A New Story

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[0:00] Last weekend, I was on a prayer retreat, and one of the speakers was describing the spiritual journey that people make over the course of their lives and how one season of your life can look so different from another.

And I was reminded of a famous study that explored some of these realities. It's known as the Grant Study. In the late 1930s, about 270 or so undergraduates at Harvard were selected to be part of this massive longitudinal study.
And the ones selected were judged to be among the most well-adjusted, the most likely to succeed, and they agreed to be poked and prodded and interviewed every single year for the rest of their lives.
Massive longitudinal study. And even though their identities were kept secret in recent years, it's come out that two of those participants in that Harvard study from the late 30s, one went on to be president, John F.
Kennedy, and the other ended up being the editor of the Washington Post during the Watergate era, Ben Bradley. Found out those were two of the study participants.
[1:25] And as you can imagine, this study has been looked at and written up in books and magazines, most recently in the Atlantic, seeking to understand the insights and the lessons to be learned.

And here's one of the most surprising lessons, at least for the researchers. The lives of these young men played out in ways that defied predictability.
Those that started life with certain advantages did not necessarily lead to later success. And conversely, those who started with certain deficits or who experienced certain defeats along the way did not necessarily end in failure.
Two examples written up from this study. One man was especially gifted and grew up in Manhattan as the son of a rich doctor and an artistic mother.
While he was in college, the researchers wrote, perhaps more than any other boy who has been in the grand study, this participant exemplifies the qualities of a superior personality, stability, intelligence, and good judgment.
[2:38] Yet, by age 31, for no apparent reason, he developed feelings of bitterness towards the world, dropped out of the study, and died at a young age.

His life was described by those who knew him as wandering and without purpose. Another young man in the study was raised in a working class family by what the researchers described as an angry, alcoholic father and an anxious, irritable mother.
Yet, this man went on to become a national leader in the civil rights movement. He was loved by his co-workers, and by the time he was in his late 40s, he was ranked by researchers as among the top fifth in the study with regard to psychological health.
He lived into an old age, and he was celebrated in his obituaries as a hero of the civil rights movement. Where someone started out was no predictor of where they would end up.
Decades later, the primary researcher reflected that if there was one theme that emerged from the study, it was this. The course of these people's lives had little to do with how much or how little trouble they encountered, but how they responded to that trouble.
[4:07] The study's author writes that this central insight is best captured in the story of a father who on Christmas Eve puts into one son's stocking an expensive gold watch and into another son's stocking a pile of horse manure.

The next morning, the first boy comes to his father and says, Dad, I just don't know what I'll do with this watch. It's so fragile. It could break. The other boy runs to him and says, Daddy, Daddy, Santa

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left me a pony.
If only I can just find it. What is it that causes one person to receive a gold watch and to respond with fear and caution?
And another to receive something that nobody wants and yet interpret it in the most positive and constructive of ways. Psychologists have studied the factors behind the different ways people respond to trouble and difficulties in life.
And in recent years, they've determined that one of the key factors is behind how we respond are the stories that we have been told.
[5:22] The stories that we absorb from the broader culture and the stories that we tell ourselves to build our identities and to give us a sense of who we are. To give just one example, a team at Emory University studied emotional well-being in children and they discovered that one of the biggest predictors of emotional health in a child was the family story they heard growing up.

The researchers noted that all families have a narrative and they tend to take one of three basic shapes. The first shape is the ascending family narrative.
We came from nothing. We worked hard. We made it big. And now, Junior, it's your turn. Another is the descending narrative.
We used to have it all, but then we lost everything. Life isn't fair and whatever you try probably isn't going to work. The most helpful narrative, they said, is a third one, which they called the oscillating family narrative.
That narrative said we've had ups and downs in our family. We've built a family business. Your grandfather was a pillar of the community. Your mother was on the board of the hospital. But we also had setbacks.
[6:40] You had an uncle who was once arrested. You had a house burned down. Your father lost a job. But no matter what happened, we persevered and we stuck together. What are the stories that have shaped your identity, that have shaped my identity?

We get them from our families, of course. We also get them from school, from college, from friends, from TikTok.
One way of thinking about this is by asking, when things are hard, when trouble comes, what's the story that helps you make sense of it?
In our passage this morning, in our gospel reading from Luke 24, a group of friends is asking that very question.
Luke 24 is a chapter about disciples trying to make sense of trauma. Earlier in the chapter, we encounter two disciples walking along the road to Emmaus and they are distraught.
[8:01] The person that they loved and followed, who they thought was going to change everything, has been crucified and they feel hopeless. And now in this morning's reading, another group of disciples have gathered and they are also trying to make sense of loss and to process the trauma of Christ's crucifixion.

And in the midst of this gathering, Jesus suddenly appears. Verse 37 says, they are shocked and scared because they are suddenly confronted by something that they didn't have a narrative for. That didn't fit into any of the stories about how they interpreted reality. The person that they had watched be executed and buried in a tomb is now standing in front of them.
This raw data was important for the disciples and I think it remains important for us. Just as the disciples took on board the reality of Jesus standing before him, we also will rely on the fact that at some point in our lives, we've had an encounter with Jesus.
We've become convinced that Jesus is real, that he's alive, and that there is no better teacher, no safer person.
[9:38] Or perhaps we haven't yet had an encounter with Jesus, but we're moving in that direction.

We're becoming curious about Jesus. And like the disciples in the room, we find ourselves becoming open to the fact that the resurrected Christ might be right here.
The same person who showed the wounds to his disciples, who ate some food to prove that he wasn't just some figment of an imagination or disembodied spirit is present and available to us right now.
But notice in the passage, Jesus does more than just give them himself. He also gives them a new story to make sense of their lives.

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Verse 45 says that Jesus opened their minds to reinterpret everything that happened in their past, to reconsider their experience of loss and disappointment through the lens of a different story.
[10:53] And the new story, Jesus tells his disoriented disciples in verse 46 is this. That the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead and that repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations starting in Jerusalem.

The new story that Jesus gives them, in other words, is a story that makes sense of loss and disappointment and hopelessness. It's a story of three things.
Cross, resurrection, and mission. Up until this point, the disciples don't have this as their story.
As Jews, what they have at this point is a really confusing family story. A story of being called by God to be a light to the nations and yet failing to live up to that and worshiping the gods of these other nations instead.
It's a story marked by moments of triumph with military victories under King David and fame and riches under King Solomon. And yet it eventually leads to exile in Babylon.
[12:16] It's a story of greatness never fully realized, of hope continuously disappointed.

And theirs is a story that many of us can identify with. Anyone who has experienced some longings for greatness not fully realized or had some hopes disappointed.
But Jesus gives a new story by which to interpret all of those losses, cross, resurrection, and mission.
The first part of the story is the cross. Our instinct is to keep the cross at several degrees of remove remove from us for it not to become part of our story.
The cross might be part of Jesus' story and therefore it's maybe part of my story in a theological sense but not in an experiential sense. Or the cross might be part of say the martyr's story.
[13:35] Someone who suffers for sharing the gospel in some hostile territory. Or the cross might be part of a monk's story. A particularly holy person dedicated to prayer and renunciation of worldly things.

But when Jesus says the cross is to become the interpretive grid for my story, for our story, for everyday real life, what does he mean? A few months ago I was talking with a Trappist monk who I meet with on occasion for spiritual direction.
We were discussing humility as the path towards God. And I commented on the clear route to humility that he had as a result of his monastic vows.
But when I said that he smiled. And his response to me was to say that he thought that his path to humility was not nearly so strenuous as those of us who are called to live in the secular world.
He said think about what humility a parent learns when their child does not obey them in the way that they hoped. or when a colleague very subtly makes you look bad in front of your boss.
[15:07] Or when a career doesn't advance in the way that you expected. Or when your spouse doesn't notice a good deed. He said for the person living in the world there are small experiences of the cross of suffering and sacrifice that can bring about humility every single day.

And if we can notice those moments and receive them in that way those daily realities can form us into Christ just as much as anything I do here in the monastery.
And so we might ask what what are those points of suffering or sacrifice in my own life right now even the very smallest things that I might interpret through the lens of the cross.
It doesn't mean that I stop praying for God to take those troubles to take that suffering away because God is never the author of evil. people. But Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane shows us what this looks like.
He prays for the cross to be taken from him even as he also places his life in the hands of his father. And so we begin to interpret any troubles that we experience even the smallest things through the lens of the cross.
[16:49] a friend in school talking behind our back. A health issue that's not going away. A family situation that's causing sleepless nights.

And like Jesus we will pray Father please take this away. But we will also pray Father so long as this continues would you shape me by it?
Would you form me into greater conformity to yourself through this experience? And as we do that we will see that the other two parts of the story that Jesus gave his disciples play out in our lives as well.

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Resurrection and mission. As we learn to enter into experiences of the cross in our lives we will also experience resurrection.
Even though resurrection may come in different ways. In some cases we may experience a resurrection of new opportunities. A surprising relationship that becomes possible after the pain of an old one ending.
[18:05] A career path that only opens up after other doors close first. first. But other times we may experience a resurrection that is more subtle but also more profound.

Because in the losses we suffer we may experience that our hearts are resurrected. That our life with God is resurrected. we start to become more of the person that God intended us to be.
We begin to experience the kind of life that becomes possible when through the pain of loss our old self begins to die. And this leads to the final part of the story.
Mission. As we begin to experience troubles and trials through the lens of the cross and as we also begin to experience resurrections in our lives.
Big and small we will find ourselves along with the disciples with a message to bring to others. But that message will never be simply some didactic facts that we drop into the laps of others.
[19:24] Rather we will bring our own experiences of the resurrected Christ. Our own experiences of healing and transformation as a loving and natural overflow into the lives of those around us and we will find ourselves leading lives of mission.

We all have stories by which we make sense of our lives. stories. The good news is that you and I are not bound to the stories we have now.
You are not bound to any story that has been imposed upon you or that you have absorbed from others. Jesus offers you and me a new story.
The story of cross and resurrection and mission. And it is a story for where we live our lives right now.
Amen. Amen. You. Thank you.

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