

Easter 2020
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An Easter Message

Rev. Jamie wanted to give me an opportunity to preach an Easter message even though we aren't celebrating the entire Easter Vigil, so here goes.

When I was in high school, I went on something called the St. George Trek, sponsored by the Catholic Committee on Scouting. It was a bit of a pilgrimage. A small group of Scouts and I, along with a priest and a seminarian, went to Philmont Scout Ranch and backpacked through New Mexico for a little more than a week. We hiked. I shot a rifle for the first time. I prayed, sang, discussed religion. I wondered why they included a seminarian with the group because they could have just had lay religious leaders or the priests leading the group, though a seminarian does give people an idea of the path from laity to clergy if that's something you'd want to consider—oh no, this is totally a recruitment effort. Hey, Catholic Committee, mission accomplished. Sort of.

Anyway, the great conclusion to our pilgrimage was a pre-dawn hike up the Tooth to watch the sun rise over the mountains. I spent the entirety of my ascent sorting out the story I would tell about the week and this moment. I was looking for something dramatic, same as I wanted for this Easter sermon.

I was thinking: Moses and Sinai, Elijah and Carmel, Jesus and Tabor, Kevin and the Tooth.

But when I got to the top, and saw the first rays of sunlight, I felt... nothing special. I complained to God, and Jesus answered:

Hey, uh, Jesus, so I'm watching this sunset.

Yes. It's pretty, isn't?

Yes, it is, but I'm—I guess I'm underwhelmed.

Kevin, it's a sunset. The Earth rotates, and the sun becomes visible over the horizon. It's the same at sea level as it is a couple thousand feet up.

I understand, but I was thinking something, I don't know, more dramatic.

Burning bush, fire from heaven, the Transfiguration?

Exactly.

It's a sunrise, Kevin. That was never going to happen.

I have to tell the story of this week, Jesus.

Well, you should definitely start with what the trek is and why you're there—and you should totally talk about the fact that you didn't realize it was part recruitment effort.

Well, I need an ending to this story. I just can't go back down the mountain with... the mysterious assurances of a loving God... the nagging sense that I'm connected to something larger than myself... Why are you smiling? That's the ending to this story, isn't it?

Yes, it is.

You could have just said that.

I like watching you get all spun up. "The nagging sense that I'm connected to something larger than myself." That's a good place to start.

Strange and wonderful things can happen in the hours before dawn. I saw a pretty sunrise and talked to God. "At the turning of the morning," we are told, Moses stretched out his hands over the sea, and God

smashed the Egyptian army, freeing God's people. And in Matthew's Gospel, women set out at dawn to care for the body of their friend. An earthquake occurs, and an angel of the Lord rolls away the stone, revealing the great miracle of our faith, the Resurrection. The God who freed the Hebrews from their oppressors now frees all his children from the last and greatest oppressor, Death.

The *Church* is officially born at Pentecost. The Holy Spirit descends to inspire the apostles. Peter, the rock upon which Christ built the church, gives the first sermon.

But *our faith* is born at Easter, at dawn, at the Resurrection, and its first sermon is one we hear commissioned but never given: "Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.' This is my message for you" (Matthew 28:7). The faith of the Church begins with women telling stories. And on those stones, on those words written on the human heart, God builds the Church. And so this is my message for you: tell that story.

In this time of separation and isolation, of pandemic and plague, precaution and panic, we need stories. So tell them. However you navigate this difficult time, I hope you use a bit of it to tell stories. Tell the Easter story. Tell your Easter story. Tell a story about the darkness just before the dawn. Tell the story of a time God spoke to you. Tell a story about how you broke a habit. Tell a story of a time that changed you. Tell a resurrection story. If you don't have one, tell the resurrection story.

Because stories have power.

There is a legend about the founder of Hasidic Judaism, Rabbi Israel ben Eliezer, the Baal Shem Tov. Called upon to save his people, he went into the woods, lit a fire, and said a prayer. And the miracle happened. Over the generations, the knowledge of exactly what he did was slowly lost, until no one remembered the spot in the woods, how to light the sacred fire, or even the prayer. All that remained was the story, so a wise rabbi told the story. And it was enough.

I don't believe in magic words, but stories do have power. Why do you think people are so reluctant to tell them? Why do so many of us think twice before telling the stories of our faith? We know the effect they can have; we understand their power.

So tell the story. Who knows? Your words might just heal. Your words might just be the cure someone needs. Stranger things have happened before dawn.

And when stories don't have power, they nonetheless remind us of what's important, why we fight, struggle, and endure.

In 1969, physicist Robert Wilson famously testified before Congress about appropriations for a particle accelerator.¹ A senator asked about national security applications; Wilson said it had none, that the accelerator had nothing to do with the military. The senator asked if it could help in some way in the Cold War with the Soviet Union. Wilson replied that the accelerator's research would advance our knowledge, that "it has nothing to do directly with defending our country except to help make it worth defending."

And so I tell the story, but not because I think it will change things or change me or because it entertains me or helps me pass the time. I tell the Easter story because I need an identity other than man who is constantly washing his hands and changing gloves and masks. Because I need a history and a memory that goes back farther than the day the schools closed. Because I need a community that extends beyond who I can reach via social media. Trauma narrows our perception. Stories widen perspective. Stories recall who we really are, who we might still become. They remind us of what we've lost and of what is still possible. They help us grieve; they help us hope. They don't themselves fight. They make our fight worth it.

Resurrection is hard to find and hard to believe. Tell the story. Find a friend or a loved one. Call them. FaceTime, Zoom, Duo them. And tell them the Easter story. Let's practice:

After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And suddenly there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord, descending from heaven, came and rolled back the stone and sat on

it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, ‘He has been raised from the dead, and indeed he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him.’ This is my message for you.” So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them and said, “Greetings!” And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.” (Matthew 28:1-10)

If you’re more of the skeptical sort, go with Mark’s version, which simply ends with the empty tomb. And remember you can always give yourself a little critical distance with the frame: “The Bible says...”

Find your own way to tell the story. Because stories have power, and, even when they don’t, they remind us of what’s important, why we fight, struggle, and endure.

The resurrection you seek will come. Or you’ll find the strength to keep searching.

I had wanted this Easter message to give you whatever it is that you’re looking for in this season—hope, joy, peace—something that met the gravity of the moment, something, I don’t know, dramatic. Earthquakes, angels, that sort of thing, you know? Because that’s Easter!

Except that’s not all of Easter. Easter is also people telling each other a story, which isn’t in itself that dramatic a thing at all.

I leave you then at dawn—with Moses stretching his hands over the waters, with the two Mary’s at the tomb meeting their friend and Savior, with a kid on a mountain talking to God, with the mysterious assurances of a loving God, with the nagging sense that you’re connected to something larger than yourself.

I’m told that’s a good place to end and a good place to start.

Happy Easter!

1 <https://history.fnal.gov/testimony.html>