

"An Easter for Pool Halls and Greasy Spoons"

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¹After the sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. ²And 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. ³His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. ⁴For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men. ⁵But the angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. ⁶He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. ⁷Then 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." ⁸So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples. ⁹Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him. ¹⁰Then 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)

There are really just two things I want to say to you this morning. The messages are simple and straightforward, but I think the best way to share them with you is through two stories. There is a reason that Jesus taught with stories, so I figure if it is good enough for Jesus, it is good enough for us, especially on Easter Sunday.

The first story is about a pastor named Wayne Reece.¹ It was Easter weekend in the early 1960s. Reverend Reece had not yet graduated from seminary, but he was already pastoring four small churches in the Texas panhandle. On this first Easter as a pastor, he wanted his Easter sermon to be as good as possible. He had labored on it long and hard, building a solid biblical framework, accenting it with some lofty quotes from modern theologians, and finishing with a garnish of a few good clean jokes. The night before Easter Sunday, Reece hosted a group of youth from his four churches. He ended up having to take one of them home. Of course, this kid lived way out in the country. It was only after he had dropped the boy off that Reece realized that he had not filled the car up earlier in the day. The engine started to sputter and lurch, and almost immediately Reece found himself stranded along a dark roadside in the middle of nowhere in northern Texas. He scanned the horizon and saw nothing -- no lights, no houses, certainly no gas stations. So he just started walking. Finally, out in the distance, he saw a faint glow. As he neared it, he began to hear twangy music. Then he was able to make out the parking lot, which was full of pickup trucks and motorcycles. It was a country roadhouse. He'd never been in one before, and he really didn't know what to expect inside, but he knew he had no choice but to go in.

As the loose wooden door slammed shut behind him, he noticed three guys playing pool in a little room off to the left. He figured that was as good a place as any to find some help. As soon as he walked in, one of the men came right up to him.

"Hey I'm Eric," he said. "You wanna play some pool?" Chances are pretty good that this young Methodist pastor looked like a pretty easy mark.

¹ Details of this story come from Wayne Reece's own telling of "Easter in a Texas Roadhouse" on "The Moth" Radio Hour, <https://themoth.org>; also at https://www.nypl.org/sites/default/files/events/LIVEOMG_10.21Transcript.doc.

"Sure, why not," Reece answered. "I used to play a bit back in high school." It did not take long to figure out who was being hustled. Eric let his new guest break, and Reece proceeded to run the table.

Eric, who had never taken a shot, stated the obvious. "Uh-oh," he said to his friends, "we've got a pool shark in our midst." It turns out that Eric was the nice one in the bunch. The other two weren't so happy about a new guy moving in on their hustling territory. One of them got very direct: "I want you to tell us why you are in our neighborhood."

"Okay," Reece replied innocently, "well, I'm the new preacher at the Tioga Methodist Church. I was on my way back, but I ran out of gas. I've got to find a way to get home because I'm preaching at four churches in the morning and because it's Easter."

The guy who hadn't said anything, whose name was Roy, finally chimed in. "What's Easter?" he asked. The other guys laughed at what seemed to them a clearly stupid question.

"Honestly," Roy said, "I've never been to church before and I want to know the story about Easter."

As they sat down in a nearby booth, Reece's pastoral mind began to race. He honestly wondered what he should say, how he should tell that old, old story to this guy who would be hearing it for the very first time. He thought about the sermon he had already written for the next morning, with its lofty language and corny jokes and quotes from Paul Tillich. But he decided to go another way.

"Well," Reece said, "there was this guy named Jesus and he gathered twelve guys around him and they were his gang. They roamed the countryside together and they talked about peace and justice and love and God, and they did great things, but the authorities wanted to get him and so they tried to find ways of either capturing him or killing him."

He threw in a few more details, but he figured he better get to the Easter part. "One night one of the gang ratted him out to the authorities, and so they caught Jesus and the next day they hanged him on a tree and they killed him. Two days later, some of the gang went to try to find him in the tomb where they had laid him, and he wasn't there, and they searched around and asked around, and finally someone said, 'God has raised Jesus from the dead and has given him new life.' Now, Roy, that's the story of Jesus, and that's the story of Easter."

"Man," Roy said, "that's an awesome story."

"Well, I believe in an awesome God," Reece replied.

The four men sat in silence for a few moments. Then Eric stood up and addressed the group. "Let's go get the Shark some gas."

So Reece got on the back of a motorcycle with some new friends and a new nickname. They evidently found some gas to siphon somewhere -- Reece didn't ask questions -- and pretty soon he was back in his car on the way home.

That night, before he finally went to bed, Reece scrapped his old sermon and wrote a new one -- one that told the story in much simpler terms. Remember that he served four churches, and as he pulled into Tioga to give that sermon for the fourth time, he found everyone dressed up in their Easter finest. As the first hymn started, the congregation heard a roar of engines enter the parking lot. Almost immediately, seven guys in black leather sauntered into the back door. The usher in the back looked at Reece with a look that said "what in the world do I do?" Kind of answering his own question, he turned to the men and blurted out the first thing that came to his mind. "Can I help you?" As usual, Eric spoke first. "Yeah," he said, "we're here to hear the Shark tell the story of Easter. Again."

Fast forward now about twenty years, to Honolulu, Hawaii.² The preacher and evangelist Tony Campolo had been invited to speak at a conference, but he was having trouble with the time difference. He woke up at 3 a.m. and couldn't get back to sleep. He finally decided he should just get up and find something to eat. The only place that was open at that hour was a small greasy spoon. And, let's just say, the spoons were not the only greasy things in there. He didn't even want to touch the menu, so when a guy in a dirty white apron lumbered over to take his order, he just asked for coffee and a donut.

Right then, the door flew open and about 8 or 9 rowdy prostitutes came stumbling in. As the only patron, Campolo had taken a seat right in the middle of the counter. So the group divided and took all of the other seats. The jet-lagged preacher was now surrounded by Honolulu prostitutes. He tried to make himself very small, but he couldn't help but overhear their loud conversations. One of them a few seats down leaned out and addressed the whole crowd. "Hey, everybody," she said. "Tomorrow is my birthday. I'm going to be 39."

A woman seated beside her responded immediately. "So what? So, it's your birthday. What do you want me to do about it? Do you think I'm going to throw you a party or somethin'?"

"Why do you have to be so mean?" she replied. "I don't expect you to do anything. I've never had a party in my whole life – why should I expect one now?"

After a while the women cleared out, leaving the preacher alone again with the fat guy in the apron. "Do they come in here every night?" he asked the cook. "Those girls? Yeah, they come in here a lot."

"The woman that was sitting right there, does she come in here every night?" "Agnes? Yeah, she's here every night. Why do you ask?"

"I heard her say her birthday is tomorrow. Why don't you and I set this place up and throw her a birthday party tomorrow night?" The cook's face lit up immediately. "That's a great idea!" He called back to his wife in the kitchen, "Hey, honey, this guy wants to throw a birthday party for Agnes tomorrow night!"

The wife came out from the back and grabs his hand, saying that would be a wonderful idea. "I know this sounds strange," the wife says, "but she is a really nice person and she's done many wonderful things for people" [which, you know, was probably right in a way].

The fat guy insisted on baking and decorating the cake, so Campolo said he'd get the decorations. The next day, after the conference, he bought some crepe paper streamers and made a poster board sign with "Happy Birthday Agnes!" written on it. The next night, early in the morning, the three of them decorated the diner. As early morning came, it became apparent that word had gotten out on the streets of Honolulu. By 3 a.m., the place was packed. Every prostitute in Honolulu showed up. And there they all were: 40 prostitutes and the reverend.

When Agnes walked in, the place erupted in unison with a loud "Happy Birthday!" She was completely stunned. All she could do was stand there in shock. The group launched into the birthday song, and as the last verse came to a close, the fat guy came in with the birthday cake blazing with 39 candles. When she saw the cake, she lost it. Tears began to flow down her cheeks. She began to tremble. Still she didn't say a word.

"Blow out the candles, Agnes!" the cook yelled. "Blow out the candles." She just stood there paralyzed. She didn't move. She didn't say anything. The cook couldn't stand it. "Blow out the candles, Agnes! If you don't blow out the candles, I will!" So he did, and then immediately moved to the next thing. "Cut the cake, Agnes! Cut the cake..."

² Story by Tony Campolo delivered at Windy Gap, NC in October 1989, recorded by Life Giving Tapes, Pineville, NC.

At that moment, she finally spoke. "Hey, let me keep the cake. Can I? It's OK right? I've never had one before. I just want to keep it for a few days. Can I just take it to my apartment?" Of course, they all said she could. She picked the cake up off the counter, and the crowd parted as she carried the first birthday cake she had ever received out the door, carrying it like it was the most precious thing in the world.

When the door closed behind her, there room was completely silent. No one moved. No one said a word. The preacher didn't know what to do. Finally he simply said, "What do you say we pray?" So, at 4 a.m., in a greasy spoon in Honolulu, the preacher led 40 prostitutes in a reverent and solemn prayer. They prayed that Agnes would be comforted. They prayed that the Lord would bring her peace, that God would plant his joy in her, and that Christ fill her life with the power of his life.

When they had all said "Amen," it was, again, the cook who spoke first. "Hey, you didn't say you were a preacher. What kind of church do you preach in?"

And in one of those moments when the Holy Spirit gives you just the right words at just the right time, he answered "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

"No you don't," he answered. "I would join a church like that."

Who wouldn't? Who wouldn't want to be part of a church like that?

I told you that there are really just two things I want to say to you this morning. The first is that **there really is new life in Jesus**. That is the real story of Easter, regardless of where that story is told, regardless of whether you hear it first as an 8 year old in church or as a fifty year old in a Texas roadhouse. Jesus had a gang that loved him. One of them ratted him out, and the authorities killed him. But on the third day, that grave was empty and full of light. The Shark was right: the story of Easter is that God gave Jesus new life.

The second thing is that **this new life is for you**. It doesn't matter who you are or where you are. It doesn't matter what you have done or what you have failed to do. The new life that God gave to Jesus on the first Easter is the same new life that God offers to you today. You do not have to earn it. It is simply given to you as a gift of love. That is why the empty tomb is such good news for preachers and pool sharks, for roadhouse hustlers and Honolulu prostitutes, for you and for me. It is a message that can hold its own - without apology or embarrassment -- in any pool hall or greasy spoon.

I think Roy probably said it the simplest and the best: "Man, that's an awesome story."

Thanks be to God. Amen.