high school, *Les Miserables*, I loved it. If you haven't seen that musical, I highly suggest renting the new movie. From the beginning, I was intrigued by the main character, Jean Valjean. He's imprisoned only because he stole a loaf of bread for his starving family. He escapes, to be taken in by a bishop. Valjean takes advantage of him and steals his silver. The police catch him with the goods, and when he is taken back to the priest, the bishop tells the police he gave Jean the silver. Valjean is stunned when the bishop lets him keep the things and urges him to take a turn in his life. He realizes that he was filled with bitterness from his unjust imprisonment. He was ashamed that he was living in the past. He chooses to escape from that past; that past is now dead. "Another story must begin," he says. He chooses an Easter moment.

The raising of Christ tells us something integral: nothing is the same anymore. Easter is important because it allows us to put these past things into their proper place. I can and will say some really foolish things now and then, but Easter opens up a new door where these things lose their power over me. Christ let what was past stay in the past as he reached forward. There's a word for that: Grace. I saw a really helpful picture on Facebook the other day that I made a point to put on our page. It was a statement about grace. It said, "Grace means that all of your mistakes now serve a purpose instead of serving shame." When we live in the past, we try to fix things that cannot be fixed. God's forgiveness as shown through Christ cannot even be fathomed. The only work that has to be done is what we do with ourselves. We can question, sure, our worthiness at such a venture, but that's our question, not a question of God's decision making. Easter is the opportunity once gain to realize these things should be left behind. God is a God of moving forward, not back.

One idea of Easter is to let go of past mistakes. But that's a passive idea. Easter is not to be lived fully living passively. When we as Easter people move beyond our mistakes and past grievances, we are called to actively live into something new. Jean Valjean faced that when he realized he was at his crossroads; he decided to leave his stealing past behind, but he also decided to become a new person devoted to the highest ideals. To be Easter people means that we take hold of new life as it comes our way. I think sometimes this sounds like a big and lofty phrase. "Take hold of new life." It can, when we look at everything on a wide and grand scale. It's not about changing everything. We cannot and should not change who we are at the core, and we do not want to leave behind what good gifts we have to offer to God's service. It's about taking hold of new possibilities and new places to grow. As I said before, we leave the past behind in terms of guilt, punishing ourselves, and holding on to old trouble, but we do not leave behind what it teaches us and how it informs us to grow.

I give thanks for my beautiful wife, because she sees the things that I cannot. I'm good at seeing big picture and talking in grand flowing big statements. She sometimes tells me that leaves much to be desired from me. She's the detail-oriented member of our new family. So, as I'm seeking to grow into the newness of being more detail oriented, I ask you to look at the small things in our lives where we can take on new life. Every time you wake up in the morning, you wake up to new possibilities. Will I take up the joys and new possibilities that the rising sun presents? Will I be hopeful? Think of every time you bathe or take a shower as a new occasion to reclaim with your baptism and forgiveness and grace it represents. Will you let the sins wash away time and again? When I say something I know wasn't me at your best, what will I do? Will I take on the opportunities that Christ

presents to me to grow from my mistakes? The possibilities are endless when we approach life seeking Christ's new life. That calling is one of new opportunities and second chances.

Along with new life, we as Easter people are called to live a life of joyfulness. I said last week that we don't want happiness. Happiness is a quick feeling that fades away with the moment. I'm sure all of you collect something. I have many collections, like sports jerseys. When I get a new jersey, I find myself in the midst of happiness. That happiness, though, when it's just about the jersey, fades quickly, because the newness of the item fades quickly. I want to get them for other reasons. For example, I've gotten in the habit of getting jerseys when I visit a new place. I got about six or seven soccer jerseys during our honeymoon. Not only did I get them to wear, I got them as remembrances of the situation. When I look at and wear them, I find myself recalling that time with a sense of joy. But the joy has nothing to do with the jersey. The joy is based on the memories of being with my new wife and what we were doing. When I look at this jersey I got on the honeymoon, I think of our trip to Picadilly Circus, to the store called "Lillywhites," where they had jerseys upon jerseys of just about any soccer club you could think of, and the time we picked this out together. When the jersey has that connection, it leads me to joy.

The difference between joy and happiness is that joy is a choice. Personally, my wife and I are always in discussion about cultivating joy. Let's be honest. Life is hard. She works a full-time stressful job that makes her want to collapse onto the sofa when she gets home. Well, to be honest on my end, there's a whole lot more that goes into my job than you see on Sunday mornings, and it carries some stress with it as well. Joy doesn't just find us. Joy is a lifestyle that we must cultivate; we will not find ourselves people who have joy forced on us or come up on us when we least expect it at all times. And it's not the easiest

thing. The world can seem like a frightening place with wars, with threats, with geological disasters, murders, and so much more. The coming of Christ told us something. Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly," in John 10. There is a difference between mindfulness and victimizing. We are called to be mindful of these pains and to address them as we are able just as Christ did. To be a victim of fear is to live in fear constantly, to be obsessed with the offhand chance of horrible things happening. We need not live with fear clouding our vision and pushing us out of the realms of joyfulness. We can't hear the voice of Jesus there. As mindful Easter people, we are to be like Mary Magdalene, searching. That is the culturing of joy, for when we hear the voice of Jesus as she did, we will have our eyes opened to the possibilities. Joyfulness is the space we live into as Easter people, for with Christ, there is always reason to celebrate.

Now's the time for audience participation. Give me the last word. Easter changes... what? (Everything). In the resurrection of Christ, we are called to be Easter...(People). We do this by letting go of past...(mistakes), fully grasping new...(life), and cultivating an attitude of...(joyfulness). The great thing is, if you didn't quite get them all, that is where grace comes in. But grace calls us to live fully. Of course, we will never get the Easter people life right all the time, but we are called to endlessly cultivate it. We are called to dig deeper, to live more richly, to grasp all the life that Jesus the Christ calls us to be through that empty tomb. We will have darkness in our lives, we will have negativity, we will be focused on the past problems. But we always have the empty tomb, and the empty tomb is always about newness. Easter is always about the chance once again to live into that newness; every Sunday is a new Easter. How will you respond? Amen and Amen.