

LOVE CHANGES LIFE

Good News for Messy People | John 21:1-19

For twenty years, it was my privilege to be the voice of a weekly television and radio program called LOVE CHANGES LIFE which aired on WGN, Fox TV, and other outlets throughout Chicagoland and surrounding states. I selected that name for the program for the same reason I've chosen it as the title of this my final Easter message as Lead Pastor of Christ Church. It is because I believe the great love of Jesus is the most life-altering power in the universe and the gift most needed amidst the turbulent seas of our times. To get at this today, I want to reflect on a text that is seldom preached on Easter Sunday but has much to say. Hear the Word of God as it comes from John 21...

Some Messages Get Lost in Translation

In the annals of American marketing lie a hundred good ideas that didn't quite connect with the consumer the way the advertisers had planned. For example, when Chevrolet expanded their operations into Latin America, they were puzzled as to why their reasonably-priced car, NOVA, didn't come close to meeting sales expectations. Someone finally pointed out that in the Spanish language the term, "No Va" meant "Won't go!" A major U.S. airline had a similar experience of low consumer interest, until it was discovered that their marketing promise, "We earn our wings every day," was translated by some potential Spanish customers as the assurance that if they flew with this airline they would arrive at their destination as angels. My favorite one of all, however, is the confusion unintentionally created by poultry magnate, Frank Perdue's, famous slogan: "It takes a tough man to make a tender chicken." In Spanish, the tag-line unfortunately read: "It takes a virile man to make a chicken affectionate!"

It is amazing how a message's original meaning can get lost in translation. The older I get, the more I think that often happens with the Easter message too. Oh, I think most of us get the life-after-death part. According to a recent LifeWay poll, two-thirds of Americans (and 70% of people in the Midwest and South) say they believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead and hope they'll go to heaven too.¹ It's the part of the Easter message that has to do with life here-and-now that I think often gets lost in translation. If Jesus truly died and rose again, then -- practically-speaking -- how does that change life for you and me today?

Easter Can Get Lost in our Lives Too

At Eastertime, some of us feel like we start to get a clue. The reality of the Empty Tomb and the missing body and all these people whose lives were dramatically changed by encountering Jesus back from the dead, has a way of assaulting our skepticism, if we're paying attention at all. Some of us may even start to believe that a power for resurrection and renewal is available to us too. More than a few of us leave the church making our Easter resolutions. "Things are going to change, God. I'm going to do some spring cleaning in those places where I know I've been messing up... I'm going to bring Christ's ethics into my workplace more... I'm going to talk to my family about my

faith... I'm going to love others, even strangers, the way You love me, God... I'm going to join your fight against the forces of evil or apathy in this world, God. Oh, others may deny you, Lord, but from now on I'm going to follow you."

And then, what happens? Life happens! The bills need paying... the housework and the homework mounts up... sports and social activities jam our schedules. We know there are things going on over at that church that could strengthen our capacity to live out what we promised, but suddenly our free time becomes very precious. Maybe the kids move away and without the Sunday School hook we forget that WE needed to keep learning too. Without that kind of weekly spiritual weeding, less helpful values grow up till they choke off our capacity to love and live like we'd resolved to that Easter. Because we don't come face-to-face with Jesus' life and teaching every week, we lose sight of His alternative way of dealing with people and problems.

And at first, we may feel badly about that: "Why can't I be one of those people who really lives this stuff out?" But then, because that's too heavy to handle for long, we start thinking: "You know, I'm a pretty good person; the parts that need changing, I can probably fix or tune-up on my own." Or maybe we begin to doubt again whether there really is a life-changing power after all. "I guess I'm not really the super spiritual type," we say. "But at least I'm not one of those hypocrites that pretend they are." And so, we go back to our normal life, as if Easter never happened.

We're in the Middle of the Easter Story

But you know what? That doesn't make us outsiders to the Easter story. This cycle of hope and discouragement places us right in the middle of the Easter story. On that first Easter morning, the man we call Simon Peter heard the shocking news the women shared that the tomb of Jesus was not only open but empty. Determined to see for himself, Peter found the graveclothes Jesus had been buried in discarded like the chrysalis of a risen butterfly. A short while later, Jesus suddenly appeared to Peter and the other disciples behind the locked doors of an upper room in Jerusalem.

Now, you'd have to expect that the next time we meet Peter he'd be a truly changed man. He'd be filled with a new joy and confidence. He'd be utterly and irrevocably committed to living for Jesus. But instead, when we meet him in the text I read at the start, Peter is back on the Sea of Galilee, fishing, just as he was before he ever met Jesus in the first place... just as if Easter had never happened at all. Why is that?

Well, have you ever promised to be there for your spouse or kids, or for a business colleague or friend, and then, when they desperately needed your faithfulness and companionship, you failed to deliver? When you saw them again, were you filled with joy? Now imagine that the One you've failed is God himself. Imagine it's the Being who gave you life, who gave His life for you, but you denied and disowned him three times and more. Isn't there going to be a part of you that would rather wish that God right out of existence... or to run and hide in your old routines... rather than face Him squarely again? Isn't there a part of you that does that?

And if that offended God should seek you out this Easter, even after you've run from Him, wouldn't it be only natural to think that He has pursued you simply in order to shame and punish you for your backsliding ways? Why would it be natural to think that? Because that's how people normally love us – conditionally.

No wonder the scriptures report that **"as soon as Simon Peter heard"** that Jesus was now there a third time, this time on the shore of Galilee, near to where Peter and his buddies were fishing, Peter **"wrapped his outer garment around him (for he had taken it off) and jumped into the water."** Some interpreters of this text say that Peter was so glad to see Jesus that he couldn't wait to get ashore and be reunited. That's not my theory. I think the only reason you put on all your clothes to swim is if you know you're going to need all the cover you can find when you're out of the water and running through the brush to get away!

At the Heart of the Universe is a Life-Changing Love

But there was something about Easter that had gotten lost in translation for Peter, as it can for us too. We can all get stuck in thinking a lot like a certain thief that made the evening news during the fall after I finished college. This thief stole a car whose owner then became strangely frantic. He had the police issue an all-points bulletin, and went on the radio himself, begging the thief to return the car and its contents untouched. Seeing police cars trailing him, the thief drove faster and faster to escape them, failing to understand that the dominant reason for their pursuit was the box of saltine crackers on the front seat next to him. The car's owner had been preparing to put them in his pest-infested garage. They were laced with rat poison.²

I know it's hard to believe that someone who'd been so wronged could care so much for the wrongdoer, because sometimes we find it so hard to. I think of the person who declared: "I'm so glad I got religion. I have an uncle I used to hate so much I vowed I'd never go to his funeral. But now I'd be happy to go to it any time." The truth is we struggle to will or work for the good of those who do wrong. It's why our relationships with flawed people are so MESSY. But there is Someone who never stops willing and working for our good even when we have failed badly.

If you remember nothing else I say to you today or have ever said from this pulpit, **never forget with what a great LOVE you have been loved and are loved by God... with a love that goes in search of people not to punish but to save them.** Jesus himself put the truth like this: **For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, that whosoever believed in Him** – which means put their trust in him -- **should not perish but have everlasting LIFE. For God did not send his Son to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him.**

A little boy once behaved very badly on a shopping trip with his mom. As they were driving home, the boy broke the tense air in the car by asking: "When we ask God to forgive us when we're bad, He does, doesn't He, Mom?" "Yes, He does," his mom replied tersely. "And when He does, He buries our sins in the deepest sea, doesn't He Mom?" "Yes, that's what the Bible says," the mother replied. The boy was silent for

awhile. Then he said: "I'm really sorry for what I did, Mom. When we get home, you're not going to go fishing for those sins, are you?"

When I read that story, I groaned. How many times have I pulled up the rotting fish of some friend or family member's past failure, just to score a vindictive point -- as if that failure was the final word about their character? We should all groan, because the love we meet at Easter behaves so very differently towards you and me. I suppose God could dredge up all of our past broken promises... all of our perverse fantasies... all of our cheating and our chintzing... all of the deaths we've participated in by our action or our passivity... all of our backsliding between today and last Easter. God could do that except for one thing. **Love keeps no record of wrongs** (1 Cor 13:5). As far as Jesus is concerned, if we put our trust in Him for our salvation, we can live with complete certainty that the guilt and penalty that went with those old sins is no more. As Jesus said: **It is FINISHED** (John 19:30). Those fish were buried with Jesus and the only thing that will be raised again is your NEW LIFE.

That's why when Peter finally gets up the nerve to come back down the shoreline and join Jesus and the other disciples over breakfast, what Jesus does NOT say to him is almost deafening. At no point does Jesus remark: "Wow, Peter, that time you denied me was a real whopper. How about we just mount that failure on the wall so you'll always have a reminder to do better." No, instead the scriptures give us the unforgettable image of Jesus cooking that fish for Peter's breakfast. That mental picture is a vivid reminder to me that people's past failures aren't to be dredged up and left lying around till they stink. They should be cooked quickly, digested once, and thereafter viewed only as the food of experience that strengthened us to live freshly.

Easter shows us that our past is not final, our present isn't futile, and our future isn't fixed. Jesus is the Great Love whose grace is greater than the gravity of your PAST. Jesus is the Great Love who offers you his person and power for whatever you're dealing with in the PRESENT. Jesus is the Great Love who promises you that your FUTURE is wide open and a wonderful new life is available to you.

So, let today be the first day of a whole new era of faithfulness and fruitfulness in your life. Accept the fresh start Christ offers you now. Go out every day to will and work for the good of even the MESSY people you meet; seek to love them as Jesus loves you. You will hear people say that this world's hope lies in technological progress or better products or improved politics, but **our greatest hope lies in what the life-changing love of Jesus Christ can do when it fills up souls and societies.** So, don't let that message get lost in translation, O.K.? Jesus is alive. He changes lives. He's created communities like this one for us to do life with and to extend his love to others. And so I say to you: Happy Easter. Hallelujah! And Amen.

¹ <https://research.lifeway.com/2023/04/05/americans-believe-in-easter-resurrection-but-arent-sure-why-it-matters/>

² <https://www.upi.com/Archives/1981/11/27/National-News-Briefs/4461375685200/>