

FINDING JOY AND FREEDOM THIS EASTER

Happy Easter, church! I hope you really are happy this Easter. All of us here are wearing happy faces, smiling, giving handshakes to everyone but beneath that veneer of joyful demeanor, maybe is a feeling of uncertainty, an emotion that is on a roller-coaster because of difficult circumstances you're going through. Maybe finances are not enough, your marriage is going south, your children are misbehaving, you have a sickness that's lingering, your prayers are not being answered, you're not happy with your job, and so on. It just feels like life is falling apart. When life falls apart, what do you do?

That phrase, when life falls apart, is what I want us to think about this Easter. How does the resurrection of Jesus Christ help us get through all that we're going through right now? Well, there are three things.

First, Jesus' resurrection proved that he really was who he claimed to be. It validated his identity. A lot of people in history have claimed to be God, but only one proved it by bringing himself back to life, walking around Jerusalem for 40 more days before he went back to heaven. That means we can trust his promises. It's why 3 billion Christian believers are celebrating Easter this week. It's also why history is split into BC and AD because the resurrection of Jesus is the defining pivotal point in history. Everything else is dated in relationship to the resurrection.

Second thing, Jesus' resurrection proved that there is life after death. Without it, we'd just be guessing and we would just be wishful hoping. But the fact that death is not the end of the story, we know that because of the resurrection and with so many people around us dying right now in wars, in earthquakes, in floods, in school shootings, that's especially good news.

The third thing is that Jesus gave us a model for what to do when life falls apart. In 1 Peter 2:19, 21, it says this: *“For it is commendable if someone bears up*

under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God...But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God.”

Remember, Christ suffered for you and he gave us an example to follow. Hear that? An example to follow so you should do as he did. This Easter, I want us to look at the example that Jesus gave us. It is through his example that we can find joy and freedom in the midst of the feeling of sorrow and enslavement to suffering. I'm calling this message, *“Finding Joy and Freedom this Easter”*.

Now, the second greatest miracle of the Easter weekend, besides the resurrection of Jesus, was actually the sudden change in attitude and the amazing transformation in the lives of the disciples. Within about 72 hours, they were radically transformed. The Bible says this in the book of John, chapter 20, verse 19 *“On the evening of that first day of the week, (this is Sunday, the day Jesus rose back from the dead) when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders”*.

Now, that huddling in a home with the doors locked sounds a lot like the shutdown some of us experienced during the pandemic. Get the picture. They're isolated, they're intimidated, they're insecure. They're thinking, the authorities killed Jesus, maybe we're next. Maybe the Romans are going to come after us. They're going to kill us. Then it says, *“Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.”*

Now this is a radical transformation in these guys. You see, when Jesus died by public crucifixion, it left the disciples with a boatload of negative emotions. They have all this dream of the kingdom coming and now the savior is dead on a cross. They felt dejected, defeated, demoralized. They felt disappointed, disturbed. They felt distressed and dismayed. They felt depressed, they felt disillusioned, and they certainly were dreading the future. But after they see that Jesus is truly alive

on Easter Sunday, they are transformed and instead of depressed and dejected, they're delighted and defiant. They're not afraid of anybody anymore. They're ready to take on the world, and they did. What was that change? They had seen the risen Savior.

You see, on Friday and on Saturday, they're anxious and afraid, but by Sunday evening they become assured and assertive. And in 72 hours, they go from being embarrassed and exhausted to being ecstatic and euphoric. It's party time, Jesus is alive. Let's celebrate.

Now, I don't want you to miss what understanding the resurrection did for people whose lives had fallen apart then. Because when you understand it, it'll change your life. The people whose lives had fallen apart when Christ was crucified and then when they saw him be raised from the dead, they went from being cowardly to being courageous. They went from being fearful to fearless. They went from being gloomy to being glad, from being hopeless to hopeful and happy. They went from being powerless to being powerful, from being upset to being unstoppable. And Christianity spread through the whole world. They were now ready to take on the world.

Now, what is it that caused such a transformation in attitude in about 72 hours? Seeing the risen Jesus Christ come back from the dead. That quickly changed their lives and then millions of lives and then billions of lives. Now, follow me on this. Jesus' death and his burial and his resurrection happened over three days. Friday was the day of fear and pain. The day of fear and pain. And I'll explain this. Saturday was the day of confusion and grief. When everything fell apart. And Sunday was the day of freedom and joy.

Now here's the reality. You are going to face these three days repeatedly in your lifetime and you're going to find yourself asking three questions. Number one, what do I do? What do I do in the days of fear and pain? Then number two, how do

I get through the days of confusion and grief? And number three, how do I get to the days of freedom and joy? And the answers are all in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. So let's consider each day since you're going to go through these days many, many times, I have in my life many times, and let's see what they did.

Number one, Friday was the day of fear and pain. When you're facing a day of fear, when you're all afraid, and many people are still afraid at present because of covid, but there are other things which causes us to be afraid, like inflation, indiscriminate shootings, natural disasters, personal problems. When you are in the day of fear and pain, you need to do two things. You do the two things that Jesus did.

Number one, write this down, or take a picture **I need to reach out to friends.** Yeah, that's what Jesus did. I need to reach out to friends, draw close to friends. Before Jesus was betrayed and arrested and tortured, the very last thing he did was spend some time intimately with his friends in the upper room observing the Passover and then knowing the pain that he was about to face, he took his friends to his favorite place to pray. He got his friends together in the day of pain and in the day of fear.

Matthew chapter 26 says this: ***"Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane. That's a garden, his favorite place to pray. and he said to them, 'Sit here while I go over there and pray.' He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, 'My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.' Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed."***

This is Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane. Now, I want you to notice two startling facts about what I just read. First, even Jesus Christ needed the

presence of friends in fear and pain. And it is a mistake for you to try to handle pain alone. Your friends are just a click away, on Facebook, Instagram, whatever. Social media has its good points. We can be apart, but not alone.

Second thing is that Jesus was open and he was gut-level honest about the pain he was going through. In fact, here's what he said. He said, "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.*" Now, if Jesus Christ needed to be that open, if he needed friends and he needed to admit what he was feeling, you need to share your pain.

It is a mistake to not share the emotions you're going through. Emotions are meant to be felt. Feelings are simply feelings. They're meant to be felt. You don't repress them, you don't suppress them. You express them and you confess them. And you need to find a few friends that you can say, "I'm scared right now. I'm anxious right now. I'm hurting right now. I'm struggling right now." Galatians chapter 6 in the Bible says this, verse 2, *Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.* What is the law of Christ? Love your neighbor as yourself.

In times like this, in a crisis that brings out the good in some people, it brings out the bad in others. One day, someone asked the great Elie Wiesel, who was a prisoner at Buchenwald concentration camp, "Elie, how did you get through the horror of the Holocaust?" He replied, "God and friends, God and friends."

That's why here at Fil-Am, we put importance on becoming a part of a home group. There are two we have right now. The East Group and the West Group. We hope to add some more in the future just like it was during the pre-pandemic era. We also have a group for young people we call Young Adults Ministry. So, if you're not in any group, I encourage you and urge you to join one. Or if you want to start one, just let me know.

So the first thing I need to do on Friday, the day of fear and the day of pain, is I need to reach out to friends.

But second thing I need to do is reach out to God. **I need to reach out to God.** How do you do that? You pray. Imagine how it would feel if you were Jesus Christ knowing the pain you were about to face. What do you pray in times like that on the day of pain and fear? In Mark chapter 14:35-36 it says this: **"Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."**

Now follow me on this. Jesus knows he's facing the ultimate in physical pain, mental pain, emotional pain and spiritual pain. First, he knows that physically he's going to be beaten, wounded, tortured, kept from sleep, whipped with 39 lashes, put a thorn of crowns on his head, and nailed to a cross. He's going to have the ultimate and physical pain.

Second, mentally and emotionally, he's going to suffer humiliation, rejection, shame, disgrace and betrayal. Spiritually, he's going to carry the guilt of every ugly crime and every sin ever committed in history. He's going to pay for it all. He's going to take the guilt of every rape, of every murder, of every molestation, of every evil thing. Think about that. How would that feel to take the guilt, not simply my guilt, but the guilt of every sin, every person in history and the experience of the hell of separation from God, the Father? Wouldn't you cry out like he did on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Now in facing this pain on this first day, the Friday, the day of pain and fear, I want you to notice what Jesus prayed and whenever you are in pain and whenever you are in fear, you need to pray the Gethsemane prayer. What did he do? He did three things. First, he affirmed God's power. He said, "Father, I know you can do anything. I know you can solve this problem. I know you can turn it around."

Second, you express your desire. You say, "I don't want this pain." Well, Jesus did it. It's okay for you to do it. He said, "Father, if it's possible, I don't want to go through this. I don't want this pain." And that's okay.

But then third, you offer your trust and you say, "Nevertheless, I want your will not mine." That's the Gethsemane prayer. That's the prayer you pray on the day of fear and pain. Hebrews 2:18 in the Bible says this: *Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.*" He knows the pattern. He knows the power that we need.

Now, after Jesus finished his praying, the soldiers arrived and they arrested him. What did the disciples do? They ran away. They were all cowards. They fled the scene. Every one of them lost their faith on the night that Jesus was arrested and put to trial, mocked and tortured. Matthew 26 says this, verse 56, *"Then all the disciples deserted him and fled."* Did you know that? All the disciples fled Jesus on the night he arrested? One came back though the next day at his crucifixion, the apostle John when accompanied Mary the mother of Jesus.

Now, after Jesus died, he was taken down from the cross and he was buried and that leads us to the next day, at Saturday. Saturday represents the *day of confusion and grief.* You're going to have many days like this too. You'll have days of pain and fear, but you're also going to have days in life filled with confusion and grief.

Imagine the full range of emotions that the disciples are feeling when all of a sudden on Saturday their Savior, their Messiah, the one that they believe is the son of God is laying in a grave. They've got profound grief. They've got great loss. They are certainly disillusioned. This is not what they expected. I'm sure they were all full of doubt. I'm sure they were filled with regrets. If only we had stopped Judas. If we were more brave. They were filled with self-recrimination. They all ran away. Peter says, "I denied Jesus three times." They're filled with fear. Are

they going to kill us too? They're filled with confusion. What are we supposed to do now? This is the day of confusion. Saturday.

Jesus had warned them that this was going to happen. Matthew 26:31 in the Message paraphrase, it says this: *"Then Jesus told them, 'Before the night's over, you're going to fall to pieces because of what happens to me.'"* Jesus is warning them at the Passover. Your neat little world is about to fall apart.

Many of us are identifying with that right now. Your neat little world's going to fall apart. In Mark chapter 14 it says this, verse 27, *"'You will all fall away,' Jesus told them, 'for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.'"* And that's exactly what happened. They all went AWOL on Saturday, the day of confusion.

Now at that point, as I mentioned earlier, the disciples abandoned Jesus and ran away. Question, have you ever ran away from God out of confusion? Have you ever deserted God out of doubt? Have you ever left God out of pain? Most likely all of us had. The apostles were grieving because their master, their Lord, their Savior is in a grave. How do you get through the days of confusion and grief after a major loss? Well, the answer is this, write this down, *I need to remember the promises of God.*

Friday, I need to reach out to others and reach out to God. Saturday, *I need to remember the promises of God.* Now, right before Jesus was executed, he gave them a promise. John chapter 16, Jesus said this, here's what's going to happen. *Jesus went on to say, "In a little while you will see me no more, and then after a little while you will see me."* He's predicting his resurrection. *"Very truly I tell you, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a*

child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy." On the Saturdays of life, those are the days of grief, the days of loss. But he said, "I'll be back and you will rejoice and no one will be able to rob you of that joy."

Right now, everybody's going through a tough time. There are still the lingering effects of covid, the economic difficulties, the political turbulence, the war in Ukraine whose effects are felt here, the indiscriminate shootings, and what have you. And that's why you need to do what Jesus said to do. Immerse yourself in the promises in the Bible. Did you know that in the Bible there are over 7,000 promises of God to you? They're like blank checks. Now, if you have an insurance policy and you know what's covered in the policy, you don't worry about that because I know it's covered in the policy. The reason why you worry, you don't know what's covered in the policy. You don't know what God has promised to you and when you don't know the promises of God, you worry.

Now the Bible says in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, "*For no matter how many promises God has made, all 7,000 of them, they are "Yes" in Christ.*" So in dark and in confusing times what you need to do is to hang on what you know to be true. What do we know to be true? God sees everything you go through. God cares about everything you go through. God loves you unconditionally. You can't make God stop loving you. You can try, but you'll fail because God's love isn't based on what you do. It's based on who he is. God is love.

The Bible says God is close to you all the time. You might feel alone, but you're not alone. God's presence is not a feeling. It's a fact. And God says he grieves with you when you grieve. The Bible says God wants the best for you. The Bible says that God can bring good out of bad. You can't do that. I can't always do that, but God can. God specializes in turning crucifixions into resurrections.

Now, what happens when we don't remember the promises that God has made to us in his word? Real simple, we worry, we worry. I don't have time to go through the 7,000 promises with you, but let me just give you one this Easter. Isaiah chapter 43:2-3 God says: *"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the Lord your God."*

There are a lot of things that are out of your control. You need to turn to him and you need to trust him. If you hold onto the promises of God, you're inevitably going to make it to the third day and that's Sunday. Friday, the day of fear and pain. Saturday, the day of confusion and grief. Sunday is the **day of joy and freedom**.

The Bible says that when the disciples saw that Jesus had overcome death, it created an explosion of contagious joy. They're freed from their fears. They're freed from their anxieties. They're freed from their worries. They've all been forgiven, paid for on the cross. They're freed from their failures. Jesus had said, "When you know the truth, the truth will set you free." Why? Because Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." He also said, "And if the son sets you free," talking about himself, "you are truly free."

So, how do you get to the days of joy and freedom? Well, here's the third key. **I need to rely on the power of Jesus.** The same resurrection power that resurrected Jesus from the dead is available to you. You see, you can't do this on your own power. You've tried. There are things in your life you don't like about yourself and you'd like to change them. And if you could change them, you would, but you can't so you won't.

And willpower is not enough. It works in the short term, but eventually you get tired and you go back to your old ways. Only God's power can get you there. It

takes more than self-help. It takes more than self-effort. It takes more than positive thinking. It's not, I think I can, I think I can. I'm in favor of positive thinking. It's better than negative thinking. But it only works on stuff you can control. What about the stuff you can't control? You can't resurrect yourself. You need a savior. God has to do it for you and that's called salvation. God sent Jesus Christ to be your savior.

Now, to get through the worst days of your life, you need to rely on the power of Jesus. That's what Easter's all about. In John chapter 11:25-26 Jesus said this very famous statement, *"I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die."*

Now, many people couldn't believe that Christ had raised himself, but he did. And that's why billions of people have put their faith in Christ because death is not the end of the story. If God can resurrect the dead body, he can resurrect the dead marriage. If God can resurrect the dead body, he can resurrect a dead career. If God can resurrect the dead body, he can resurrect a dead dream.

Now, I want you to notice that the answer to your problem is not a principle. It's a person. He said, "I am the resurrection." You need to get to know Jesus. A lot of people know about him. I know who he is. I even believe he's the son of God. Fine, but my prayer for you this Easter is a prayer that's in the Bible. It's in Ephesians chapter 1. Here's the prayer I'm praying for you this Easter. *"I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead."*

Did you get that? The same power that raised Jesus from the dead 2,000 years ago, split the world into A.D. and B.C. He says that power is available to you

when you build a friendship with God and a relationship to Christ. That's why Paul says in Philippians chapter three:10, *"I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."*

Now, there's a life changing prayer that I hope you'll pray this Easter. It's from the Bible. It's Romans 10:9 and it says this, *"If you declare with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

Now what does that mean? The first phrase, what does it mean, Jesus is Lord? We don't live in the feudal system anymore. We don't have kings and queens and counts and vassals and lords and ladies and knights and squires. We don't live in a feudal system. So what does it mean to make Jesus the Lord of my life? It means to make him the manager, the boss, the CEO. When you make Jesus Christ the Lord of your life, you put on a sign that says under new management. He's not just resident in your life, he's president in your life. He calls the shots. You say I haven't been doing a very good job of managing my life, Jesus Christ, I was made to live in contact with God, be the manager of my life. That's what it means to make Jesus Lord.

Now, I'm going to lead you in a prayer in just a second. That could be the most life changing prayer in your life. I want to get you out of Friday and out of Saturday and into Sunday. I want to get you out of the days of pain and fear, out of the days of confusion and grief and get you into the days of freedom and joy. How do we do that? Every week at our church, we do several things. The first thing we do is at the end of every service, we recommit ourselves, our lives to God. We recommit our lives to Jesus Christ. I'm going to pray a prayer right now and I want to invite you to bow your head and follow me in this prayer.

Now, you don't actually have to say these same words. The words aren't as important as an attitude of humility that basically says to God, God, I need you. I'm not God. You're God and I'm not. God is God and I'm not, and I need you in my life. Jesus Christ, I thank you for dying for my sins. If you're ready to do that, you can follow me in this prayer. You don't have to say it aloud. You can say it in your mind. God knows the very thoughts you're thinking right now. But if you're by yourself in your home, I encourage you to say it aloud. Just say it. Pray this prayer aloud. It'll be the most important prayer you've ever prayed. You don't even have to close your eyes. Let's just say it.

Say this: Dear God, just say that, dear God, you know every fear I have and you know every pain I felt. God, you know what confuses me and you know what grieves me. And God, you know I've spent a lot of my life in the Fridays and Saturdays of life and I want to get to Sunday. I want to move from confusion and fear and pain and grief to freedom and joy. I don't understand it all, but thank you for sending Jesus Christ to die for me. To pay for all the things I've done wrong. I want to know your presence. I want to have a relationship to you. Not a religion, I want a relationship to you. I want a friendship with you starting today. I want to learn to live by your promises and I want to learn to rely on your power to get me through my most difficult days. Amen.