

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Strong Back, Soft Front, Wild Heart

John 20:1-8

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John 20:1-8 Common English Bible (CEB)

20 Early in the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been taken away from the tomb. ² She ran to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said, “They have taken the Lord from the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him.” ³ Peter and the other disciple left to go to the tomb. ⁴ They were running together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to arrive at the tomb. ⁵ Bending down to take a look, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he didn’t go in. ⁶ Following him, Simon Peter entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ He also saw the face cloth that had been on Jesus’ head. It wasn’t with the other clothes but was folded up in its own place. ⁸ Then the other disciple, the one who arrived at the tomb first, also went inside. He saw and believed.

I want to start out today by sharing something I saw yesterday at the Easter Egg Hunt. Here at the church we had an Easter Egg hunt and we had several different hunts. Each hunt was divided into 4 age groups each group with its own divided territory to stay in. Well Brian Hunter down at First UMC was our announcer, he yelled go. The kids all dashed out and frantically started picking up eggs. As they went eggs got missed, because kids were looking far ahead of them. In fact later in the hunts we put a whole row of eggs on the far end. After most of the kids passed by me, as I stood in the middle, I saw one younger child from probably the smallest age group. Was he staying in the

boundaries of the races? No, he was going from the little kids to the big kids area, crossing the ribbon dividing each, getting all the eggs that got passed over. I thought to myself, "That kid, he has it figured out."

(Look under your chairs, find empty Easter eggs)

What did you find? Bet you are going to be wonder what that has to do with the sermon today, or maybe you guessed.

So today in our scripture we have one of the disciples who doesn't always seem to have it all together, in fact history has dealt Mary Magdalene a low hand of now being the pure and even at times the church has called her unholy. Yet, on Easter morning here she is going to the tomb to care for Jesus and she crosses into the tomb only to find Jesus gone. I love this Gospel reading because Mary, doesn't wait for anyone to tell her what has happened. She runs away in terror, scared someone has stolen their beloved leader, and friend's body. She runs to Peter and of course Peter doesn't believe her. He is a man, he has to check it out on his own. He is thinking, "Why would they do that?" He runs to the tomb with a shadowed figure, an unknown disciple which I think the gospel writer intends to remind us of ourselves. There at the tomb they find the cloth that had laid on Jesus body and face, and saw the imprint where the oils were on the cloth. They leave confused, this is the part I didn't read, and then Mary stays behind weeping. A man wonders why she is crying, asks her. Then she realizes it is Jesus, and he has been raised. This woman who is known from crossing barriers has crossed the biggest one, she knows first that Jesus resurrection has happened and new life and new creation is possible.

At Shiloh in preparation for Easter we have been studying how to have courage in the wilderness. We have been studying the ways of Jesus along with a book by Brené Brown called *Braving the Wilderness* to understand how we are called to be brave in

our current age, and specifically to understand how living has people of resurrection, of new hope and new creation can change our lives.

(PROJECT 1)



Courage in the Wilderness

**YOU ARE ONLY FREE WHEN YOU
REALIZE YOU BELONG NO
PLACE—YOU BELONG EVERY
PLACE—NO PLACE AT ALL. THE
PRICE IS HIGH. THE REWARD
IS GREAT.**

- MAYA ANEGLOU

In our work we have looked at one phrase from Maya Angelou that goes this way:

You are only free when you realize you belong no place—
you belong every place—no place at all. The price is high.
The reward is great.- Maya Aneglou¹

The ways of Jesus are this, to belong every place and no place. Jesus teaches through his life that we are called to be with the people we are with, to offer life to those in need, and to give of our gifts generously because God will then work through us to bring a new kingdom here on earth. The death and resurrection seal the deal. In Jesus death we learn the world is still a broken place, a place that believes there cannot be enough for all, and that tempts us to imagine that God has abandoned us. Jesus resurrection reminds us, that God has not abandoned us and that if we learn to live the ways of Jesus by rejecting the fear this world would teach us, we would find life and as the gospel of John says, “find it abundantly.”

Today for our time together I want to focus on a quote from Roshi Johan Halifax, we found in our study this season. The simple version is the title of the sermon today found in your bulletin.

All too often our so-called strength comes from fear, not love; instead of having a strong back, many of us have a defended front shielding a weak spine. In other words, we walk around brittle and defensive, trying to conceal our lack of confidence. If we strengthen our backs, metaphorically speaking, and develop a spine that’s flexible but sturdy, then we can risk having a front that’s soft and open....How can we give and accept care with strong-back, soft-front compassion, moving past

¹ Brown, Brené. Braving the Wilderness (p. 5). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

fear into a place of genuine tenderness? I believe it comes about when we can be truly transparent, seeing the world clearly—and letting the world see into us. —ROSHI JOAN HALIFAX²

Today when you leave this church I hope you know that living a Jesus life, a resurrected life, in the wilderness of this world is about living with a strong back, soft front, and wild heart.

Strong Back

Having a strong back is hard. If you know anything about posture or core strength you know that muscles that make up your back help determine greatly your health and well-being. Backs and spines are what allow messages to travel throughout our body and a healthy back means you can stand up to things. We also know from core strength work, that backs don't just naturally become healthy. You have to use them and bend them, especially as you age.

A strong back for us as people means throughout our lives we are constantly working to develop who we are. Our character counts, and we know character only happens when you belong somewhere. This is why I am a Pastor, I believe in making places where people can belong. Where they can know they are cared for and have community to sustain them through the ups and downs of life. Belonging is the thing that builds strong backs.

The interesting thing is that, kids know this from a fairly young age. They know they need a place to belong, to grow from. It is why they seek out peers to embrace them, even if those peers aren't the healthiest role models. And there is a difference between fitting in and belonging. Belonging builds the core in a much deeper way. In Brené

² Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness* (p. 147). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

Brown's work she asked middle schoolers to define belonging, here is what they said,

- Belonging is being somewhere where you want to be, and they want you. Fitting in is being somewhere where you want to be, but they don't care one way or the other.
- Belonging is being accepted for you. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else.
- If I get to be me, I belong. If I have to be like you, I fit in.

Additionally, belonging is important, but belonging at home is even more important. It is clear from these middle schoolers they know this, because they were able to name what it feels and looks like to not belong at home.

- Not living up to your parents' expectations
- Not being as cool or popular as your parents want you to be
- Not being good at the same things your parents were good at
- Your parents being embarrassed because you don't have enough friends or you're not an athlete or a cheerleader
- Your parents not liking who you are and what you like to do
- When your parents don't pay attention to your life³

Not only did Jesus life show us what it means to live with character, to face up to people who disagree with you, and even allow God to take you to places you fear the most. Jesus also reminds us that the children get this strong back stuff more than we do. They just know it and they

³ Brown, Brené. *Braving the Wilderness* (p. 160). Random House Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

invite us to learn it again and again. Living with a strong back is living knowing that you belong. Take this story for example:

The Making of a Saint

Johnny was out shopping with his mother one morning in the high street. Feeling a bit bored, he happened to look up at the windows of the nearby cathedral. He wasn't very impressed. From the outside, they looked drab and dull and a bit grimy.

He said as much to his mother when she came out of the supermarket. 'Just let's go inside,' she said to him. So they went into the cathedral, and his mother took him to where the big stained-glass windows were.

At first, Johnny was entranced by the magical coloured patterns on the stone floor of the ancient church. They seemed to dance in front of him as the morning light streamed through the mighty windows. 'Look at that,' he pointed to the dancing image on the stone floor. 'What is it, Mum?' 'Well,' his mother replied, 'actually, that's a saint. See the window up there, which looked so dull from the outside? There's a saint up there in the stained glass, and the light is shining through her and making her picture dance for us here on the stone floor.' Johnny stored up this information in his heart, and the two of them went home for dinner.

A few days later, Johnny's class was having a religious instruction lesson. The teacher was talking about saints. 'What do you think makes a saint?' he asked the class. Johnny's hand shot up. 'A saint is someone the sun shines

through,' he explained, 'and when that happens, the stones come to life.'⁴

Source unknown

Soft Front

Jesus desired us to have a soft front. He was very clear about this. A soft front is the willingness to have compassion and care for those around us. Jesus exemplified this to us in how he lived and he exemplified the risk of doing this in how he died. Jesus was executed by Roman powers who desired to make an example that any weakness was a sign of powerlessness. Jesus knew that God did not work that way, that God worked power through the lowly and that in moments when we see our weakness together, that God shines through the brightest.

(Project 2)



⁴ Silf, Margaret. One Hundred Wisdom Stories (p. 43). Lion Hudson. Kindle Edition.

There was an image that rocked the headlines this week. It started with images of a cathedral burning. Notre Dame is our cathedral, collectively it is a church we can all imagine when we think of churches. Many have visited there and if we haven't visited we have seen pictures of it throughout the centuries. When we saw it burning, we all saw our church burning. Even those who were not Catholic, or Christian felt pain and the loss of a place where so much prayer had been offered up.

The next image, the one on the screen, was embraced by many. The site of the altar still standing and the gold cross, light in the darkness still present. One blog said, "This is proof of God." The next one said, "Well the burning point of gold is less than wood, so maybe not what you want to use to prove God." For us, it was an image of the holy and sacred standing against the fires of destruction.

The same day Notre Dame burned a mosque in Palestine burned, an ancient building older than Notre Dame. Last, month 4 churches in Louisiana burned, 3 of them historically black churches, burned out of hate. All of these images have been making us grow concerned. Then something else happened money started coming in to rebuild not just Notre Dame, but all of these places. People were not ready to give up on the holy, people knew together they needed to rebuild those place we all belong.

The soft front is still hard, because we are afraid of getting burned and yet we still need to make sure all have access to the grace and love of God. I think what the churches and the money comes in tells us, is that when we care for the sacredness of one another that resurrection is possible and that image of the cross amongst the rubble is one we can all identify with. We have to care for each other and building up armor will not help us do it any better, even if we have to follow Christ to the cross.

Wild Heart

Finally friends, we have to live with a wild heart. Like our children we have to imagine the world can be a better place, like Christ we need to dream with God of a Kingdom ruled by a God of peace, justice, grace and love.

I found this picture that says wild heart to me in so many ways:

Project 3



Then I found this story from a friend of mine of a wild heart. I have a friend name Frank and he tells this story about his son Justin:

When Justin was a little boy, he would dress up like his favorite characters. Unlike other children, Justin took this role of playing his favorite characters seriously. At one point he was into being Peter Pan, and at some point it became clear that if Frank wanted to get his son's attention he would have to take this role seriously. Justin would answer to no other name at that point except "Peter." Frank would finish cooking dinner and he would call out, "Justin it is time to eat."

In the other room he would hear Justin talking with Wendy Darling, or conversing with lost boys about what to do that night, and would not hear any movement toward the dinner table. Frank finally learned to finish cooking dinner and call out, "Peter, dinner is ready," Then Justin would finish swashbuckling pirates and captain hook and come running.

At this time in Justin and Frank's life they were going regularly to Catholic mass that celebrated the eucharist or communion. Frank had been finding the practice meaningful and his son Justin would go along, or maybe we should say "Peter" went along with tinker-bell in tow.

One day when Frank was cooking dinner he heard from the other room, "Lumiere and Cogsworth you must stop." If you don't know these names, they are characters in Disney's Beauty and the Beast. Just to see the change in play, Frank went into the other room and said, "I see you have changed your world. Who are you playing in this world? Gaston?"

Justin looked up and said “No, I am Belle.”

A little while later Justin was out in his sandbox in the backyard and Frank heard Justin again change the world of his play. “This is the body of Christ and the blood.” The words coming from the backyard intrigued him again.

He went to go watch and there in the sandbox sat Justin, with a blanket draped over his shoulders. Pouring sand into a cup and offering it to a few of his gathered stuffed animals. Frank comments that he wasn't surprised by this young boy playing the priest, acting out a world he had seen played out each week at mass.

As Frank watched something changed on Justin's face, he ran back inside the house. When he emerged, he had an armful of his other stuffed animals, and he went back for another arm full after that.

He sat the stuffed animals in semi-circle of mixed fur and colors around him and he began pouring sand into any container he could find and placing it in front of each one. Justin's face suddenly grew concerned. As he was pouring and handing out the containers by placing one in front of each animal, Justin grew concerned when he ran out of containers for each animal. Justin's face contorted into one of those pondering concerns, and then you could see it light up.

He began moving animals, so two or three would be around a single cup. Until each animal was in a place to share a cup of God's love with one another.

Friends, the work of Easter, of new life, does not end after bunnies and eggs are gone. It is the daily work of our lives to follow the Jesus way. To live with strong backs, soft fronts and wild hearts is the core of the Christian faith. It is why we have God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

So go from here today and know you are called to dream a bigger table, a kingdom of life and to live with a wild heart in love with what Jesus has shown us in resurrection.

Shalom and Amen