

“Wake Up Call”

John 20:10-18

Series: Finding Your Way Back to God

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The Woodside Church

Easter Sunday, March 27, 2016

John Ortberg tells the story of a friend named John who was a denominational official. One of his jobs was to travel to little rural communities to do funerals where they didn't have churches. He went with an undertaker, and they would drive together in the undertaker's hearse. One time, on their way back from a funeral, John felt quite tired and decided to take a nap. He thought, 'Well, I'll just lie down in the back of the hearse.' I know that sounds like a creepy thing to do but this is a true story. The undertaker who was driving the hearse pulled into a service station to fill up on gas. The service station attendant who came to fill the tank peered in the back window of the hearse and got freaked out when he saw a body stretched out in the back. Then John woke up, sat up, knocked on the window and waved at the attendant. John said he never saw anybody run so fast in his whole life.

That kind of wakeup call will make you run. Easter is the ultimate wakeup call. The followers of Jesus fully expected to see death when they visited the tomb. Instead they found life. And it changed the direction of their lives. When Jesus woke up from death, it was a wakeup call for them.

Easter calls all of us to awaken to something new and better. When Jesus awoke from death to life He opened the door to an amazing promise: we can all find our way back to God. Surveys indicate the vast majority of Americans believe God exists in some form. Yet in a gathering of this size, I bet there's a variety of feelings about finding your way back to God.

- I've always believed in God. I worship weekly, pray daily and never doubted.
- I believe in God but I don't need a church or a religion to tell me what to do.
- I used to believe in God, but somewhere along the way I lost interest.
- I can't believe in God. It doesn't make sense when there is so much suffering and evil.
- I want to believe in God, but I've suffered too much abuse, pain, or loss to trust Him.
- I don't need God because I'm too busy enjoying the party or climbing the ladder.
- I don't want anything to do with God because his so-called representatives judged or hurt me.

That reminds me of a wakeup call story. Joe's wife said, "Wake up Joe. It's Easter Sunday. Time to go to church." Joe said, "I don't want to go to church." "Why not?" his wife asked. "Give me three reasons why you don't want to go to church on Easter." "Ok," Joe shot back, "those church people don't like me, they're mean to me, and I never get anything out of it.

Now give me three reasons why I should go to church.” His wife replied, “Ok. First, the people at church do like you. Second, you do get something out of it. And third, you’re the pastor.”

There’s a truth buried in that wakeup call. All of us – pastors, believers, agnostics and atheists, rich, poor and middle class, college-educated and street-wise, man, woman, teen and child, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and none-of-the-above – all of us can take a step closer to God, can find our way back to God. That is the great news of Easter.

So today is the perfect day to begin our new series: Finding Your Way Back to God. It’s based on a book by two brothers who are pastors in Chicago: Dave and Jon Ferguson.

You’re invited to go on a journey, one that could change your life in big and significant ways. All of us feel lost on this road at some point in our lives— sometimes really lost, and sometimes for a really long time. It comes down to a simple yet overwhelming longing: We want to find our way home. We want to feel personally connected to the One who made us, who knows us for who we are. Who might even be able to help us. We feel powerfully drawn to move toward God.¹

After witnessing thousands find their way back to God, Dave and Jon observe three principles:

- Whether we know it or not, we all have a longing to find our way back to God
- While everyone’s journey is different, there is a universal pattern for the way back to God
- God wants to be found even more than you want to find him

Well if that’s all true: why do people find it hard to find their way back to God? There are obstacles and off ramps on the road of life which take us in different directions. It can be difficult, on our own, to turn in the right direction.

When my wife Lisa and I were on vacation we rented a car in a country which drives on the left side of the road. This was my first time and I can tell you it was nerve-wracking. Every time I came to an intersection I said, “Left turn. Left turn.” At the same moment my wife said, “Left turn. Left turn.” The roads were narrow, winding, and steep. Often I drove uphill, on one lane, around a blind curve. There were loads of roundabouts and they all went the wrong direction. I actually managed quite well I must say. There was only one habit I couldn’t break. As you know, the steering wheel is on the other side. That’s fine. What I didn’t know is the turn signal is also on the other side. So every time I came to that crucial moment to signal my turn, I pulled the lever and the windshield wipers sprang to life. When I returned the car, the rental guy said, “I saw you driving in the city.” “How did you know it was me?” He said, “Wiper blades.”

On the road of life, sometimes we get stuck in roundabouts – going around in circles – sometimes we worry about what’s coming around a blind curve, sometimes we wander and get lost, sometimes we take an off ramp that looks good and yet takes us far from home. Maybe you’re even like I was in the car with a habit you can’t break so that every time you try to turn the right way you get the wrong result. But today, wherever you are, right now, you can move

¹ Dave and Jon Ferguson, *Finding Your Way Back to God: 5 Awakenings to Your New Life* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah Books, 2015) 1-2. The stories about Kelly, Jeremy, Melissa and Rick are from their book.

toward God. There are many obstacles that keep people from finding their way back to God. Let me tell you three which showed up on that first Easter.

One roadblock is **Doubt**. There is enough pain, evil and suffering in the world to cause anyone to doubt there is a God or that He loves us and wants us to come home. Bombings in Brussels, Istanbul and Paris, famine across Africa, war in Syria. “Why?” we cry again and again. “Answer my questions,” we say, “And then I will believe. Until then I doubt there is a God.”

Thomas doubted that first Easter. And who can blame him. His friends said, “We have seen the Lord!” But dead is dead. People don’t come back to life after crucifixion. Thomas said,

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25)

That seems fair. Give me proof and I’ll believe.

Kelly had her doubts. Her mom pushed her to go to church, confirmation, and first communion. In spite of her mother’s good intentions, none of it made sense to Kelly. By the time she was fifteen, she says, she had enough and gave up on God. The truth is she probably gave up on God much earlier. Kelly’s dad died when she was only four months old.

I think, in some ways, I didn’t want to believe in God— my dad died, my brothers didn’t really look out for me, and my boyfriend was abusive. It was hard to believe there was a good guy out there. And since God was supposed to be a ‘Father,’ I didn’t want to let him in. God was far, far, far away.

On the outside, Kelly seemed to be doing fine without God. In high school she was a cheerleader, on the dean’s list, and had lots of friends and a life full of promise. But instead of going to college, Kelly started waiting tables at a restaurant where Dave Ferguson eats regularly. Over the next years, Kelly dated several men who gave her nothing, with the exception of a beautiful baby boy. Her youth, her hopes and dreams gradually all wore away. Through it all, her constant friend was a bottle. Then one day Dave visited her in the hospital; she looked like death. She had drunk herself into a coma— whether by accident or in an attempt to kill herself – no one knew. The hospital staff wasn’t sure she’d make it. Dave wondered if he’d ever see her again.

A few months later, I got a text and then a call from Kelly. She told me she always felt comfortable talking to me about spiritual matters and wanted to know if we could meet. She told me that she was sober for a few weeks and was working the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Then she looked at me with a deep sincerity and said, “Dave, can you help me believe in God?” I said I would try my best.

When they met a second time, Dave showed her a Bible verse in which God promises, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.” (Jeremiah 29:13) Then Dave advised her to take a 30-day wager. Act as if God is real for a month. If He’s real, you win everything, if He’s not, you lose nothing. “Every day, pray, ‘God, if you are real, make yourself real to me.’ Let’s see what happens.” She wanted to trust me on this but didn’t know if she could.

Easter tells us the solution to doubt is not proofs but faith. It's taking a risk and trusting God. When Thomas finally did see Jesus, the Lord said,

“Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.” Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:27-28)

Did you notice something? Thomas never touched Jesus. He trusted Jesus because of the wounds – because Jesus showed He suffered for our sin, laid down his life for our pain, and decisively defeated death forever. He's there for you. He's trustworthy. He's worthy of your trust.

A year after her hospital stay Kelly went back to thank the doctors and nurses who cared for her. When one of the nurses hugged her, Kelly broke down sobbing.

It just hit me that I was really alive, and I could have been gone. Forever. I would have missed so much. I realized that it was something more than the medicine, monitors, and doctors that kept me alive. It was God. He kept me alive because he loves me and he wants me to be there for my little boy and to help others.

Easter helps us overcome doubt with faith. We can find our way back to God.

Another roadblock on the way back to God is **Despair**. The disciples were deathly afraid that first Easter. They feared the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers. Yet underneath was a deeper despair. They pinned their hopes on this Messiah. He made them believe God was in charge, God would defeat their enemies, God would win...and soon! Then it all collapsed and they ran away to hide. It's painful if your team loses or your nation loses but the worst despair of all is when your God loses. That's why none of them believed Mary when she said, “I have seen the Lord.” By Easter evening the doors are still locked. That locked door is their feeble attempt to control the situation. Locked doors can't keep out soldiers. They also can't keep out hope.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord. (John 20:19-20)

The disciples needed a power stronger than doors and death to give them hope.

Melissa reached the point of despair as a teen. When her parents separated, she prayed to anyone out there who would listen. Trying to fill the void left by a broken family, she experimented with drugs. When that didn't satisfy her deep longings, she turned to men to meet her need. After a painful divorce from a man who mistreated her, she entered an even more abusive relationship. She said,

I could never understand why God couldn't stop me from getting beat up. So instead of turning to God, I turned to cocaine.

She met a man named Jeremy, who had two failed marriages and was also deeply in despair.

You could feel the darkness. In spite of finding each other, we were still lost and alone. We knew our only way out was to admit that we couldn't do it on our own.

They began searching for something more. Their search eventually led them to a church where they started on the road back to God. Jeremy and Melissa decided to make the same wager as Kelly. And things began to change for the better. As they continue to deepen their relationship with God, Melissa and Jeremy know they dare not try to do it alone. They have joined a small group of people who are trying to know God better, just as they are. Melissa remarked,

What keeps us close to God is having each other and having other people in our lives who are on the same journey.

Here at Woodside we firmly believe in the power of small groups. These are groups of imperfect people who help one another find their way back to God. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus shows up in these groups and turns despair into hope just as He did for the disciples on that first Easter evening.

The third roadblock on your way back to God is **Desire**. We all long for love. That's a good, God-given desire. We long for love from God and the people in our lives. Sadly, instead of love, you may have received rejection, anger or abuse. You may have run after some wild living in an attempt to fill yourself with love. You may even be tormented by some demons of desire.

Contrary to popular belief, Mary Magdalene was not a lady of the evening. But she was tormented by seven demons. We don't know why she had them, but we do know Jesus cast them out and set her free. If someone does that for you, you'll follow that person even to the gates of death. And that's what she did: Mary watched Him suffer the agony of crucifixion and visited His sealed stone tomb. Why? Demons and people abused and rejected her. Jesus was the only person who loved her unconditionally. Now, He was dead and thieves stole His body. Completely distraught, she cried and begged the cemetery caretaker to help her find His body. Then the caretaker called her name, "Mary." She awoke from her grief, turned and discovered Jesus is alive! She awoke to love.

Today, you can awaken to faith, hope and love. Today, you can take the first step on the journey back to God. I invite you to do what Kelly, Melissa and Jeremy did: take the 30-day wager. Each day, all through the day, pray this simple prayer: "God, if you are real, make yourself real to me." If you write the word "Wager" on your Connection card, with your name and email on the front, I will send you a short email with a question to ponder and a prayer to pray for 30 days. As part of this Wager, I also encourage you to join us for the next five Sundays to hear about each step on the way back to God and to be part of a Growth Group that helps you on that journey. It will be the best wakeup call you've ever had.

Rick had the rawest wakeup call you can imagine. Rick's earliest memories are of him, his sister, and his mom getting beaten by his dad. Then, unexpectedly, when Rick was eight years old, his dad chose to follow Jesus and became a different person. Ironically, this drove Rick away from God. "I actually began to hate God. I couldn't understand how he could forgive my dad after all he'd done to us." His resentments burning, Rick wandered further from God. He was angry at everyone. Except Mandy. There was something special about her. Rick said,

I noticed that when Mandy prayed she actually believed she was talking to God and she would see real stuff happen. She began to rekindle my hope in God, and she helped me understand why God would forgive my dad.

Eventually Rick married his friend Mandy. Yet just six hours after their wedding ceremony, Mandy suffered a stroke and was rushed to the hospital. Rick recalls, "I spent my wedding night in my car in the parking lot of a hospital, sobbing uncontrollably, asking God why. 'Why today? Why ever? Why us? What are you doing, God?' " He received only silence.

Rick still has no idea why God let this happen. But Rick will also tell you, in the midst of the most unimaginable crisis, God made himself real. "When I finally got out of the car and walked back into the hospital on my wedding night, I found seventy of my closest friends and family in the waiting room, all there to support me. A few friends brought guitars, and before I knew it, there was an all-night worship and prayer session in the waiting room." The road to recovery was a hard one for Mandy and Rick, but God continues to show his love to them. People have paid for their rent, medical bills, cell phone service, food, car insurance, therapy, and date nights. Rick says the experience has actually deepened his faith in God. "After seeing God move so clearly through his people, I know three things for certain: In spite of my inability to understand him, God is wise and knows what is best. He is generous and gives us what is best. And he is loving and does what is best."

In the darkest journey of his life, Rick found his way back to God. Today, if you want to take the first step on your way back to God, join me in the Easter greeting: He is Risen! He is Risen Indeed!