

The Stories We Tell

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] Good morning again to all of you. I've said this many times, I'll say it again, the sound of children in this building just fills me with joy. It's the best sound there is. Kids, I'm so glad that you're here, and I'm so glad that we get to celebrate Easter together.

I know my kids are here somewhere as well, so hello to you. Hey, to my kids. And I'm so glad that we can be together. This is a long-awaited Easter, I think, for many reasons that we'll get into. But we are in...we've been in a series actually for a while called Emotionally Healthy Spirituality. And we've been talking about this because it's, I think, very important to recognize that Easter, resurrection, the promise of the renewal that comes with the gospel doesn't just apply to us spiritually. It's not just about getting saved, getting a kind of punch card that gets us into heaven. It's not just about renewing us physically, meaning that we will be given new bodies and this world will be restored. It's about that, but it's not only about that. It's not about social renewal and all of the broken systems being set right in the world. It's about these things, but it's not only about these things.

It also brings with it the promise of emotional renewal. And for many of us, emotional renewal is something that we think very little about, and yet it probably affects us every waking moment of our lives. And so we've been focusing on the power of the gospel to renew people emotionally, to renew us in that way. And in addition, in case you didn't figure it out already, this is Easter Sunday, and so we want to focus on Easter stories. We want to focus on the resurrection. And so this morning, I'm excited to focus on maybe my favorite Easter story of all. This has been my favorite story probably ever since I first read it 20 years ago when I really came to faith. So we're going to be looking at this story in John chapter 21. And John chapter 21 shows us about the power of the gospel, the power of the gospel, the power of the gospel, the power of Easter to heal shame.

Peter has this encounter with the risen Lord Jesus that profoundly changes him because Jesus is able to heal his shame. And if you're someone who is in need of that kind of healing, as I quite frankly am, then this story is for you. And the good news of Easter is that it's available not just to Peter, but to everyone. So we're going to look at John 21. It's going to show us three things, the problem of shame, the dynamics of shame, how shame works in us, and then finally the answer to shame.

How Easter is that answer? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word, and we thank you for your son, and we thank you for the empty tomb. We thank you for the hope that it gives us.

[3 : 1 9] Lord, in years past, we focused on the evidence that leads us to believe with great confidence that this resurrection happened. But now, Lord, we ask you to show us what that means.

What difference does that make for us as we sit here this morning? What difference does that make in a world that has suffered through a pandemic and economic collapse and political division and all of the other things that have, all of the other ills that we have suffered through, Lord?

Most recently, mass shootings and death, Lord. We ask that you would show us what the resurrection means for our own hearts. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. Amen. So, the problem of shame. Some of you may have seen the film that came out years back called Force Majeure. Force Majeure is about a family. They go on a ski vacation in the French Alps, and they're staying at a ski resort. One beautiful afternoon, it's the second day of their week-long vacation.

They're eating lunch together out on the veranda of the ski resort, and there's this beautiful shot of the Alps just behind. The mountains are just behind this veranda, and you have a husband, Tomas, and you have a wife, Ebba, and then you have their two children. And they're sitting there eating lunch, and there's a little rumble, and people turn, and they look up, and you can tell that there's something happening out of the shot, and then all of a sudden, you begin to see snow coming down, and people start to get interested, and they say, oh, it looks like an avalanche. Oh, this is going to be really cool. And people start to get their cameras and their binoculars, and our family, Tomas and Ebba, they kind of stand up, and they're, wow, what's happening? And the snow begins to come down the mountain, and people are taking pictures, and they're oohing and aahing, and then it gets closer, and it gets closer, and it gets closer, and the rumbling gets louder and louder and louder, and all of a sudden, people start panicking and screaming because it looks like the avalanche is going to crash right into the veranda. And so people start turning around and grabbing their things and running and screaming, and at that moment, at that moment,

Ebba, the mom, grabs her children and covers them. As they cry out for their father, Daddy, Daddy. Tomas grabs his phone, pushes a man out of the way, and runs screaming off camera, abandoning his family. Turns out it's a false alarm. The snow, smoke, and haze begins to clear, and in the clearing haze, you can see people sort of getting back to their feet and sitting back down at their lunches, and you can see Ebba comforting the children and getting them to sit back down, and then slowly and very awkwardly, Tomas comes walking back onto the camera, looking around and kind of chuckling, and awkwardly sits down with his family and asks, everybody okay? And nobody will make eye contact with him. None of his family say a word to him. And the shame of that moment, the shame of that choice in that moment of panic haunts Tomas and Ebba, the rest of the film. It in fact starts to rot Tomas from the inside out. It starts to erode their marriage. He can't let it go. She can't let it go. It just sits under the surface and breaks everything apart. And that's what shame does. And you know, I think that this scene sort of gives us a little bit of insight into how the disciple Peter must have felt in the days following Easter, the days following the crucifixion, right? Peter is this man who had pledged himself to Jesus. He had sworn on multiple occasions,

[7:16] I'm going to follow you anywhere. Even if I have to lay down my life for you, I am committed to you, Jesus. He had made all of these audacious pledges of his loyalty. But then Peter was arrested.

And it says that as Jesus was being taken away after Jesus was arrested, Peter is following along behind, but at a distance so nobody would know that he was associated with Jesus. And then it says that somebody had built a charcoal fire. And so Peter sits down next to the fire. And as he sits down, a woman looks at him and says, hey, aren't you one of Jesus's disciples? And an avalanche of panic and fear washes over Peter. And in that moment, he says, no, no, you're mistaken. And then somebody else says, no, no, no, I could sworn that you were one of his disciples. I've seen you with him before.

He says, no, absolutely not. I don't know what you're talking about. And then a third person says, yeah, I'm really certain that I've seen you with Jesus before. And he says, I tell you the truth, I don't even know the man. And Luke 22, 61 tells us that at that moment, the rooster crows. And Jesus, who's being arrested, hauled away by soldiers, turns. And he makes eye contact with Peter.

And there's this moment of eye contact, a look of knowing. And so Peter gets up from the fire. He runs out away where nobody can see him. And he collapses. And it says, he weeps bitterly over what he's done. So by the time we get to John chapter 21, it's been days after Easter weekend, God only knows how many nights Peter had lain there in agony. You know, shame, one of the things it does, it just keeps you awake at night. You toss and you turn. And God only knows how many nights Peter laid there at three o'clock, four o'clock in the morning, replaying that scene in his mind over and over, wishing that he could go back, wishing that he could take it back. You can only imagine Peter laying there in agony, just fantasizing about what he would say if he could go back and do it again. Fantasizing about standing up and saying, I am a follower of Jesus. I would follow him anywhere.

I would lay down my life for him. I love that man. And surely he comforted himself and thought, if I could only go back, that's what I would say. That's what I would do. That's the real me.

[9 : 54] So in John chapter 21 verse 3, when Peter says, I'm going fishing, there's a lot going on in that little statement. That statement is the result of the impact of shame on Peter's identity. By this point, Scripture tells us, and it's easy to miss this, by this point when Peter says, I'm going fishing, Scripture tells us in a couple of different places, not only in the Gospels, but Paul says it in 1 Corinthians 15, that Peter had seen the risen Jesus face to face. That when Jesus rose, he made a special appearance to Peter. So by this point, Peter has already seen the risen, he knows he's resurrected.

So you ask, well, why is he going fishing? And the answer is, it's because Peter no longer believes that he's a disciple. A disciple has one job, follow your master. One job, follow your master.

Peter failed in that one job when it counted most. So he's gone back to his former life that he had before Jesus ever called him, the life of a fisherman. He has to do something with his life.

So shame is about our identity. And this is what makes shame different from guilt. See, guilt focuses on what we do. Shame focuses on who we are. Guilt says, I did something bad. Shame says, I am bad. Guilt says, I made a mistake. Shame says, I am a mistake. It's completely different.

Guilt is something that we don't really experience until we're old enough to grasp the impact of our actions on another person. It requires a certain amount of empathy. And so we can't really experience guilt until somewhere between the ages of three and six, developmentally. So children, if you're here and you're younger than that, no offense, but you don't have any empathy. And we don't expect it of you.

[12 : 01] It's just developmentally not possible. The good news is you can't really feel guilty for making your parents angry or spilling things. It's just developmentally inappropriate to expect that of you.

Older kids can. But shame, shame is something that we can feel before we have even acquired language. Kurt Thompson's a local psychiatrist. He wrote an amazing book on shame called The Soul of Shame. I highly recommend it. But in that book, he says, we usually have no conscious memory of our initial encounters with shame. These can take place as early as 15 to 18 months. 15 to 18 months. And usually, these early experiences of shame involve a child's response to someone's nonverbal cues. A glance, a tone of voice, a tone of voice, body language, gestures, or intensity of behavior that interrupt whatever the child may be doing, delivering a subtle but undeniably felt message of disapproval.

So kids as early as 15 to 18 months can pick up nonverbal cues of disapproval. So we feel shame long before we know what shame is. And Brene Brown, who many of you have probably heard of, is a very well-known sort of shame and vulnerability researcher. And she says that as we get older, we all experience shame, but men and women tend to, according to her, experience shame in somewhat different ways for different reasons. So I don't know if this will resonate you, but what Brene Brown says is that for many women, for many women, shame is this web of unattainable, conflicting, competing expectations about what you're supposed to be. Shame comes in the form of this. You need to have an amazing career. You need to be beautiful. You need to be fit. You need to be socially engaged. You need to be politically engaged and aware. You need to be an amazing parent. You need to be an amazing wife.

You need to be all of these things. And so shame comes from this sense that no matter how hard I try, I am failing in some or all of these categories. Like shame whispers, you've sacrificed all that time with your kids for your career. Why isn't your career further along? What do you have to show for it?

And she says, for many men, shame comes down to one thing. She says, it's not a whole web of expectations that for most men, shame comes down to one thing, being perceived as weak. Being perceived as weak. Like Thomas in Force Majeure. Right? The one thing you're supposed to do is the father and the husband, protect your family. Right? And he, and he, and he, he freaks out and he runs away.

[15 : 14] And this is another thing that she says that I think is interesting. So just take it for what it is. But Brene Brown says that this isn't just because men in our lives are hard on us, right? And tell us we can't be vulnerable. This is not just because of dads and coaches. She actually says that, that some of the men that she's talked to say that it's the women in their lives who are even harder on them when they are weak. So the problem of shame is this. If we kind of hold all this together, here's the problem of shame. Almost everyone experiences it from a very early age and yet almost no one knows how to deal with it. We don't know how to deal with our shame. So some people respond by numbing themselves.

Right? Brene Brown says this is why we are the most in debt, obese, addicted, and medicated adult cohort in U.S. history. She says that's unresolved shame. Some people try to perfect themselves.

They become highly perfectionistic about themselves, their marriages, their kids. Some people blame shift. They offload their shame onto another person or another group of people. It's all their fault. It's not my fault. That's a lot of what politics has become in our culture for many people.

Some people in our society have learned how to weaponize shame and use it to coerce people to move in the direction that they believe will be best for society. So this is the problem of shame. Almost everyone experiences it. Almost no one knows how to deal with it. So I want to say something about how shame actually works on us. The dynamics of shame. Before we talk about the answer to shame. Because this is really important. Shame comes to us in the form of the stories that we tell ourselves. Shame comes to us in the form of the stories that we tell ourselves. There is a broad consensus in the research that human beings are hardwired to be storytelling creatures. We are compelled by our biology to make meaning out of our lives. So we're neurobiologically hardwired to create stories that make meaning of our experiences. So as Brown says, when we fail, when you fail, you are compelled by your wiring to come up with a story to explain that failure. And here's the most important truth.

It doesn't matter if that story is true. Your brain will chemically reward you for coming up with a story that is false every bit as much as it will a story that is true. So accuracy doesn't matter.

[18 : 19] Whether or not it aligns with reality doesn't matter. But a story is a story is a story from the perspective of your brain chemistry. Right? So shame works by telling us stories, devising stories about who we are based on our life experiences. So Kurt Thompson, again, this local psychiatrist, he uses one of the most helpful analogies that I've ever heard for this. He says that all of us have this kind of personal shame attendant. A shame attendant. Imagine somebody just kind of following you around all the time, like a little shame attendant. And he says, we each have our own who attends to every turn in our storytelling venture. So we have a shame attendant. And we have a shame attendant.

No matter how large or small the moment, our attendant is waiting to offer advice, suggestions, and reflections with the intended purpose of disintegration. Right? So see if this resonates with you. And he says, you know, you wake up in the morning. Your shame attendant is there waiting for you. You know, you open your eyes. And the first thing your shame attendant says is, wow, you really didn't get enough sleep last night. Why'd you stay up so late? What were you thinking? And then you get out of bed and you kind of walk into the bathroom and you look and you see yourself in the mirror. And your shame attendant is standing there and says, you've put on some weight. Look, those pants barely fit anymore. And look at that saggy part. That wasn't there a year ago. And look at your face. Right?

And you sort of are looking in the mirror and your shame attendant is helpfully pointing out things that you might not have noticed. And then as you're brushing your teeth, your shame attendant is standing right there and it says, you know, there have been at least five or six times that you promised yourself you were going to start exercising, start eating better. How many times did you follow through on those? None? Okay. And it continues to list off example after example after example.

Maybe it throws in a few memories of other things, other projects that you've started but never finished. Maybe your shower leaks and you look up and you're like, I told my spouse a month and a half ago I was going to fix that. And your shame attendant says, but you haven't touched it, have you?

Right? And then before long, this narrative is being constructed of how worthless you are. How you're the kind of person who never follows through on anything that you say you'll do.

[20 : 48] Kurt Thompson talks about the shame attendant, but he also points out that as Christians we need to recognize that there is a true spiritual evil behind the shame attendant. This is not just psychological. This is spiritual. See, we think that satanic attack looks like the movies, you know, where things are moving around and it's all scary. No, no, no. A satanic attack most often comes in the form of that voice in your mind reminding you of all of those things as you're brushing your teeth in the morning. That's spiritual attack. You know, that's what the word Satan actually means. It means the accuser. When Jesus predicts Peter's denial in Luke chapter 22, verse 31, he says something interesting. He's saying to Peter, before the cock crows, you're going to deny me three times. And right there he says, just before that, he says, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you that he might sift you like wheat. I used to read that and think the focus is on the denial of Jesus. He's going to sift you like wheat, means you're going to deny Jesus, you're going to lose your salvation, and that's what the focus is. That's not, in fact, what it's talking about here.

What it's talking about is the fact that Satan's true aim is to destroy Peter with the shame that follows that betrayal. That's what he's talking about. Satan wanted to get you to make a mistake, and then he wanted to spend the rest of your living years destroying you because of that mistake.

Right? Like acid for your soul. This has been Satan's objective ever since the garden when he first convinced Adam and Eve to disobey God. See, before the fall, there had been no shame in the world. It says that they were naked and unashamed. But after the fall, Satan, the shame attendant, points out, right, just after the fall happens, Satan goes, you know you're naked, right?

You should be ashamed. You should cover up. Nobody wants to see that. And shame enters the world, and it's been there ever since. So this is the problem with shame.

Almost all of us experience it, unless you're, you know, have no empathy. No emotional awareness whatsoever, right? Most everybody experiences shame, and almost no one knows how to deal with it. And the way shame works is it's rooted in the stories we tell ourselves, the voice of our shame attendant. So let's put that together and ask, what's the answer, what's the hope that Easter offers us? Here's the answer to shame. The answer to shame is the truth of the resurrection and all that it means. Because here's how it works.

[23 : 52] There's one story that shame is trying to tell us about who we are. Every minute of every day, your shame attendant is telling you stories about who you are. And its objective is to convince you that you are not worthy of love or belonging. That's one story. You're worthless.

The only way to be free from that story is to find another story. To find another story. And Easter tells us another story. A better story. A true story. Believing in the fact of the resurrection is very important. We said that at the outset. But it's not enough to heal shame. There are a lot of people who look at the evidence and they're like, yeah, I really believe that Jesus rose. But there's a disconnect between that and their shame. Right? It's not enough to believe that it happened.

Peter believes in the fact of the resurrection. He had the advantage of seeing Jesus face to face. But he's still in the vice grip of shame. He's still the guy who betrayed Jesus. Peter, who are you? I'm the guy who betrayed Jesus. And that's what this encounter at the beach is all about. You say, well, what's going on with this little breakfast scene here? Here's what holds it all together. Jesus is giving Peter a new story with a new identity attached to it. And you say, well, how's he doing that? He is recreating the circumstances of Peter's calling. Peter was fishing when Jesus called him and said, leave your nets and come and follow me. He recreates that setting.

And then he recreates the setting of Peter's betrayal. It is no coincidence that Jesus builds another charcoal fire there on the beach. Right? The olfactory sense is most closely connected to memory. And it's not a stretch to imagine that ever since that horrible night of Peter's betrayal, every time he smelled a charcoal fire, he went right back to that night. Right back to his moment of cowardice. Jesus builds another charcoal fire. And Jesus is putting the question on the table.

Which Peter is the true Peter? Right? Peter the disciple? Peter the coward? Who's the real Peter?

[26 : 31] You know, as we said before, how many nights had Peter laid awake in his bed in agony, tossing and turning, wishing, if only I could go back, I would tell that woman and those two men, yes, I know Jesus.

Yes, I followed Jesus for three years. Yes, I love Jesus. I would give my life for Jesus. Take me away. I want to die right next to him. Don't you understand that here on the beach over breakfast, Jesus is giving Peter that chance to go back and to say what he wished he could have said.

He asks him three times, once for each denial. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.

Simon, son of John, do you love me? Yes, Lord, you know that I love you. Simon, son of John, do you love me? Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you. His soul is being knit back together.

The shame is evaporating. The lies of the accuser, the shame attendant, are being silenced as he speaks these words. Jesus already knows the answer to the question. He's doing this for Peter because Peter needs to hear his own voice saying this to Jesus. Peter needs this. This entire encounter is nothing short of a liturgy. This is a liturgy aimed at silencing the voice of shame and telling a new story. Not Peter the coward, but Peter the forgiven, Peter the rock, Peter the shepherd.

[28 : 12] And I think this is the true turning point in Peter's life and ministry. Right back in Luke chapter 22, when Jesus predicted Peter's denial, he said, I've prayed for you, Peter, that your faith may not fail and when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers. You know what's going on there?

Jesus is saying this. The only way that Peter is going to become the kind of man who can strengthen his brothers, who can feed sheep, is if he fails and overcomes the shame that comes with that failure.

Before this moment on the beach, Peter was overconfident. He was overzealous. He was constantly going over the top. He was constantly saying things like, I would die for you. I would do anything for you. As we heard this past Thursday, don't wash my feet. Let me wash your feet. Missing the point.

So overconfident was Peter in his own excellence. And the only way Peter is going to become the kind of man who can be the rock of the church, the shepherd of God's people, is to fail, to be broken, to face and to ultimately deal with his shame. In other words, to put it more succinctly, Peter knows what grace is intellectually. Only now does Peter know what it's like to need grace and to have it poured into your life. And out of that brokenness, Peter becomes a new man. He is now ready to strengthen his brothers and sisters and to feed God's people. So there is a story, just to pull all this together for us, there is a story that shame wants to tell you. There is a story that shame is telling you right now. In your mind as you're listening to this, some of you as you're managing your kids. There's a story that shame is telling you. And the only goal of that story is to break you down, to isolate you, and to convince you that you're not worthy of love or belonging. But Easter, the reason for all of this, the reason for the bells, is we're here to announce, like heralds in the darkness, a new story. A new story is being told in the world about who you really are. And it's the story of a God who made you. It's the story of a God who loves you. It's a story of a God who will stop at nothing to ensure that you belong to Him forever. It's a story of a God who took all of our shame, all of our failure, all of our sin, and then died in our place to set us free from shame and guilt and failure and sin. The only way you will ever know who you are is to know whose you are. I remember Dan saying that, and it stuck with me. The only way you're ever going to know who you are is to know whose you are. But it's not enough to believe it intellectually. It's not enough to kind of hear this and think, okay, what are we doing for lunch? Like Peter, we have to inhabit this story again and again and again until we believe it in our bones, in our flesh, in our gut.

And this is why it's so vital for us to be gathered together for worship on a regular basis. Right? Our liturgy, all of the words in this liturgy book are meant to do for us what the liturgy did for Peter on the beach. The words of this liturgy are designed to do those two things, to silence the voice of shame and accusation, and to reaffirm the story that is true about who you really are, who people are, who God has called them to be. And listen, man, you show me somebody who has dealt with their shame, you show me someone who knows who Jesus has called them to be in this world, and I will show you someone over whom Satan has no hold. And such a person is a threat.

[32 : 27] Such a person is dangerous to all that is dark and unjust in this world. Let's pray. Lord, we know this is true, but we need to know that we need to, that we know that we know that we know that this is true. That's the reason we sing, it's the reason we pray, it's the reason we confess and hear the absolution spoken, it's the reason we pass the peace, it's the reason above all that we share in the Lord's Supper. Even as we know this is true through our time together from here on out, help us to know that we know that we know that there is no voice of shame in our lives, that we are loved and that we belong to you and to one another forever and ever. Amen.