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# “Happy to Be Here”

Matthew 28:1-10

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*After the Sabbath, as the first day of the week was dawning, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb. And 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. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him the guards shook and became like dead men.*

*But the angel said to the women, "Don't be afraid. I know that you're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He's not here. For he's been raised, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He's been raised from the dead, and indeed he's going ahead of you to Galilee. There you'll see him.' This is my message for you."*

*So, they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell his disciples.*

*Suddenly Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!"*

*And they came to him, took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.*

*Then Jesus said to them, "Don't be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee. There they'll see me."*

*Matthew 28:1-10*

For a Valentine's Day episode of This American Life, they told love stories, but not the usual kind. One was a quirky little tale about a couple, Richard and Linda, who had been married for nine years and had two kids. One evening the family went for ice cream and Linda recognized a man in the store, a former boyfriend looking better than ever.

His name was David. He was a psychologist like Linda. She and her old flame engaged in some small talk with just

a hint of flirting. Linda and her family left, but this chance encounter was all she could think about.

When she got to work on Monday, there was a long message from David. She ignored it, but he called again. She knew better, but thought it could not hurt to return his call. David suggested they get together for coffee. Linda decided to ask her husband Richard what he thought about her going for coffee. He admitted he was not thrilled, but he trusted her.

He said, "Whatever you think."

Linda confessed that she could hardly stop fantasizing about this man from her past. In a moment of brilliance and tenderness, Richard put his arms around his wife and said, "Honey, I'm so sorry I don't do that for you anymore."

That was all.

Just, "Honey, I'm so sorry I don't do that for you anymore."

Linda called David and told him she was married to a wonderful man, and for David never to call her again. She felt alive and joyful. She realized what she had.

In a day when so many are always looking for greener grass, Linda and Richard's story is inspiring. There is something wonderful to be said for faithfulness after the thrill is gone. There is something holy about staying with it, even when we do not feel like it (This American Life, February 1998, ep. 93).

We know what it is like when the sparkle is gone, when our get up and go has gotten up and gone. If we were on Broadway, we would be Kimberly Akimbo, who ages 4½ times faster than everyone else, so she is a teenager who looks 72. Some days we can imagine how she feels.

We choose our duller clothes, because we do not want to waste a good outfit on a boring day. We skip breakfast because nothing sounds good. We lose 20 minutes on Facebook, 20 on Twitter, or 20 on Instagram—or all three.

What we really want to do is spend the day on the couch, with a pint of Chunky Monkey in one hand and our favorite glass of red in the other, watching the Real Housewives of New Jersey, but we know this is not a scientifically-proven technique for feeling better. On our zombie days, the lower energy we feel, the less we do, the worse we feel, and the cycle continues. We feel anxious, panicky, more tired than usual, unable to sleep, angry, frustrated, low on confidence, low on self-esteem, unable to have fun, and unable to concentrate on what we're supposed to be doing.

We just can't get over our ex. We bombed our big presentation. We had a big fight with our partner. We feel like the people closest to us are having secret meetings to talk about how to be more irritating. We eat too much, drink too much, and complain too much.

Some days showing up is about all we can manage. We do not need a particular reason to feel uninterested, dull, and dreary, because we know death every day. Dead relationships. Dead capacities to dream. A killed sense of purpose. A killed hope. A killed faith. We feel dead even though our hearts keep pumping. We are tired of the news, tired of senseless death.

We have had a hard three years of a global pandemic, political turmoil, racial injustice, mass shootings, unjustified wars, natural disasters, and a struggling economy. When

Covid cases began to decrease, we wanted to be hopeful. We wanted to return to normal, but the new normal is hard.

Covid resulted in the loss of six million lives worldwide. Economies have changed. Marketplaces are different. Our jobs are not the same. Our children's lives are not the same. Injustices have been exposed. Extreme voices have become mainstream. The world is different.

According to the World Health Organization, issues related to the pandemic triggered a 25 percent increase in anxiety and depression worldwide. Pick any day and the news is much the same. Here a school shooting, there a terrible accident, everywhere a tragedy, floods and tornadoes, bombings and massacres, household beatings and drive-by fatalities, and blood and tears.

We do not need reporters to tell us about broken hearts. When we gather in this sanctuary, we put on our best face, but we bring a variety of heartaches. The daily toll of a parent with Alzheimer's. The pain of a broken marriage. The loss of a job. The estrangement from family. The challenge of an illness. The diminishment of aging. The anguish of an unrequited love. The poor judgement that led to a terrible mistake. The loneliness that follows the loss of a loved one. Some days it feels like everyone is dealing with a crisis.

We come to church and it feels much the same. We listen to the prayers, but do not pray. We sing, but do not feel anything. We give money, but do not give ourselves. Some days we wish the minister would preach shorter sermons. We get tired of being told to love people we do not like. Talking to someone from another tax bracket, another race, or another generation does not seem worth

the trouble. When our lives are unexciting, tedious, and lackluster, when God seems far away, we are tempted to give up on faith and hide, forget that we are Christians, and give ourselves to boredom, selfishness, and blindness.

What do we do when the thrill is gone, when there is no sparkle, when love has died, when hope has left the building? Most give up and give in, but a few keep trying, keep showing up. Every story that ends with good news begins with sad news. Every story with a happy ending has a hard part. It is true for this story.

Love has died, dead like never before. Their world has come to an end. The finest human being they know is dead. His life was spent seeking out the rejected, caring for the distraught, and restoring life itself. When he is a little more than thirty, the government executes him for wanting things to be better, blessing the peacemakers, caring for the hurting, feeding the hungry, and challenging the powers that be.

These two women watched him die horribly. Unlike the twelve, who headed for the hills, they saw the spear planted in his side, the corpse loosened from the cross, carried away, and closed up in a tomb. What are they supposed to do now? The male disciples decide to hide and try to forget they were ever disciples.

The women are made of sterner stuff. They will go to the tomb. They do not expect anything. They are not going with any secret hope. They just keep showing up, even after their hope is dead.

This is how Easter begins—not with trumpets and everybody singing, Christ the Lord is Risen Today, but with women coming to cry, because their love for Jesus did not

die when Jesus died. In Matthew's story, Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph are standing there waiting faithfully for nothing. The stone is gone and the tomb is empty. They assume that Christ has been taken away.

When the gospels describe the tomb, it is not in a garden full of lilies and tulips, with pastel duckies, chicks chirping, and a few brightly colored eggs hidden under the foliage. The tomb is on a fault line where an earthquake cracks the ground. An angel who looks like lightning drops from the sky, rolls back the huge stone, and sits on it. Security is not expecting anything either. The guards faint dead away at the very moment the angel is about to announce that the one who was dead is alive.

The women hear this unlikely to be followed advice, "Don't be afraid. "I know you're looking for Jesus, the one they nailed to the cross. He isn't here. Come and look at the empty place where they thought he'd stay. Then go tell his followers."

The women who came hoping to find nothing, there only out of their own faithfulness, are suddenly deep in wonder and full of the joy that comes when life shows up unexpectedly. As they run like mad to tell the others they are met by the very one we are looking for. They fall to their knees, hug Jesus, and worship him.

Jesus says, "You're holding on to me for dear life, but there's nothing to be afraid of. Go tell my friends that they'll see me."

That is the promise. If we keep showing up, even when we are not feeling it, we will see God. If we keep showing up, we will have moments when we are excited

about our lives and our faith. What should we do when the thrill is gone? We should stay with it, day after day. We should keep doing the things Jesus did.

We should worship, giving ourselves to grace. We open our hearts to moments when the prayers become our prayers. We sing from deep within. We are glad to give. We listen to the stories, because they are our stories.

Share what we have with God's children. Forgive, even the irritating people we live with. Listen to the lonely, even when we wish we had not answered the phone. Serve those who are needy, sick and dying—even when we do not feel like it. Then we will have moments when we want to help. We look for conversations with people whose lives are different from ours. We love those close to us as much as we can.

When we are not feeling sparkly, we keep showing up. We get up and move. Brush our teeth. Wash our face. Sit in a sunny window and drink a cup of coffee. Eat something healthy. Bake something delicious. Wash the dishes by hand.

Get out of the house. Go outside. Take a walk. Walk the dog. Go for a run. Work in the garden.

Find a way to laugh. Or cry if it will make us feel better. Look through old photographs. Take some new ones.

Do something kind. Reconnect with someone. Talk to someone we love. Listen to music. Sing about what we are feeling. Write about what we are feeling. Pray about what we are feeling. Think about things for which we are grateful. Focus on what we have, more than on what we don't. Think about what truly matters.



Breathe and see that God is in us. Listen and see that God is speaking. Touch and see that God is here. Behold and see that God is beautiful. Savor and see that God is good.

The great gift of Easter is hope that lifts us from dullness, loneliness, and despair to strength, beauty, and happiness. We may think the thrill is gone, but if we keep following Jesus, even to the tomb, we will find him, or he will find us.

The women did not expect anything out of the ordinary when they went to the grave, but their faithfulness led them to God. Sometimes God comes like an earthquake and sometimes it is a still small voice, but it is always hope. We know that God has shown up, that Easter has happened when we reconsider the dullness that tempts us, and see that life in God is more beautiful, wonderful and honest, when we are surprised to find we love our neighbor, when we give a good gift, when we stand up for the left out, when we work hard for free, and when celebration is the only thing that makes sense.

God meets us in our faithfulness and replaces despair with joy, sorrow with hope, and death with life. If we keep our hearts open, the stones roll away. God raises us to life. God calls us to joy. We come to Easter in faithfulness, to hear the music, remember the story, and let God put the sizzle back into the romance of life.