

Making It Home, Safe

^{NRS} Luk 24:1 But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb, taking the spices that they had prepared.² They found the stone rolled away from the tomb,³ but when they went in, they did not find the body.⁴ While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them.⁵ The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, but the men said to them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.⁶ Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee,⁷ that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again."⁸ Then they remembered his words,⁹ and returning from the tomb, they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest.¹⁰ Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them who told this to the apostles.¹¹ But these words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.¹² But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in, he saw the linen cloths by themselves; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.

“Home base,” according to the book of Official Baseball Rules “shall be marked by a five-sided slab of whitened rubber. It shall be a 17-inch square with two of the corners removed so that one edge is 17 inches long, two adjacent sides are 8 1/2 inches and the remaining two sides are 12 inches and set at an angle to make a point. It shall be set in the ground with the point at the intersection of the lines extending from home base to first base and to third base; with the 17-inch edge facing the pitcher’s plate, and the two 12-inch edges coinciding with the first and third base lines.”

Did you get all that? Wow, this kind of crazy attention to detail is further proof to me that if Presbyterians had an official sport, it should be baseball- and not golf, despite the connection with Scotland and old men in plaid pants. And I’m thinking of you Dave Backen and Rob Ayers. It’s definitely a cat walk morning for us here at TPC. ☺

Baseball and Easter have always belonged together for me. Maybe it’s because the seasons start at just about the same time every year- this year a few of you may have noticed that the Major League traded in their palms for pennants and opened last Sunday.

And maybe it's because I played baseball as a kid, and the excitement I felt with the promise of a new season always seemed, to me at least, so connected with the promise of Easter.

I still remember that feeling of anticipation, of hope, every spring, as Texas started to leaf out and green up, and before stepping outside felt like stepping into a blast furnace. Each spring my mom would sign me up for a new team. I'd get my uniform, my grey practice pants, and I'd get my glove out- oil it up for another season. The house I grew up in, the house my folks are still in just outside of Ft. Worth, has this unusual set up that was perfect this time of year. The house sits on a hill, and the garage is actually independent and sits down at the street level with this great, flat driveway. I could stand where the road meets the driveway and throw a tennis ball at those doors for hours with the Spring sun warming my back. Of course every once in a while the ball would veer off course. In a landscaping move straight from the Marquis de Sade that I still don't understand, my mom and dad planted prickly pear cactus up both sides of that driveway- and any tennis ball that found it's way into those pin cushions became covered in thousands of tiny needles that I'd be digging out of my hand for weeks. You'd think that would have improved my accuracy, but it didn't really. I pitch even more wildly than I preach. But that didn't really matter to me. Just being out there with a whole season ahead of me, a new start, a blank slate- whenever I think of Easter and Christ's promise of new life, as strange as it may sound, I can almost feel those practice pants again snug on my legs, I can almost smell the sweet, earthy scent of glove oil and leather.

I'm not the only one to make this connection between Easter and America's pastime. Years ago I read a great book by a former commissioner of Major League

Baseball, Bart Giamatti, entitled Take Time for Paradise. And one of the sections that has stayed with me is when writes about how home plate is called home plate- and not fourth base.

He writes: “If baseball is a Narrative, a story,” writes Giamatti “it is like others—a work of imagination whose deeper structures and patterns of repetition force a tale, oft-told, to fresh and hitherto-unforeseen meaning. But what is...the tale oft-told that recommences with every pitch, with every game, with every season? That patiently accrues its tension and new meaning with every iteration? It is...the story of going home after having left home, the story of how difficult it is to find the origins one so deeply needs to findHome No translation catches the associations, the mixture of memory and longing, the sense of security, the aroma of inclusiveness, of freedom from wariness, that cling to the word home. . . . Home is a concept, not a place.” Home is a concept not a place- can you believe a baseball commissioner wrote that?

It reminds me of that other great theologian, George Carlin. Do you remember how he compared baseball with football? He noticed how much nicer baseball is than football. Baseball is played in a park- football is played on a gridiron. Baseball is played in the Spring, the season of new life. Football is played in Fall, when everything is dying. Baseball has a seventh inning stretch; football has a two minute warning and sudden death! But most significantly is the goal of each sport. In football we see a quarterback, a field general, marching down the field, throwing bullet passes and long bombs, sometimes even from the shotgun, all trying to crush the other team’s defense and score points. In baseball though, what are you trying to do? Why, everyone is trying to

get *home*. In baseball we're all just trying to get home and hear the umpire call out 'Safe!'

Home. Home. This is what baseball is all about. It's also what Easter is all about. Isn't that why we're all here? You and I, we come here, some of us with hope, some of us with skepticism, heck some of us dragged here (don't raise your hand), but ALL of us, though, all of us drawn in by this wild story, all of us wanting to believe, that even in the face of death, we and those we love still might make it home together and be called safe.

Peter Gomes, the chaplain to Harvard University, calls it the "primal...homing instinct to go to church on Easter." Whether we're church people and attend all the time, or whether we're OK with God, but a little nervous about God's friends and feel a little out of place this morning, we're all here together trying find our place in this wild tale of dawn, women, grief, spices, and an empty tomb. We're all trying to feel our way home.

Do you know the worst Easter I celebrated also turned out to be the best- and all because I a new way of going home. It happened back I was in seminary. Our second year there, Melis was going to be out of town on business for Easter. She hated to leave, but it was important. And I told her I'd be fine, but truth be told, I *was* kind of at loose ends as Easter day was approaching and I wound up without any plans. I was going to hang out with my friend Steve and a few others, but he was headed out of town, too.

So, I was just kind of feeling lost and kind of homeless the day before Easter when my phone rang. It was my neighbor, Tonia Smith. We had these crazy neighbors upstairs- the Smiths. The Smith's were, and there's no good way to put this- horrible

people. I know you're not supposed to say that- especially on Easter, but it's true. If they borrowed food that was name brand- they always gave you generic back. Mark was a Ph.D student in Old Testament, and he decided he wanted to get as much mileage out of studying Hebrew as possible and named his kids Mayim and Joram. I mean Mayim is all right, it means water, but Joram? That's just mean. And when we were new, they invited Melis and I up for dinner and games. They had us playing as couples- one against the other. And after they beat us about the third time in Pictionary, I kid you not, they ended up pointing their fingers at us shouting "In your face!" It was Pictionary- you'd think they won the world series.

So, I pick up the phone, and it's Tonia Smith. She lives 20 feet away, but she calls me on the telephone. She calls saying she knows Melis is out of town and wonders if I have plans. And all of a sudden I find myself torn. While normally I'd rather have my eyes gouged with a spoon than have another dinner with them, I sort of found myself on the fence. I *was* lonely- and maybe I just needed to spend more time with them. Maybe they had a good side I just wasn't seeing yet. So I tell her the truth- I tell her no, that I don't have any plans. And then she says the strangest thing. She says, "Great, well we were wondering if we could borrow your table then. We have a lot of people coming over and could really use it." Borrow our table? Kind of in a daze, I tell her that I don't think it's a good idea, that it's really Melissa's, and old, and quite fragile. And then I did it- I said that if it would still be OK that I'd be happy to come and what could I bring? There was this awkward silence over the phone. Tonia explained that they were really going to have a full house and didn't have room for another- they just wanted our table. Then, without missing a beat, this vulture tried to see if there was any more meat she

could pick off my now dead carcass. She said, “Well, how about a few of your chairs then. I’ve seen through the window you a bunch of them around.” Again I tell her no- and I made a mental note to invest in thicker curtains. She then wished me happy Easter and hung up.

Now, normally I would consider it a reprieve that I didn’t have to have dinner with the Smiths. But when I hung up- I was not only angry, but I felt lonelier than I did before. I wasn’t even invited to the Smiths. On this particular occasion, already feeling a little lost- this phone call left me feeling now amazingly alone. I sat down and sighed. Not only were the people I cared about gone- but the people I was left with were truly bizarre.

And I was still feeling that way the next morning, Easter Sunday. In fact I was feeling so low, I was thinking about just skipping church entirely. But as I was laying in bed, my phone rang again- I was thinking it was Tonia again, probably wanting to borrow my toothbrush if I wasn’t using it. But it wasn’t. It was my friend Steve. Steve was supposed to out of town, but as luck would have it, he wound up staying. He was calling to see if I wanted to go to church with him. I didn’t want to go- but I said yes, anyway.

It was a glorious morning- it’s true that New Jersey really does have some godawful, industrial zones, but the boroughs around Princeton really are gorgeous. That morning, the rolling green hills were blanketed in soft, silent fog, and I-95 was surrounded by towering forsythia, exploding in yellow just like they are here this morning- well it just took my breath away that morning.

And church? Well, I’ll tell you the truth, I don’t remember a single word I heard that day. I don’t even remember what hymns we sang. But what I do remember- what I

do remember is the feeling I had that came over me as I walked through the cemetery, a cemetery with not just civil war graves but revolutionary war graves, and then sat down in an old, wooden pew just bursting with people. The place was so full of life that morning, people I knew, people I didn't- but all of them genuinely warm, smiling at me, shaking my hand, whether they knew me or not- literally loving me back into life. That morning, even though my family felt like they were a million miles away- I discovered home that morning. I found my way home that Easter morning.

You know, Bart Giamatti is right- home really isn't a place. It's not a structure or a piece of land somewhere, it's is so much more than that. But I think he's wrong when he says it's a concept. I think he's wrong when he says home is something as abstract and bloodless as a concept. Friends, the good news of Easter is this: home isn't a place, it isn't a concept, it isn't a five sided piece of rubber- home is a person. Home is a person. Home is the person of Jesus Christ- God become flesh, the leader who didn't come to bark out orders but to serve, the teacher who didn't come to write theology books but tell stories, the one whose laughing spirit not even death could silence. Home is the person of Christ, and home is you and me, home is you and me, whenever we act in his name and care for one another. Whether our love is planned out in some extravagant way, or whether we do something as simple as give a smile and a kind word to a lonely person who is feeling out of place; home is us.

Welcome home this morning, friends. In Christ's name welcome home! **Amen.**