

Jeremiah 31:1-6
Psalm 118:1-2, 14-24
Colossians 3:1-4
JOHN 20:1-18

“Jesus Christ is risen today”

Many Americans live in fear of death.

Heck, so many of us are such wimps that many Americans are even terrified of *aging*, despite Dr. Seuss’ well-informed opinion that “old age is not for sissies.”

And so, millions of us are looking for an “edge.” As Sports Illustrated wrote in its March 17 issue, “We are a juiced nation. We are a nation on dope. We are a nation looking for enhancement, a way to age gracefully, perform better and longer, and at the outer edge, vanquish what was once considered that all-time undefeated opponent known as aging. We do that by Botoxing our wrinkles, lifting our faces, reconstructing our noses, despidering our veins, tucking our tummies, augmenting our breasts and taking a little pill to make sure we’re ready when, you know, the right time presents itself.”

It has been estimated, according to the same article, that more than \$1 billion was spent annually on legal Human Growth Hormone in 2004. The Mayo Clinic reports that the number of testosterone prescriptions filled by U.S. pharmacies doubled between 2000 and 2004 – to 2.4 *million*. The Mayo Clinic “also estimates that three million people in the U.S. use anabolic steroids,” including illegal uses, and another expert estimates that 15 million Americans use performance-enhancing drugs of one sort or another. All those numbers are from the same article.

All those numbers carry far, far beyond the realm of professional athletes. And then there’s surgery – *surgery* – purely for cosmetic reasons, also known as vanity.

Or fear. Fear of aging. Fear of death.

The classic American response to the fear of death is bigness. We’ll get bigger, buffer bodies – any way we can. Bigger cars. Bigger houses. Bigger credit lines. Bigger corporations. Bigger credit lines. Bigger government. Bigger credit lines. “Get bigger and *live*” seems to be the motto.

Gee, bigness sure worked for the dinosaurs, right? And the ancient Egyptian Empire, the Babylonian Empire, the Roman Empire, Enron, and Bear Sterns, right? Look how big and immortal they all are now, right?

Right?

Maybe, just maybe, **steroids – physical or financial – aren’t the way to eternal life**. Maybe, actually, that way leads to death, sooner rather than later. Maybe there’s another way.

Maybe it starts by facing our own problems honestly, having the serenity to accept the things we cannot change and the courage to change the things we can. After looking for life in all the wrong places, maybe a new start comes from looking for life from the Savior, not from a syringe.

Maybe it was simpler back then when there *were* no syringes, back when some people who really had genuine medical issues found no doctor who could help them and were branded as “possessed by demons” and were, literally, hopeless. Unless they happened to run into a guy who claimed that God loved them and that God both could *and wanted* to heal them – even if the person was a woman, and a woman with no particular family connections or power.

Such a woman was Mary from the Galilean town of Magdala, known to us as Mary Magdalene. Unlike most women of the Bible of her time and before, she is not identified in the Bible as “the wife of ___,” or “the widow of ___,” or “the daughter of ___,” or “the sister of ___,” or “the mother of ___.” She is, simply, herself. That in itself was radical in traditional Middle Eastern culture.

She did have problems, this Mary. Luke Chapter 8 tells us that she had been healed by Jesus – that he had “cast out seven demons from her.” Many illnesses, including psychiatric ones, were attributed to demonic possession in First Century Palestine: this one must have been especially inexplicable, incurable and scary to her contemporaries.

But nothing scared Jesus. And nothing defeated Jesus.

Mary was healed, and thereafter joined Jesus’ entourage as it traveled around the Holy Land, and she became a devoted and highly regarded disciple. (There is *no* evidence, by the way, that she had ever been a prostitute; that smear was invented in the 6th Century by Pope Gregory I to turn her into an example of penitence instead of what she was – a strong, independent, faithful disciple of Jesus who was, yes, single and a woman.)

Mary had faced her own illness or disability, whatever it was, and had seen it vanish at the command of the Lord of Life. How could she not be fearlessly loyal to the One who had liberated her? Jesus, after all, had taken Peter away merely from his fishing boat; Jesus had taken Mary Magdalene away from – what? Insanity? We don’t know, but unlike Peter, she never denied Jesus, and she never ran away but stuck with him in his darkest hour on Good Friday afternoon.

She looked straight at Death at its most powerful and most vicious that day. She looked straight at Death and must have thought, “If the world could treat *Jesus* like this, what might be in store for *me*?” She stared right at Death: gruesome, painful, agonizing death. There was nothing in the pharmacy or from the guy on the street corner or “the guy at the gym” which would defeat this.

Only God can defeat Death.

And only by Christ’s own death could *he* rise to new life.

Mary Magdalene also had the guts to be the first one to show up Sunday morning at the tomb of a man who had been publicly executed as an Enemy of the State. She saw that the stone had been rolled away from the entrance of the cave-like tomb, and ran and told Simon Peter and the mysterious “other disciple.”

Unlike those men, who had the courage to come but left, perplexed, she stayed at the tomb, crying so hard her eyes got blurry. Ever cry like that?

So it was that *she* was the first one to see the resurrected Christ, to recognize him *when he called her by name*.

The men, when they heard from her, might have thought she had flipped out – or flipped back – or maybe “had been smoking something.” They didn’t believe her when she said she had seen the risen Lord.

But Mary was the first to know that this truth is better than any artificial stimulant: “Jesus Christ is risen today.”

The path to new life – *real* new life – is to be ourselves, to “let go and let God,” and to have faith in Jesus Christ who defeated death and sin by dying, himself sinless, for the sins of the whole world, and rising to new life, unconquered and unconquerable.

So let’s stop any desperate ways to get artificially “bigger” as an antidote to aging out of fear of death, or to conform to some ridiculous body image promoted by society. We can behold Christ on the cross [I point to that Station of the Cross] and acknowledge that this life can be full of pain, pain of many kinds that sometimes cannot be taken away by us. And we can behold the highest cross in this church [I point to the top of the stained glass window], the *empty* cross, the *Easter* cross, and remember that Christ lives and reigns victorious over death, and his new life offers us hope for life beyond this life. Death can be *an* end, not *the* end, for all to whom God offers new life in heaven. And the serenity, healing and boundless joy of heaven can “leak” into this life, too, by the grace of God.

In fact, that’s what Christians are called to do: to make this world a little more heavenly. Not “bigger.” Just *better* – by the grace and with the guidance of God.

Love and Life shall conquer strife.

Life and Love now reign above.

And they will reign *here*, too, when God’s will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Now, let’s *live*. Every day is Easter.

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