**Easter Sunday Reading 2015**

ARLONA

Once upon a time . . .

JOE

Wait a minute. This isn’t a fairy tale.

GILBERT

You said it was last Sunday.

JOE

Yeah, well, maybe I’ve changed my mind a little.

KEN

I got to you during the Maundy Thursday service, didn’t I.

JOE

So you were with Jesus during the crucifixion. Let’s just say that put a different spin on how I’d been thinking of things.

GILBERT

I hear the words “empty tomb” and I know what that means, but sometimes I can’t get my head wrapped around it. I want it to be something that I think about every day and yet some days I confess, it seems more historical than spiritual.

ARLONA

I hear the words and I know the story but . . . I want the . . .

ALL

Glory.

PHYLLIS

Exactly. I want to wake up each morning and – what’s that line from that one song – delight myself in Him.

JUSTON

I don’t ever want to feel unloved again.

KEN

I don’t ever want to forget.

GILBERT

I don’t want to be out of His peace.

ARLONA

I don’t want to ignore His voice.

JOE

So I’ve been thinking about my relationship with Jesus. It’s like when someone dies and for three days it’s all memorial service planning and family and friends and then it’s all over. And then the people left behind get to start what life looks like without that person even though you remember them.

ARLONA

Wait, what are you saying?

JOE

Okay, I’m talking about me here, all right? I’m a church kid, born and raised here, parents are pillars of the church, accepted Jesus at age 9, went to church camp, you know the routine. But now I’m an adult and I look at Jesus’ death and resurrection and I say to myself, where did all that love go? There was a time that I had a relationship with Jesus and now I feel like I have an understanding with an occasional stirring in my heart. I feel . . . grey. I feel like the color Jesus brought to my life has faded over the years. He’s a part of my history, not a part of my life. (*to KEN*) Even though you had it rough, I envy you. You actually traveled with Jesus and heard Him talk.

KEN

Yeah, but . . .

JUSTON

Wait, you talked about color. My heart was black, black as the darkest night, black as the pit of Hell. I did things and saw things and things were done to me that were evil. I’m not talking about just sinning here. I’m talking about dirty, evil, ugly behavior.

I found Jesus in jail. The first time I said I found Him I had a parole hearing coming up and I thought it would sound good. “So you’ve gotten your life straight now,” they asked me. “Yeah,” I said. “I’ve found Jesus and I’m a new person. The person I was before is gone and I’m sorry for my behavior.” And you know what? They didn’t buy it for a minute. A lot of people find Jesus before a parole hearing. A couple of years later I attended a Bible study just to have something to do and I sort of started to feel something. But then that chaplain left and I thought the next one was weird, so I didn’t go back.

But then, it was getting close to my release date and I started thinking about all the things I would be able to do once I got out. I’d have to sneak around because I didn’t want to violate my parole so I’d have to be careful but I would have my life back again. I tried to get excited about that but it just wasn’t happening. But then, one night, I realized that maybe the problem was that I didn’t want to have my life back. I wasn’t very good at being in charge of my life.

So, I went to that weird chaplain and I told him maybe he should explain this whole Jesus thing to me one more time. And this time, I got it. I really got it. You know what Easter means to me? It means freedom. Not from jail, not from drugs, not from crime. It means freedom from my black, black heart. I have to remember that from time to time, because the old ways beckon and God seems far away then. But I remember the freedom and His love.

ARLONA

(*to JOE*) I was like you. Raised in the church, read the Bible, knew all the right things to do. And then I met Dan. He wasn’t a Christian but I thought, well, you know, missionary dating and all that. He was unbelievably handsome and he told me I was beautiful. We dated for a couple of years and then he asked me to marry him. You should have seen my ring, it was gorgeous.

We got married in a huge church wedding and I thought Dan would eventually come around. He would come to Christmas Eve service and Easter with me. And I thought, life is very, very good. Dan had a great job and we lived well. And then we found out we were expecting and life was even better.

But then Dan lost his job. Losing a job takes a toll on a man, no doubt. He became moody and sullen. He would lash out at me for no reason. Sometimes he would be out all night and come home reeking of bourbon.

One morning after one of his all-night binges, I yelled at him that I wanted him to straighten up. I was tired of his behavior and that God had a plan for him if he would just listen.

After I got out of the hospital, I went to a church where no one knew me and I fell on my face before the cross they had at the front. I prayed for my soon-to-be ex-husband in jail and for the child that would never be born. And I cried for all of my losses – my marriage, my home, my baby. But even more than that, I cried for listening to the world more than listening to the Lord.

(*to JUSTON*) Your heart was black. My heart was broken.

GILBERT

There used to be a book called “When I Relax, I Feel Guilty” and that’s me. If I take time for myself, I feel guilty because I should be doing something else. If I buy something that’s not super expensive but it’s not an absolute necessity, I think about giving to the poor. If I read a novel, I feel guilty I’m not reading my Bible. If I’m watching TV, I think I could be doing some volunteer work at the church. If it’s -35 wind chill on a Sunday morning, I feel guilty that I wonder if church will be canceled so I don’t have to go out in the weather. If I don’t spend time with my family, I feel guilty. If I don’t work on the car or the house, I feel guilty. The “to do” list goes on and on. I just want some peace. That’s all I’m after is some peace.

I’m not sure how I got to this point but verses like “do not worry about tomorrow” and “Yes, my soul, find rest in God” -- how does that work? “On the seventh day God rested” – seriously? “Keep the Sabbath holy” – I’d like to try that! I look around and I see tired, stressed Christians, just like me.

And I think of that empty tomb and I have to believe, I h**ave** to believe, that this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. Oh, God, what have we done to ourselves? Where have we gone wrong? My faith is so small – that mustard seed has nothing on me. (*to JUSTON and ARLONA*) Your heart is black, your heart is broken, my heart is tired. I am so tired. I just want – peace. The peace that passes all understanding has long passed mine.

PHYLLIS

I’m older now and like Winnie-the-Pooh, sometimes I just sits and thinks and sometimes I just sits. I have a lot more time to ponder life in general. I think about my children and their children. I think of my career and the people I met through my work. I think about those who have gone on before me and I think about my own homecoming. But mostly I think about the delight that I’ve known throughout my life by knowing Christ.

Your stories are so vastly different but all I can say to you is – if you’re not finding delight in the Lord on a daily basis, you don’t have the correct understanding of what God wants for us. There isn’t always happiness. I’ve known heartache. I’ve had terrible thoughts. I have not always been faithful. But I have known joy and I know delight. None of us should wait until the latter days of our lives to discover the joy of Jesus and to delight in Him.

I wish I’d been at that empty tomb. I like to think it would take me a long time to get back to Peter because I would be dancing, twirling in circles, hands held above my head, as my robes swirled about my ankles – He’s alive! He’s alive! Praise God, Jesus is alive!

My heart rejoices and oh, children, how I want your hearts to rejoice as well. The peace and joy and love of the empty tomb is for all of us, regardless of where you’ve been or what you were or the frustrations you feel now. Don’t rob yourself of His love and direction. None of us are worthy and all of us have sinned greatly. But we are all offered eternal life God’s love. Don’t ever forget that.

KEN

In the way that only earthly-written Easter dramas can do, I stand before you as a disciple of Jesus Christ. I’ve been deceased now for many, many generations but (*to JOE*) you mentioned that I was lucky because I was able to travel with Jesus and hear Him preach. And you’re right, that was a life-changing experience. But – I have to ask you – what do you think happened after Jesus ascended back into Heaven? I can tell you. There were arguments and unfair treatment and miscommunication and a whole lot of persecution. Feelings got hurt, grudges were held, and we all got a huge reminder that even though we had been in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ, we were still messy humans. Discipleship isn’t easy. Following Jesus isn’t easy. Some of us have had rockier roads than others but we all have made that decision that somehow – even in our human inadequacy – that we are going to give our hearts and our lives to our Redeemer.

The past is not that different than the present. As we all said at the beginning, we want to feel that glory. It’s ours. Take those heartbroken, black, stressed hearts and crack them open. Let His love surge in and take root. I don’t have all the answers. None of us have all the answers. Even God’s holy word doesn’t have all the answers. But there is an empty tomb with a promise of love, of salvation, of eternity. Don’t forget that. Please, don’t ever forget that.

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

ALL

Amen.