



## **“Easter: What’s In The Way?”**

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*Transcription*

I’m going to tell you today about the time I witnessed an open heart surgery. Watching from on high in that surgical theatre, that operating theatre (a totally appropriate name). I saw a 50-ish male body laid out before me. Face covered for identity, groin covered for modesty. Save for that, covered in Betadine and antiseptic.

We watched from that operating theatre window up above, our noses almost pressed against the glass. No, it wasn’t open air, and no, I was not eating Junior Mints, for all of you who are Seinfeld fans. It was not going to be a miracle of candy that would make him well.

The theatre really is a perfect name for it. Perfect name. Because it was some of the highest drama I’d ever experienced in my life. The surgical team assembled, and you know, I like to show a lot of PowerPoint slides. I’m not going to show you any slides today. I’m not going to get too graphic. But I will tell you that the veins were cut from the legs. They would serve eventually as a conduit for the blood to flow the bypass around the heart. The chest cavity was cut, and then spread open, and there I saw a beating – injured, but beating – human heart.

But that wasn’t the most dramatic thing. It was the moment when the surgeons turned on the heart-lung machine, and it started to do its work, and that once beating heart stopped, and just laid there in his chest.

I’ve got to tell you, my own hands went right up to my pulse. I’d encourage you to do that right now. Everyone got a pulse? Alright, we’re good right here.

That was one of the most dramatic things I’ve ever seen in my life. And I’ve got to tell you, for those next five or six hours, this is a quadruple bypass. This went on for a while. It was one of the most galvanizing things I have ever seen in my entire life.

They got toward the end of that surgery, and they turned the heart-lung machine off, and they got the heart started again. I just breathed a huge sigh of relief. Except the heart was kind of doing weird things. It wasn’t beating the right way. So they got out these giant things. They were like big salad tongs. Like an internal defibrillator is what it was.

They kind of cradled the heart around it and they gave it a little shock, and the heart started beating regularly again.

The reason for this surgery was, as I said, a quadruple bypass, because the blood vessels around the heart in this person's life could not contain the flow of blood any longer. Not in a way that allowed this person to be healthy. Couldn't carry the flow of life anymore. For this man, his arteries, his veins were occluded. They were tight and narrow. The way was blocked, and they had to find a different way so that life could continue to flourish. They needed to find new vessels that would be open and spacious enough to carry the flow of life to where it yearns to go, and life could return to health and wholeness.

And so we arrive here on this Easter morning. Now, our tradition does not insist upon literalism to approach the meaning of ancient text and ancient stories. The resurrection story, and it is a powerful story, I would say for me the most meaningful spiritual story there is, but it's not approached as a fact to be argued. I mean, there are churches and traditions and communities that will spend a lot of time this morning arguing about the fact that unless you accept this resurrection story of Jesus rising from the grave as absolute truth, there's no hope for you at all unless you can accept it.

And to be fair, on the other side, sometimes in our congregations a lot of breath and a lot of energy will be expended upon the fact that this is just a myth. It's not history, and so it should just be approached academically.

I think both those approaches miss the point. This is not a fact to be argued over the resurrection, or resurrection generally. It is a capacity of the spirit to be encouraged in each and every one of us. I believe that Easter is real and to say "real" in a sense of spiritual truth, and is important because we all know – and you might know in your life right now in some very real ways – that blockages and stones that guard the path, that shut down the path. Blockages and stones are real. Because the vessels of our heart and the vessels of our spirits can sometimes be constricted and locked down, and we feel as if there is not enough life to carry us forward into the life to come.

All four gospel stories, Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, they all mention this thing. That the stone. And by stone, I'm not talking a little pebble. Like a giant boulder was rolled over the cave of the place where Jesus was laid down when he was dead, and then that big giant boulder was rolled away. They said it four times in all these stories, and that means if you read the gospels, it's really important.

A church father. There were church mothers as well, too, in the early parts of the church as the Christian churches started to come together. The church mothers don't get nearly as much notice as they deserve, but one of the church fathers, Peter Chrysologus said this: "To know resurrection, to know life coming back to life, the stone must first be rolled away from our hearts."

And so this morning is an opportunity to ask and for you to ask yourself, what stone is in the way for you? What's in the way for you? What afflictive emotion? What unhealed grief? What anxiety? What long-held resentment? What anger? What bitterness? What sorry? What fear? What suffering is in the way of your life experiencing your life in a deeper and more flourishing fashion?

We are invited to recognize on this Easter morning, just like in the drama skit we acted right up here, that sometimes our lives and our hearts can run unintentional software. I don't know too many people who want to run the software of low self esteem, and anger, and resentment, and yet so many of us do against the instincts of the better angels of our nature.

And here's the thing most of us also know: It takes longer than just a call to tech support to get our machine running optimally. It takes longer than six hours on an operating table to bring our hearts, and the spiritual sense of our hearts, truly back to life. And it takes more days than the three days very often, as it does in the Easter story. It may take multiple days. It may take weeks. It may take months. It may take years. But here's one thing that we can affirm. The movement from woundedness to healing, from brokenness to wholeness, it is real in our lives.

And by real, I don't mean perfect. One of the things I love about the gospel telling of what are called the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus is that one of the first ways that the people who knew him when he was alive recognized him after he's come back is his scars. Sometimes in this society we can through shame or embarrassment seek to cover up our scars as if they reveal our deficiencies, rather than recognizing that our scars may be the symbol and the significance of the fact that we are healed and healing.

Rumi, the great ancient poet of the spiritual life says, "Do not look away from the bandaged place" – do not look away from the scarred place – "that is where the light enters you." Many of us have scars. And because many of us do, many of us also know what it's like to heal.

In this movement toward wholeness, which I believe is a natural movement if we will give our permission to it, it starts with knowing what is in the way. It starts with being willing. As we sang in the third song today, with wanting to be ready for "joy to come back" even if you have no idea this morning how joy might reenter your life. You have no idea how that would ever happen. No idea what would happen for that to be true. The first thing that you can say to start to make that come true for you is just to say yes, I want that. I am willing for joy to come back to me. It takes time, and it certainly means we have to become aware of what it is in the way for us.

My favorite modern story about recognizing what's in the way? You might recognize this image of *The Shawshank Redemption*. Now I love this movie so much, and it's so much wound into my preaching and my thoughts, that a couple of months ago I said you know what? I can't believe this incredible oversight on my part, that I've never done a

SpiritFlix, a spiritual cinema message, I've never preached on *The Shawshank Redemption*, and what an oversight on my part! Then someone told me three days later, "You did, and it was a year and a half ago." So that's how much this story is woven into me.

But if you have seen the story. This is the moment where after decades – after decades of innocence, Andy Dufresne in prison dug spoonful by spoonful by spoonful through a wall to find his way to the other side. Little by little by little, he makes his way into wholeness and into freedom. But it's not done yet, because he gets through to the other side of this wall, and his night of escape, his night of liberation, and where does he find himself? The symbolism is important, pardon my language – in a world of shit. He has to go through the sewer until he can get to liberation and freedom.

If we are feeling frustrated on our ways to wholeness, perhaps we can give ourselves permission simply to say it takes time. And it's all right that it takes time. I mean, many of us saw an amazing example of this this past week being argued before the Supreme Court that sooner or later, and hopefully sooner, all mature adult lovers in this country will be recognized as legal under the law.

I must tell you, when I was a teenager in a very homophobic scholastic setting, and the first person who ever challenged my unconscious homophobia said, "Of course gays and lesbians should be able to get married," I kind of dismissed it. Not with hatred, but everyone knows *men and women* get married. And then I actually thought about what this person had told me. Well, you know what? There's been millions of conversations happening over these last decades that have helped bring people to that place of greater wholeness, love, and understanding to the point where now there is a peaceful revolution of who counts going on in this society.

But to really abet wholeness in our lives, collectively or individually, we must recognize that we do not need dynamite. We don't want to blow it all up. What we need is diligence. The willingness to do the work day after day after day. Sometimes in such small ways that we're not even sure our work counts. But if we do this work diligently, we will see the fruits of our efforts. Not by blowing things up, but by befriending our very lives, befriending our blockages, befriending our hurts, befriending our hang-ups, befriending our challenges. We also recognize that unlike that surgery that I witnessed, there's no such thing as an easy end run around in the spiritual life. There isn't such a thing as just taking the bypass road.

But we can do this. We can follow the wisdom from the ancient. It's not from the Bible, but the ancient wisdom of what's called *The Gospel of Thomas*. A beautiful mystical retelling of Jesus' teachings in which the book says things like, "Split a cord of wood, and I am there." That divine presence is there. All around us and all within us. In this simple little phrase that we could spend a lifetime unpacking. Jesus said in *The Gospel of Thomas*, "Be passersby."

Basically he's saying, allow things to flow through you. Allow things to flow around you. And perhaps this most importantly, can we maybe ease up on ourselves just a little bit. That it's not suppose to be this difficult. As difficult as it is sometimes to grow into wholeness, we're not suppose to make it this difficult upon ourselves because sometimes – and I know this really well, and I'm sure some of you know this as well – it's not a thing that's in our own way. We are in our own way. Because we love the drama. Not because we're defective, but because we get confused, and because we get scared. And we get bound up in that false idea that life is all about defending the meager thing we have already, or life is all about offensively aggressing against those we perceive to be our enemies.

If we can recognize that we can move beyond just playing defense or just going on offense, we will open up the space and the way, and the willingness to simply live out our lives. Listening to our hurts. Listening to our hopes. Listening to the true speaking of our broad, open beating hearts. Our light, our darkness, our joy, our heartaches, our sorrows. Listening to all of it and allowing it to pass through us.

There's an ancient Zen story about a nun named Chyono who studied for years diligently, practiced for years diligently, and yet did not experience enlightenment. Until one night she was carrying an old pail, a bucket of water back to her home. And that pail filled with water reflected the absolutely clear sky and the full moon overhead, and when she looked down into that pail of water, she saw the moon fully. But it was an old pail. It was a rickety pail. So the bamboo that was holding that pail together broke. And the moon went away, and the water went away, and the nun Chyono became enlightened. And she wrote these words:

This way and that way  
I tried to keep the pail together  
hoping the weak bamboo would never break  
until suddenly the bottom fell out.  
No more water in the pail.  
No more moon in the water in the pail.  
Emptiness in my hand.

The enlightenment she realized is that the moon, the water hadn't disappeared. They had just changed form. They had just changed their way. And that they were all still present, but they were not hers to capture or keep. And in that she became enlightened.

That word, emptiness. A lot of us as Westerners, we fear that word, but emptiness is just another word for openness. Wideness. Broadness. It's another word for a blood vessel that can do its work, and carry the blood, that life-giving force, to our body. Emptiness is that hole in the wall of *The Shawshank Redemption* that allows Andy Dufresne to be free. Emptiness and openness means if we can choose it for ourselves day after day after day, that we in choosing to be empty and not occluded, and not

bound down, and not tightened up, we will find ourselves to be full of so many other things. Full of life. Changing, growing, pulsing. Thriving fullness of life.

So today whatever your stones are, and you know them more than anyone else ever could, may you allow your stones to be rolled away. May you allow yourself to have that natural capacity and openness of spirit that invites us and everyone else who ever lived to be free and loving people. If we can be open, if we can carry life that wants to carry us, we may be true life bearers. Light bearers. Love bearers. And may we find what has always been true since the very beginning: That in bearing forth light and love, we already are beloved.

Happy Easter. Amen. And may you live in blessing. Let's pray together:

Boundless God, bound not at all by creed or tradition or any one person or any one people, but belonging each to all. May we allow ourselves with open hearts and open hands, even if they are scarred hands, to flow towards this life that wants to flow toward us.

May we know our hurts, our hang-ups, and also our hopes and our healings so that we may see rips in the ends to the very fabric, the very DNA of our lives an original blessing that invites us, whispers to us sometimes, yells at us, we can be whole people.

May we know the stones in our way. May we know a broad, wide path of grace and of love.

Amen.