

BELPRES CHURCH

Easter Sermon Dr. Scott Dudley

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Lord, for some of us that might be hard to believe right now, Lord, for people especially who have been deeply impacted by this pandemic that may be really hard to believe that it could ever be well with our souls. But Jesus, what this day shows, what Easter reminds us of is where the enemy decreed death, you decreed life. Where the enemy decreed defeat, you decreed victory. Where the enemy decreed discouragement, you decreed hope. God, our hope is in you. Jesus, thank you for the victory that you have won. Lord, as we turn to your word and hear this story of Easter, help us, help us, to truly believe and know it is well. It is well with our soul, as long as we walk with you. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, hello, BelPres. Happy Easter. He is risen indeed. It is so good to be with you electronically. Thank you for inviting us into your living rooms, your dens, your kitchens, your back patio or wherever you are. Happy, happy Easter. Years ago when my kids were much younger, my oldest, Holly, was about four years old at the time, we took them to the Puyallup fair. When we got there, we noticed there was a rodeo going on. I'm from eastern Washington, I grew up with rodeos, so we thought, "Maybe the kids would like a rodeo." We did not think that through very well. Because everything was going just fine until we got to the calf tie down contest, which an American rodeo is kind of a gentler, more regulated version of calf roping, where this cowboy tied up a calf in about 10 seconds and then laid it on the ground.

At which point Holly, very somberly said, "It's dead." And we're like, "No, no, no, no, no. No, no, no. It's alive. No, he's fine. Look, he's already up. He's walking around. The calf is fine. No, no, no." We kept trying to convince her. Uh-uh (negative), we left the rodeo because it was a bad idea, and we've never been to a rodeo since because we scarred the children. Save for college, save for therapy. Parents have to do both. We're going to scar our kids. Holly saw death where actually there was life. As parents, we tried to bring life, or at least some fun, but all we did was make our kids think about death. That is similar to Easter. It is similar, especially to this Easter, where so many things have died or at least feel tied down because of this pandemic.

There's the very tragic reality that people have died from COVID. 16 million people out of work. Seniors in high school missing so many rights of passage. Parents trying to work and homeschool at the same time, and fear. Everywhere, fear. Not unlike that first Easter, where the Bible says the women went to the tomb where Jesus was buried, having seen him crucified and die on a cross just a few days before on

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Good Friday. And they discover that Jesus had been raised from the dead. When they get to the tomb, the Bible says, the women see two angels and the angels ask a very profound question. They say, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen." Why do you look for the living among the dead? That is a great question, filled with hope and promise and courage as we go through this covert pandemic, as well as everything else that we have going on in our lives.

It's hope and courage in two ways. The first is, so often in our lives as Holly did at the rodeo, so often in our lives we expect death but God brings life. The women who went to that tomb that first Easter morning expected to find death. Nobody goes to a tomb expecting to find life. They went expecting to find death. Because Jesus' resurrection is hard to believe. It was hard to believe back then. Not just now, which is why as I do every year I've included in the bulletin a list of reasons to believe that Jesus really was raised from the dead as a matter of historical fact. It's in the bulletin. You can download that from our website after I get done with this sermon though, because I'm still preaching.

But Jesus' resurrection I think is not just hard to believe because it's a miracle, I think it's hard to believe because we lose hope in situations that seem to us to be hopeless. We find ourselves often saying things like, "Oh man, my chances for getting into a great college, they're dead." Or, "This career, it's dead." Kind of like Holly said at the rodeo. Or, "This marriage, it's dead. This friendship, it's dead." Because of COVID, lots of things, lots of things feel dead in very painful ways. But then there's also just the small ordinary things that I, probably you too, I'm like, "I'm missing." And I notice as this goes on, I miss them more and more and more. Simple things, like going to the gym. Like getting what's left of my hair cut. Not having to have every meeting be a Zoom meeting. When this thing is over, I hope I never again have to say the phrase, "You're on mute. You're on mute. We can't hear you."

But the thing I miss more than anything else, and actually I was telling a friend this week, it's actually a very deep grief for me right now. The thing I miss more than anything else is you. All of you. I love my church. I love you, and I miss seeing you. I miss talking to you. For me, preaching is really a very relational thing. It's not meant to be done in a mostly empty room. I can't see you, so I miss seeing your faces when I preach. I miss seeing your reactions, where I tell a joke and nobody laughs, so at least that part's still the same. But see, that was funny. Crickets. Crickets. Jake's given me a mercy laugh. Thank you, Jake. Crickets, my talents are being wasted. So many things. So many things. Have you even thought, "Maybe we should get a laugh track"? But we won't. We have Jake, so we'll just use Jake as the laugh track.

Like most college students, my son is home doing his courses online, which basically is every class is just this giant Zoom meeting. And that can go terribly wrong. He was telling us about this one time a teacher was trying to conduct the class and you can hear this one student in the background saying, "Leave me alone, mom. I'll clean my room later," for the whole class to hear. So many things, parts of normal are just dead. The thing that's awesome about Easter is, Easter is honest about that. Easter is an honest holiday. It offers no Pollyanna promises that nothing bad will ever happen. I mean, after all the prerequisite for Easter is Jesus' suffering and death on a cross on Good Friday. By its very nature, Easter acknowledges bad things happen. Things die. Both metaphorically and quite literally, we die.

We've heard a lot of talk about the mortality rate of COVID, but here's the thing. Life, it appears, has a 100% mortality rate. The ratio of life to death is running about one to one these days. We're going to die. Things die. Easter acknowledges things and people die and we need to lament that. The Bible is

filled with people lamenting, crying out to God in their pain. It's a holy thing to do. We need to ask the Holy Spirit to help us lament and do that while simultaneously holding on to God's promises at the same time. Theologian Barbara Taylor puts it this way. She says, "We are Easter people living in a Good Friday world." Easter acknowledges that things die. It's just that with Jesus, they don't stay dead. Even when we die, if we know Jesus, we will be raised to new life in a new body that we'll never know pain, suffering, or death again.

That's why Easter hope is a sturdier kind of hope than any other kind of hope, because if I'm going through a hard time and someone says to me, "It'll be all right," that is not comforting. Because, of course, it may not be all right. But Easter hope does not depend on things being all right. Easter hope acknowledges things aren't always all right. It acknowledges things do die. It's just that with Jesus they don't stay dead, and that is a sturdier hope because it's not dependent on circumstances. In the gospel of Matthew is telling you the Easter story, it says, "An angel of the Lord came down from heaven, and going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it." Now, that is an interesting detail, and sat on it. Why do you think it's there?

Well, here's what I think it is. I think it's like when I was a kid and I'd wrestle with my brother or with a friend, and the point of the wrestling match was to win. Then you'd get on top of the person that you defeated and you just stay on top of them until they cried, "Uncle." Though I never understood what my uncle had to do with that. I've never understood that phrase. But anyway, I think that's what's going on here. The angel, it's like gloating. The angel is sitting on the rock to gloat over Satan's defeat. God won, you lost. Death in vain forbids him rise. Christ has opened paradise. Take that, you stupid Satan. You lost. Where we expect death, God brings life.

I got an email a couple of weeks ago from a woman in our church, I will call her Brenda, and the subject line of the email said, "Satan took a hard left to the jaw today." Loved that title. Brenda and her husband, they have a mother-in-law unit in their house and they view that as a gift from God. And so, they want to use it for God's purposes. So they rent it out at below market rates to a family from our African fellowship, New Hope Revival. I'll call them Aaron and Naomi. Aaron and Naomi are immigrants from Congo. Aaron and Naomi got in a car accident recently. They weren't hurt, but it totaled their car, which they needed to get to work. Then they had a death in the family and Aaron had to fly back East for the memorial. They don't have a ton of money, so this was pretty stressful. All of this was happening while COVID was heating up.

So Naomi found another car on eBay. It looked legit. eBay logo, lots of protections. Naomi was told to buy \$1,200 of eBay gift cards and then email photos of the cards along with the pin numbers to eBay Motors. You know where this is going. It was a fraud. It was a scam. So they lost 1,200 bucks that they could not afford to lose. They reported it, but there's nothing that anyone could do about it. Well, a few days later, Brenda just happened to share this with her brother, who I'll call Ben, who also goes to BelPres. Ben offered to give Naomi and Aaron the \$1,200 that they lost. But then the next day, Ben actually increased that from 1,200 to 1,600 to cover a title tax, license, all of that stuff. Then Naomi and Aaron FaceTime with Ben and his family to thank them, and they shared their story of coming to America. What made them immigrate, what their hopes, what their dreams were. It just started this really cool relationship.

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So Brenda emailed me to tell me this story, to tell me all of this, and the way she ended her email caught my attention. This is what she wrote. She said, "I had been handling the whole COVID thing pretty well until yesterday, but based on some bad information I got, I thought the grocery stores were going to close. So I was trying to shop for us and for Aaron and Naomi who lived with us. I was completely stressed out and thought, 'Man, Satan is having a field day.' And I seen so many ugly posts on social media that are based in fear and prejudice. People focused on making sure that they're okay and not thinking about what's good for the community. But of course there I was trying to buy five cartons of eggs for myself, and then I felt ashamed and I was thinking only of myself.

"I was completely stressed out until this happened with Ben, Naomi and Aaron. Satan took it on the jaw today. He can throw his worst at us, but God's love is still going to prevail. And when this COVID thing is over, we're going to have a Thanksgiving dinner early with Naomi, Aaron, my brother, Ben, and his family. Naomi's cooking Congolese food and she's a good cook and a good time will be had by all. Boom, take that Satan." That's how you beat COVID-19. Where you would expect death, where there was death in some ways. A total car, no money to replace it, unscrupulous people taking advantage of an immigrant family, Brenda's rising anxiety about COVID. A lot of death, but God brought so much life, new friendships, new community, courage for Brenda. In the middle of COVID, she found hope in helping someone else.

Why do you seek the living among the dead? Where we expect death, God brings life. That's good news. But also, the reverse is true. Because, if sometimes we look at situations where we expect death but God brings life, it's also true that sometimes we expect life where there is only death. We go to all these different things thinking that they're going to give us life, but they actually don't. They're dead. The Bible calls these things idols. "If only I get into that college," or, "get that promotion," or, "date that person," or "lose 10 pounds," then I will feel more alive." Or, "I'll feel happy," or, "I'll feel better." We go to all these things thinking to find life, and instead what we find, then we find out that they're just dead things. Here's the thing about Press, sometimes we need to let stay dead what is actually dead. Because, sometimes, something needs to die for new things to be born.

Jesus said this, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds." The point's not the dead seed, it's the life that comes out of it. Sometimes things need to die for new things to be born. Here Jesus is talking about himself. Because see, Jesus had to die to pay the just price for our sin so that we could be born again into a new life and a new relationship with him. Sociologist Brene Brown says that in order for forgiveness to happen, something always has to die. Our pride has to die. Our self-deception has to die. She said, "The problem with how we do forgiveness in our culture is it doesn't cost anything. It's cheap." She says, "There's not enough blood on the floor." And so, it doesn't feel real to us because no price was paid that instinctively we know needs to be paid. So we don't believe that forgiveness is real.

As Anthony said on Thursday night, the Bible is so serious about our sin, since our sin is so destructive. It causes so much harm that something needs to die in order to cleanse us from that. It needs to be punished, otherwise, there is no justice in the world. In the old Testament, they would bring animals to sacrifice over and over to atone for their sin. But Jesus is the ultimate and final sacrifice. The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, God himself in human form dying to pay the price for our sins that deep down we know needs to be paid or there's no justice. And he did that because he loves you that much. He did that because he loves you so much, he'd rather die than lose you, and so he did.

Sometimes, something has to die in order for something else to be born. The problem with a resurrection is, you first have to have a crucifixion. For instance, sometimes one marriage needs to die so another can be born. Not with different people, but with the same two people. Put to death. Bob and Jane 1.0, so Bob and Jane 2.0 can be born. In order for that to happen, both sides are going to have to die to their pride. And instead of trying to show how their spouse is wrong, they're going to have to die to their pride and ask forgiveness for the ways that they've hurt each other. All of us, I know, I very badly want this COVID thing to be over so we can go back to normal. I found myself saying that, "I be glad when this is over so we can go back to normal."

But what about we don't? What about we don't go back to normal? What about we go to a new normal instead? So many parts of old normal have died and the gift COVID gives us is we get to decide which parts of old normal go in our new normal, and which parts of old normal need to stay dead. A blank slate is a wonderful gift and a terrible thing to waste. We get to decide what our new normal is going to be and what lives there and what doesn't and what stays dead. All of our idols have been exposed. Our false sense of security and money or prestige or popularity, it's all been exposed. How can one of the best economies in history slide into a recession virtually in just a matter of days? What we thought was stable is not stable, so let's let that false sense of security we had and all of those other things die so that a new reliance and trust on God can be born.

As one of my favorite hymns says, "Change and decay all around I see. Oh thou who changes not abide with me." I know we've all felt this lack of community, I know I have, as we've gone through this COVID thing. I was talking to a guy this week. He's got three kids and not loving the whole social isolation thing, and he said, "Yeah, I think today's going to be a good day. I think today we get to go buy some milk." Like, get to. What was a chore before suddenly becomes this adventure. I've told my wife, "I'm beginning to look forward to taking out the trash, at least it's an outing." There's so much of normal that has died, and this loss of community reminds me of my need for others. So how about we let some of the busy-ness of old normal die so that more community in new normal can be born?

COVID has put to death some of my sense of self-sufficiency. Because man, there are so many things right now as a church we are having to decide. How do we do worship, how do we do pastoral care? How do we have a congregational meeting in the middle of lockdown and all of that? We've never had to make these decisions before, and we have no idea what we're doing. So let that give you hope. We're clueless. I've said to people, "I must've missed my leading-through-pandemic class in seminary because none of this was on the final." My sense of self-sufficiency, some of it has died, which has forced me to rely more on Jesus. A new reliance on Jesus has been born. I want to keep that in new normal.

COVID has meant our ability to go out and do anything has died, so we're stuck at home. One of the things that's been born out of that death in my family has been lots and lots of family movie nights. So we worked our way through all the Disney movies, or as I like to think about it, we watched the entire Disney [French 00:00:18:47], because it just sounds more sophisticated if you say it in French that way. Then we went on and we watched Tiger King, which was not sophisticated, but whoa. Oh, so many sermon illustrations. Amazing. And I want to keep those movie nights in new normal. Sometimes, something has to die in order for something else to be born.

Where are you looking for life from something that offers only death? Don't go back to it, let it stay dead. Where are you expecting death, that disappointment's so deep that it feels like a sealed tomb? Where are you expecting death that God is going to bring new life? One of the people we met in Greece when a team of us were there this fall to do some ministry with Muslim refugees, many of whom are becoming Christians, met a guy named Elias. I've referred to him before, but I haven't actually ever told you his story. Elias grew up in Syria, was raised culturally Christian, but really wasn't all that serious about it. Growing up as a kid, he was persecuted and bullied for being a Christian. When he was 15, he was standing at a fire with his coworkers and one of his coworkers took a can of gasoline and threw it on him and he caught on fire.

The result was that he was unable to move because his skin was so burned. He lost his vision and he spent three years having to recover from all of this, all of which left him with this deep and abiding hatred towards Syrians. Eventually, he healed. He got his vision back and he decided to immigrate to Europe. The day before he left, he decided to take revenge on his attacker that threw the gas on him. So he went to this guy's house pretending to be his friend, but his sister said that this guy actually had been put in prison for killing a girl in a car accident. Elias said he believes God saved his life a second time that day, because either he would have been killed trying to kill this guy, or he would have been in jail for succeeding in killing him.

So Elias went to Greece and resolved never, ever, ever to go back to Syria. He hated Syrians. He was filled with hatred and resentment and bitterness towards Syrians. He wanted nothing to do with them. A few years later, he got married and through the influence of his wife, he went from being kind of a cultural Christian to an all-in follower of Jesus. Then Jesus just went to work on his heart. He started to feel God's love, really feel it in deep ways that started to heal him from all of that emotional trauma that he'd endured. The love was so strong, in fact, that he started to be able to love his attacker and forgive his attacker and let go of the bitterness and the anger and the rage at Syrians. He and his wife both had good jobs in Greece, but then in 2013, Elias felt God telling him to start a ministry to Syrian refugees in Greece.

But this was before the whole refugee crisis, so there weren't very many refugees in Greece at the time, but he still felt God just nudging him and saying, "There's going to be a huge influx. I want you to be ready. I want you and your wife to be meeting the needs of these refugees." So they quit their very good jobs to start serving and start doing ministry to refugees who weren't there yet, and everyone said, "You're nuts. You're crazy. This makes no sense." But then the refugee crisis came and now they've helped thousands of refugees find what they need. Many of them are Syrians. Most of them are Syrians. They help them meet their needs, and many of these immigrants or these refugees are coming to Jesus and becoming Christians.

Elias hated Syrians. So what does God do? Tells him to go do ministry and help out Syrian refugees. God has a sense of humor, that is for sure. And they've seen miracles, a man with a severe heart problem miraculously healed through prayer. They've seen resources come out of the blue where no resources seem to exist. And Elias's joyful, bigger-than-life personality, so filled with joy and courage and hope and strength. You would never guess in a million years that he used to be eaten up by hatred and bitterness and anger and rage. God brought life out of so much death, persecution, suffering, bitterness, anger, so much death. God brought life out of it, but also Elias had to put to death some things that he

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thought were going to give him life, like a huge career or revenge or anger. Put to death those things so the bigger life that Jesus gives us can be born.

One more thing, he got a great story. He got a wonderful story of God's power working through him, a story of God's healing and redemption. I heard a song a while ago in my gym, back when I could go to the gym, and the song said, "100 bad days makes 100 good stories. 100 good stories makes me interesting at parties. No, I ain't scared of you. I ain't scared of you no more." It's a stupid song. It actually really is a stupid song. It's really kind of a stupid song, but it kind of makes a good point. Kind of an Easter point. We aren't scared when we realize that God is using even the hardest things in our lives to give us a great story, of his power and of his healing and of his redemption.

So BelPres, when this is all over, what do you want your story to be? When this is all over, what do you want your story to be? Because you're writing it right now. Do you want an amazing story of putting to death things from old normal that did not give you life so things in new normal could be born to do? A story of how God brings life, where we expect death, God brings out life. Not through our power, because we don't have any of that power, but through the power of Jesus working inside of us. As one pastor puts it, who inhabits us is greater than what inhibits us. If you've never invited Jesus into your life at all, and maybe this COVID thing is revealed to you that you need him, do that right now and just say, "Jesus, please be my leader. Please be my forgiver. I want to follow you." If you pray that prayer, please let us know in the chat or email us because we want to be able to follow up with you.

And for all of us, for all of us this Easter, a very different Easter than we've ever had, to cooperate with the Holy Spirit nudges, the way the Holy spirit is leading us to write that new, that different story that Jesus wants to give us. The way that Brenda and her brother, Ben, cooperated with the Holy Spirit to help Naomi and Aaron. The way that Elias followed God's nudges to help Syrian refugees and out of it God wrote a great story in around and through them. What do you want your story to be when this is over? Throughout this whole thing, this whole crisis, I have thought a lot about my paternal grandmother because she survived so many crises in her life. I talk about her a lot because she is the hero of my life. She is my greatest hero ever.

She would have been 10, she was 10 years old when the 1918 flu pandemic was raging. She was 10 years old. She survived. Then later, as I've told you before, my grandfather abandoned her and the family. She had to raise six kids by herself. They were so poor, they were homeless at times. They were so poor, there were times they didn't have anything to eat. My dad remembers going hungry a lot growing up because they were so poor. Nobody in my family had ever gotten past the eighth grade. Most only made it to the sixth grade. Some had even been in prison. And at first when all of this went down, my grandmother had a complete nervous breakdown, could not function, couldn't do anything. That went on for months, but then she rallied and decided that all that poverty and pain and prison ended with her and with Jesus help, which she relied on every day, with Jesus' help, she got all six kids of her kids to college and out of poverty.

The thing about my grandma is, all through her life, my grandma did not have a trouble-free life at all. She had lots and lots of troubles. At no point in my grandma's life did she ever have a lot of money, and as a girl she had all kinds of dreams and she didn't get to do any of it. But she had one thing. She had one thing, she had a killer story, man. She had a killer story, which is why I tell her stories so much in sermons, in counseling situations. She had a killer story, of how God can help us overcome some of the

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hardest things in life. It was more than a story for me and my family. It was more than a story, it was a new narrative, a new family narrative. A new narrative that was not about prison and poverty and pain. A new family narrative about life coming out of death by the power of Jesus.

BelPres, we have a chance to write a new story, a new narrative for ourselves, for our church, for the East Side and for the world. Why do you seek life where there is only death, and why do you expect death where God has decreed new life? Hope coming out of hardship, singing coming out of sorrow, love coming out of lockdown, courage coming out of COVID, a new story that tells the old, old story of Jesus and his love. 100 bad days makes 100 good stories, so I ain't scared of you. I ain't scared of you at all because Jesus Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Our God has robbed the grave.

Jesus, thank you for that. Thank you that you have robbed the grave. Lord, I ask that you write your story in us. Your new story of overcoming power, of your hope, of your healing, of the fact that you can take whatever is bad and bring good out of it. Lord, help us to put to death the things from old normal that were not helping us to live so that new things in new normal can be born. Jesus, write your story through us and we will give you all the glory and all the praise. Because to you and you alone it is due. In your name, Jesus. Amen.