

RISE TO A HIGHER LEVEL (EASTER SUNDAY)

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So these three friends who died in an accident are up at the Pearly Gates. And they're asked the same question, and the question is: When you're lying in your casket, what would you like to hear your family and friends say about you?

And the first guy says, "Well, I would like them to say that I was one of the greatest doctors of my time and I was a great family man."

And then the second guy said, "Well, when I was in my casket, I'd like to hear them say I was a wonderful husband, a great schoolteacher and I worked really well with children."

And the last guy said, "What I would have really liked to hear laying there was, 'Hey, look! He's moving! He's moving!'" [Congregants laugh]

So could you imagine going to a funeral, and the person in the casket starts moving? And they come back to life? I mean, could you imagine witnessing something as miraculous as someone rising from the dead? I mean, wouldn't that be the most amazing thing ever?

Easter is the celebration of that very same miraculous event: the Resurrection of Jesus. You know, traditionally the Resurrection is seen as the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah -- by the atoning sacrifice of his life and through his blood -- we would be washed of our sins that we may have eternal life. In Unity, we don't see the Resurrection as a future promise or a passport to an afterlife, as much as we see it as a demonstration of the indestructible, invincible power of God to overcome all things, including death.

Easter reminds us that the resurrecting power of God -- that same resurrecting power -- is alive today and is available and accessible to all of us.

Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong said, *"The function of the Christ is not to rescue sinners, but to call you and empower you to be more deeply and fully human than you ever realized you had the potential to be. You and I are emerging people, not fallen people. Our problem is not that we are born in sin, but our problem is that we do not know yet how to achieve being fully human."*

And so what he is saying is that the Resurrection is not to save us, but to teach us; to awaken us; to uplift and inspire; to transform us. To empower us to rise to a higher level of ourselves; to rise to the best of our humanity and the best of our spirituality. To rise to the Christ potential that is in each of us.

You know, Jesus said, *"In this life, there will be trials and tribulations, but be of good cheer; for I have overcome the world."* You know, Jesus not only overcame death, but he overcame a lot of horrible human experiences like betrayal, hatred, injustice and abuse. You know, Easter is a time to be of good cheer; to remind ourselves that -- whatever it is we're facing in our lives, whatever we're struggling, whatever seems impossible, whatever seems hopeless and overwhelming -- that we can rise. That resurrecting power within us can help us rise and move beyond the difficulties to greater possibilities.

How many people have at least one area in your life that you would like to improve and take to another level? To a higher level? Anybody have something? Whether that is to take the level of inner peace and calmness to a higher level, you know, from the turmoil and struggle you might be going through. Maybe it is to take a higher level of joy and happiness from the frustration and difficulties. Maybe it is to achieve a higher level of wealth and success, instead of fighting and struggling just to get by. Maybe it is to a higher level of clarity and inner knowing, instead of being confused and uncertain.

Easter is an inspiring reminder for us to celebrate the risen Christ and to help us, tap into that same power to rise to the very best of ourselves.

And so today we're going to look at three Easter lessons from Jesus to help us rise to our Christ potential. The first one is to **LOOK AT HOW WE IDENTIFY OURSELVES**. Let me ask you, when you think of yourself, how do you think of yourself? How do you identify yourself? By your name? By your age? By your gender? By your job? By your body? By your achievements ... or what you didn't achieve? Or what you do well, or what you don't do well?

You know, these things aren't who we are! But sometimes we label ourselves some of these factual things. But sometimes we label ourselves some things that aren't healthy or just aren't good or true. Like, *"I'm a loser."* *"I'm such a knucklehead."* *"I just never get anything right."* *"With my luck, things will just go from bad to worse."* *"I'm just so clumsy; so unlucky."*

We have all kinds of things we say about ourselves ... Don't even realize -- repeating it over and over again -- and identify ourselves with these lesser versions of who we really are. Sometimes we put out ideas that we aren't enough: that we're not lovable; that we're not capable; that we're not worthy. And sometimes we feel more comfortable saying negative things about ourselves than saying positive things.

Sometimes we would say, you know, *"I just mess up"* or *"Blah, blah, blah,"* instead of saying, *"I'm fabulous!"* *"I'm amazing!"* *"I'm outstanding!"* We think if we go there, people will think we're conceited or narcissistic. And what all of this shows is that we're kind of don't really know who we are. We don't really identify and connect with our true nature of who we really are.

The Prodigal Son: you remember when he took his inheritance and squandered it all? And he was there eating with the pigs and the slops ... eating the slop of the pigs. And then it has a line there that turned everything around. It's a beautiful, simple little line, and it said, *"And then he came to himself."* And then he was able to rise and go back to his father, where he was celebrated.

And all that really takes place in us is that, when we come to ourselves -- to realize who we really are like he did ... He realized he was worthy of a better life than this. That he was the son of his father. That he was worthy. And that he was able to rise in consciousness to reunite with that awareness of his self-worth and who he really was.

You remember when Moses was being told by God to go tell Pharaoh to let his people go? And Moses said, *"Who should I say sent me?"* And He said, "Tell them I AM THAT I AM sent you." God is the I AM THAT I AM. And we -- the "I AM" in us -- is that Spirit of God in us. And we need to be careful of what we attach our identity to; what we attach our "I AM" to. To say, *"I am a loser,"* or *"I am a hot mess,"* or *"I am bad luck,"* we are misidentifying who we really are; misrepresenting and disconnecting from the nature of who we are.

And how we see ourselves a hundred percent reflects on what we attract and experience and how things go in our lives.

You know, Jesus was always identifying himself, not as a 33-year-old single man or a rabbi or a teacher. He identified himself as the Christ. Listen to his "I AM" statements. He said, *"I AM the light of the world."* He said, *"I AM the bread of life."* *"I AM the true vine."* *"I AM the way, the truth and the life."* *"I AM" the Resurrection.* *"I AM the Christ, the Son of the living God."* He identified at his highest level and nature; that gave him an awareness and a power to move through things at a higher level and not just be caught down thinking that we're "less than"; that we're losers or a hot mess.

"I am a child of God."

Let's say that together: [with congregation] *"I am a child of God."*

I am made in the image and likeness of God together."

[With congregation:] *"I am made in the image and likeness of God."*

"I am the temple of the living God."

[Congregation:] *"I am the temple of the living God."*

"I am the light of the world."

[Congregation:] *"I am a spiritual being."*

"I am a unique expression of God."

[Congregation:] *"I am a unique expression of God."*

"I am a son or daughter of the living God." Whichever you are, say it!

[Congregation:] *"I am a son/daughter of the living God."*

Amen. That's who you are! And it's to identify this highest nature of who we are.

And the truth is: we need to do it on a regular basis, because sometimes we'll forget. Sometimes life will pull us into a situation and we will forget. You know, the fact is: that we are all meant to be eagles who are able to fly. We're meant to fly! But sometimes we act like turkeys who are scratching on the ground. And we need to remind ourselves, because we forget.

You remember in *The Lion King*, what did Mufasa say to Simba? The thing that helped him? He said, [in deep voice] *"Simba, remember who you are."* Because the truth is: we forget. Simba was so afraid that he made a mistake, and he'd messed up so badly he didn't think he was good enough to lead. But the truth is: he was meant to be a leader. He was of royal blood. But he wasn't behaving or acting like it, because he wasn't believing it.

And the fact is: every one of us has to believe our true nature. We're amazing spiritual beings! We're unique expressions of the Divine! And we need to believe that and identify our truth with that.

You know, Jesus would remind himself, saying, *"The Father and I are one."* The Father and I are one. Think of what your phrase would be for those moments when you forget that'll bring you back. And whether it's, *"I am a child of God," "I am God's beloved child" or "I am an expression of God" -- or whatever it is! -- come up with your little mantra.*

You know, when Paul said, *"Be transformed by the renewing of your mind,"* he meant we're going to forget, but we've got to keep renewing it. Find your little powerful message – "I am the light of the world" or whatever it is. Your "I AM" statement and hold to it. Because the better we identify at our higher spiritual level, the higher we will rise in the way we show up in life.

The second one is to **PURIFY**. The first one is to identify; the second is to purify.

You ever felt, like, betrayed? Anybody ever been hurt by someone's unkindness? Or being treated unfairly? And have you ever gotten a place where you got so hurt that you kept playing it over in your head again? Over and over? Just all day, just rerunning it? Anybody ever get into an argument with that person in your head: telling them off, giving them a piece of your mind in your mind? Anybody ever do that? [Congregants laugh]

The only problem is: when you give someone a piece of your mind -- P-I-E-C-E -- we give them our peace of mind -- P-E-A-C-E. This was a lot more impressive if you saw it written down, rather than saying it! [Congregants laugh] But it is! Because the fastest way to lose your peace of mind is holding on to some grudge; holding on to some regret or anger or bitterness and keep replaying it over and over again. And

if we want to be greater channels -- if we want to rise to a higher level of our spiritual presence -- we need to purify. We need to release and let those things go.

In the book of Matthew, here's what it says. Chapter 5, Verse 23: "Therefore, if you are presenting your offering at the altar, and then remember that your brother has something against you, leave your offering there before the altar and go. First, be reconciled to your brother, and then come and present your offering."

Basically what that's saying is: if you want to feel a greater connection to God -- if you want to feel a communion and a sense of oneness -- we've got to reconcile and purify whatever it is that's going on with us. And whether it's forgiveness or making amends -- or whatever it is -- to clean that up; to purify; to be a greater open channel. That we need to do it.

Jesus easily, after being mistreated the way he was mistreated, could have held some grudges. He could have been bitter. He could have been hateful and unforgiving. But each time chose to be forgiving. And he emphasized it so much more; when he was asked, "*How many times should I forgive? As many as seven?*" He said, "*Oh ...*" He said, "*No; as many as 70 times seven!*" The number seven represents completion. So by him saying, "*70 times seven,*" he's saying to do it all the time. It's not just a "once-in-a-while" thing. It's always have a mindset of continuing to purify yourself: releasing and letting go any of the upsets or hurts as they come so they don't build up, so we can keep our consciousness and our heart pure and open.

I did see an interesting quote and here's what it said. It says, "*You don't have to forgive every time. The only time you need to forgive is if you want to have peace and happiness. But other than that ...*" [Laughs with congregation]

Every day we need to ask ourselves these questions. I mean, every day. What is it that I'm holding on to that it's time for me to let go? What in my life is it time to release? Who do I need to forgive? And what do I need to forgive myself for?

Psalms 51 has a powerful line. It says, "*Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me.*" And so it's when our hearts are purified -- when our hearts are clean -- that is when we are in our right consciousness, our right mind. That's when we are the greatest channels to allow God to flow through us.

And sometimes the things that happen to us are not going to be fair; they're not going to be kind; they're not going to be good; they're not going to be nice. And we still need to choose to forgive. Because to not do it is to inflict punishment on ourselves; to keep hurting ourselves by reliving that unfortunate pain.

Jesus put it this way, He said, "*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.*" And what He is saying is: forgive them for acting this way, because they don't realize that they're hurting themselves, and robbing themselves, and sabotaging and undermining the very peace and happiness we want by holding on to grudges and holding on to resentment.

One of the Beatitudes says, "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*" The more we're able to purify; the more we're able to forgive; the more we're able to release and let go, the clearer we can see the Spirit and the presence of God in all life, and especially within ourselves.

So it is identify; purify; and the last one is **EXEMPLIFY**.

If the world was following your lead -- if you were the example that the entire world was following -- would you be happy with the direction you're leading the world? You know, Jesus was the great example. Not the great exception; he was the great example to show us how to live up to the Christ

standard. How to fulfill our Christ potential. And he's also calling each of us to be an example of the Christ for ourselves and for others. Easter is not just to observe; it is to embody. It's not just to celebrate; it is to demonstrate.

Og Mandino, in his book, *The Greatest Miracle in the World*, said, "*The greatest miracle in the world is coming back from the living dead.*" That when we feel stuck or our life feels lifeless -- when we feel like we're just going through the motions or thinking, "*My life will just never get better than this*" -- that when we rise from that with a new consciousness, coming up with new perspectives, new actions, we will open up to new possibilities, new opportunities and new results and new outcomes.

What is one quality that you could embody in a greater way and exemplify in a greater way that would make an absolute difference in your life, in your family, and in our world? Would it be patience? Would it be kindness? Would it be compassion? Would it be joy? Would it be friendliness? Because whatever it is that we would demonstrate and bring to life, I guarantee will make an absolute difference.

You know, my brother was visiting a couple of weeks ago, and we were driving around. And at the corner of Camelback and 7th Street, we saw a homeless guy holding up a cardboard sign. When I first saw the sign, I thought, "*Wow! Those letters were so beautiful; the penmanship was incredible.*" And they were huge letters. I mean, really, I'd never seen bigger letters; more perfect writing. It was absolutely gorgeous. Only two words written on it. And it said, "*Change please.*"

And so I'm thinking, you know, the guy's having a hard time and he's asking for some change. You got any spare changed to help him out? And he did it politely: "*Change please.*" I just thought that was very cool. But those words kept running around in both of our heads. There's something more here! I think he wasn't just asking for money. I think he may have been planting a seed and giving all of us a spiritual reminder that, if we want our lives in this world to get better, that we're all called to change, please. To improve or to better or transform ourselves in some way. That, if we all did that, this would be a better world and it would be a better place.

And as we turned the corner, I literally just smiled at how insightful and wise -- using those two words that gave me two powerful, different messages, but absolutely changed me in great ways and invites us all to change.

So I ask you: What is one way you would change yourself that would make a difference and be a great example of your Christ self?

I mentioned a book a few years ago, and it's called *Ditch the Act: Reveal the Surprising Power of the Real You for Greater Success*. It was by a guy named Leonard Kim ... 10 years struggling and building companies, making lots of money. Never satisfied; always trying to do what looked like he was a success. So he always pursued that, and it was never enough. And so, finally, he lost everything and he's sitting in his grandmother's basement, and he starts blogging about his failures; his frustration; his depression; all the expected beliefs he had; and all the reasons he was motivated to do all these things. Within six months, he had two million followers. Within 18 months, he had 10 million followers! And he just did it by being honest. Just sharing exactly what was going on with him.

And when he started tuning into himself -- of what he really wanted, and what he really wanted to do, and what he was really interested in for him to fulfill -- his life just started to change in great ways. And he started helping other companies be honest with themselves -- being authentic, pursuing what was their heart's calling and desire. And they started being helped. He became an example of authenticity. And by him being more authentic, it blessed his life and it blessed the lives of so many others.

And so what is one way that you would be committed to be an example of? To take a stand for? To express that Christ quality? Whatever it is -- whether it's patience or love or kindness -- are you willing to commit to that? To bless your life, but also to be a blessing to others?

Hey, anybody see that movie called *The Holdovers*? I think it was up for an Academy Award. So far, about four people in the previous services have, so now ... [Laughs] But here's what it was. So I haven't seen the end of the movie yet, but it's about like a curmudgeonly teacher -- he's really kind of cranky; and a troublemaking smart student; and the head cook who lost her son. I think her son died in Vietnam. And they have to stay over the Christmas holidays at this private school. And it's kind of how they get to know each other and help each other.

At the beginning of the movie, the teacher is in with the headmaster, and the headmaster said this quote by Cicero. And he said, "*Not for us alone are we born.*" Not for us alone are we born. And this show shows how these different people from different backgrounds were able to teach and to uplift and support and inspire and love one another. And the fact is: we aren't just born for ourselves; we have been born for others. Yes, those around us, but sometimes the people we don't even know. That our example; the way we show up; a smile; the encouraging words that we speak absolutely make a difference. Us showing up at our best blesses us, but it blesses more people than you can realize; more people than we would maybe even ever know.

It is a powerful and important thing to be a good example; to show up in our very best. To lift ourselves to the Christ standard.

You know, Jesus said to Mary ... It was after he had risen, so she didn't recognize him. And she's looking around for Jesus, and he says, "*Why do you seek the living among the dead?*"

And one of the things is: is that sometimes we play small. Sometimes we run away and avoid life. And that's the dead. And we don't want to be there! We want to be among the living: those who are trying; those who are risking; those who are working and loving and sharing. Those who are really in the arena, giving it their very best shot to live their very best life and be their very best selves.

Fabulous quotes: 2 Corinthians 30. It says, "*And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the likeness of Christ from one degree of glory to another.*" Let me read it again. "*And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the likeness of Christ from one degree of glory to another.*"

And it is saying: when we show up unveiled -- just with the truth of who we are -- we will be absolutely transformed to that Christ consciousness and that Christ level.

Two brothers -- ages seven and eleven -- are fighting over who gets the largest pancake. The mother comes into the dining area from the kitchen and says, "*This is a teaching moment. What would Jesus do?*" And she said, "*Jesus would give his brother the pancake.*" So the mother leaves. Then the eldest brother grabs the large pancake and says, "*You be Jesus.*" [Laughs with congregation]

Easter is a miraculous celebration. It is also an incredible reminder of the overcoming power of God that is alive and available and accessible to each and every one of us. If we are willing to identify at the highest nature of our spiritual selves; if we're willing to purify our hearts through forgiving and release; and if we're willing to exemplify and demonstrate that Christ potential, that will truly help us have a great Easter and help us to rise to our highest and best.

God bless you all! [Congregants applaud]