

Easter Breakthrough

He ran for his country in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. During World War II, his B 24 crashed in the Pacific and he barely survived 47 days adrift on a raft at sea. He was picked up by the Japanese. He spent the rest of the war in a POW camp where he endured horrible abuse and torture at the hands of a prison guard that he nicknamed 'The Bird'. After the war, he married the girl of his dreams, but PTSD's threatened to destroy his very marriage. He shares, "I had nightmares every night", says Louis Zamperini and he followed me like a crazed hound from hell. His wife Cynthia knew something was terribly wrong because he often woke up shouting and in a cold sweat. One night he dreamed that he was strangling 'The Bird' himself, when in fact he was on top of his pregnant wife with his hands around her neck, choking the life out of her. His life was on a downward spiral as he began to chase other women and get drunk at local bars. He goes on to share, "I began to fall apart and my wife decided that she wanted a divorce."

You notice I share with you this incredibly true story about Louis Zamperini and his wife Cynthia. It was evident at this point in their life and in their marriage that things were coming to an end or even more to the point, that things were rapidly unraveling. Things were falling apart. As much as Louis had survived World War II, 47 days adrift at sea and years in a POW camp in Japan where he endured incredible torture; when he came back home, his life was falling apart. He just couldn't go on. He thought this was the end, as well as his wife. Louis and Cynthia needed a miracle. They needed something and someone to breakthrough in their life that would help them to go on. What we notice about Louis in this story and in his life at this point, is he begins to, in modern parlance, self-medicate. He begins to drink heavily and get drunk and begin to chase women as well. Now maybe Louis grew up in a family of drinkers, as often that happens. Maybe it was something that he reverted to when things were really tough. One of the things we noticed in his relationship, is that self-medicating in this way, drinking to try to kill the pain and deal with the struggles of life, actually destroys relationships. The reality is whether someone is struggling with a lot of drinking or using drugs; it could be sex, it could be gambling. You just fill in the blank, whatever it is you and I do to handle the pressures and the challenges in the struggle and the deep pain that still was within our life. If we're trying to deal with that with self-medicating in any way, it's just not going to work. We know that. I cannot think in all of my years of being a priest, and for that matter, all of my years of being alive, I can never think of one person who, whether they drank up a storm or took pills or whatever it was, I never saw a person who self-medicated save their relationship. Never. It destroys it. This brings home a very important point for you and I. Relationships are healed in relationship. Imagine that. It is such a simple thing to say and yet it is something that you and I often neglect. Relationships are healed in relationship. That is why in our second lesson today in the Book of Acts, we hear the Apostle Peter proclaiming a person. He's not talking about Jack Daniels. He's not talking about heroin. He's talking about Jesus Christ. He's talking about a person. He says in your bulletin today, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil because God was with him. So what Peter the Apostle, Peter and all the Apostles proclaim, and what the word of God proclaims and part of the reason why you're here today, even though you may not realize it, part of the reason why you're here today is to hear the good news that Jesus is alive! Hear the bells ringing! They're singing that he's risen from the dead!

In just a few moments, you'll be singing the chorus, 'My Redeemer Lives'. There's a reason why we are singing that. It is because my Redeemer lives! And the Easter lilies and everything about the Sanctuary today celebrates the reality of life that Jesus is alive and he is still forgiving sins. He is still bringing healing into people's lives. You know what? It doesn't matter how old you are. You could be really young. You can be really old. You can kind of be in the middle. Jesus will meet us wherever we are, whenever we need him, in whatever way we invite him in.

The Apostle Peter says to us here today that we are witnesses. This is not a fairytale. This is not a story my mother told me. I think it's really good and I'm writing about in the Bible. No, no, no, no, no. The apostles, you know, in order to be an apostle, you actually had to be alive when Jesus was alive. That's part of the qualification. You had to be called as one of his disciples. Peter says we are witnesses. We lived with him, we saw him in his crucifixion, we saw the resurrected Lord. We shared a meal with him, we mongered with him, we ate and drank together, we saw him after he rose from the dead, we experience the power of his forgiveness of his love, of his touch, all he touched, he touched us like nobody else could. He commanded us to preach. He commanded us apostles to go forth and proclaim throughout the world. I simply proclaim their apostolic message to you here today. A timeless message that everyone who believes in the Lord Jesus and gives their heart and life to him will receive forgiveness of sins, and be healed, and be made whole, and have a purpose to life like never before.

Cynthia, Louis' wife, was literally looking at the door. She was ready to leave this war hero that she no longer really knew. As God would have it, she went to a Billy Graham Crusade of all things. She realized at that meeting, that she needed the Lord. That her life was at a place that whatever was going on in Louis' life, she needed Jesus Christ for herself. She needed his forgiveness for her sins, she needed his direction for her life and she needed his grace at this moment. So when the time during the meeting came, she went up and she received the forgiveness that Jesus offered her. She went home that night. Louis shares that he immediately noticed that there was something different about her. Something had happened to her. He says, she spoke of a peace and a joy in her heart that was unmistakable. She had left sad, she had left broken, she had left without hope. She'd come home with joy and peace and she stated to him, because of my conversion, I'm not getting a divorce now. Women, think about that for a moment, about what a miracle that is. With what this woman had been through up to that point with Louis. Let me tell you something, I know a lot of married couples that have been through a lot less who were looking at the door and went through it. This is the miracle of God in her life in that moment. That in some way, God spoke to her, "You know what Cynthia, I'm not done with your husband yet. I'm not done with your marriage. Would you give me a chance?" And she said, "Yes". I know that because of her actions. She went on to ask Louis to go to a Billy Graham Crusade with her and of course, his response was, "No. I'm not going to go to a Crusade with you." Thank God, she was persistent and he eventually went. But when they bowed for prayer, when they had that opportunity to connect with the Spirit of God, he immediately left. But on a subsequent evening, he came back another night. Graham shared about people at the end of their rope and Louis remembered the POW camp, being adrift at sea for 47 days and his promise to God at those moments. "If you get me home alive, I will seek and serve you the rest of my life." What an amazing thing that at that moment... the Holy Spirit quickened in his memory the promise he made to God while adrift on the sea, those many days while being beaten to death in that POW camp, the Holy Spirit reminded him of promise that God was faithful to deliver on.

Louis shares, "As I fell on my knees and gave my life to Christ, I forgave all my guards and I knew I was done smoking, drinking and chasing women (it's a good start). The miracle that happened that night

was that my nightmare stopped for the first time in years, and I haven't had one since. My PTSD was completely healed." Oh, by the way, he was one of the first evangelist to go to Japan. One of the first evangelist to go to that country after World War II and share the gospel of Jesus Christ. He attempted to meet with that prison guard who had beaten him to an inch of his life, 'The Bird', but that guard was so ashamed of what he had done that he would not meet with him. But I say to you, does not his story speak of the miracle of God? Does not his story speak that Jesus is alive? That this story is not a fairytale. This is not a Jesus who was dead and never rose from the dead. This is a Jesus that is still alive today. That is still transforming lives in this moment. Even lives like Louis and Cynthia and lives like yours and mine that realize we desperately, desperately need him.

By the way, if you have seen the movie *unbroken*, which is based on the story of Louis' life, and some of it I've shared with you here today, the part that they leave out in the movie is the part about him coming to Jesus Christ, and his wife and help God healed them and enable them to be together for the rest of the story. I think it's one of the most important parts of the story. I thought I'd share with you today. You know I thought that was a little omission that was important to bring out today.

Jesus has been after some of you for a long time. You may not have been adrift at sea for 47 days. You may not have been in the war. You probably haven't been in a POW camp and beaten within an inch of your life. But Jesus has been coming after a number of you for quite a while. Jesus is reaching out to some of you here today. Maybe for the first time. So I would invite you and me this Easter of 2015, will you invite God to be a part of the next chapter of your life, wherever you are right now? Whether you're just hearing maybe this message for the first time in your same what would look like for Jesus to be Lord and Savior of my life, or maybe you been walking with him for quite a while and you're not sure what the next step looks like for you. I'm asking you and me, everybody in this church here today, will you allow God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit to be part of the next chapter of your life.

I shared with this story last week about the guy that was going to the bridge to commit suicide in San Francisco. As he came to the bridge, God spoke to him. God met him at the bridge. God said to him, "If you're willing to take your life, are you willing to give it to me?" You know that guy thought, "My story is over. My life is done." But God said to him, "It is not done if you will come with me." He did the same with Louis and Cynthia. They thought their marriage was done, over, nada, look for the door, pack up and go. Then God showed up. Watch out when God shows up, things change. God said, "It is not the end, it is the beginning with me. I have overcome death and the grave, don't you understand. I can resurrect your marriage; it is not too hard for me. I can give you the grace to forgive that person who you just hate to the depth of your soul for the past decades of your life. I am able to do that for you. I am able to bring a healing into your life that you can't even begin to imagine." All you have to do, all I have to do today is repent of our sins, we need to repent. We need to ask for forgiveness of our sins and also be willing to extend that forgiveness to everyone, to everyone who has hurt us. To everyone who has wronged us. To extend the forgiveness and mercy of Jesus to them as much as Jesus has given it to us and receive his healing. He wants to heal you, he wants to touch you, he wants to love you, he wants to share your life. That's the way you and I were meant to live... full of joy, full of hope, full of excitement and walking with our Lord. We need to follow the example of Louis and Cynthia and fall on our knees and be open afresh to the miracles of God. Some of you are here are saying today, "Father Joe, what are you doing preaching this kind of message in an Episcopal Church? If I wanted to go to a Billy Graham Crusade, I would've gone on my own time, thank you very much. This is so un-Episcopalian of you." Well I beg to differ. I beg to differ. If you look in the back of the prayer book at the catechism,

if you look at the baptismal service, you will find a series of renunciations of evil. At the beginning of it and in a series of affirmations. The first affirmation is: Do you accept Jesus Christ as your Savior and will you follow him as your Lord. (TA DA!) It's there... look it up. All I'm saying is, you may not hear this in a lot of other churches, you're just getting the whole gospel here. I'm gonna put it all out there for you. I want to share all of it with you and Jesus. TA DA! 😊

Fr. Joe Maiocco

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