

## Understanding and Spreading the Meaning of Easter

Some years ago, I read a short story told by a retired teacher about her student, Jeremy. Jeremy was born with a twisted body, a slow mind and a chronic, terminal illness that had been slowly killing him all his young life. Still, his parents had tried to give him as normal a life as possible and had sent him to St. Theresa's elementary school. At the age of 12, Jeremy was only in second grade, seemingly unable to learn.

His teacher, Doris Miller, often became exasperated with him. He would squirm in his seat, drool and make grunting noises. At other times, he spoke clearly and distinctly, as if a spot of light had penetrated the darkness of his brain. Most of the time, however, Jeremy irritated his teacher.

One day, she called his parents and asked them to come to St. Teresa's for a consultation. As the Foresters sat quietly in the empty classroom, Doris said to them, "Jeremy really belongs in a special school. It isn't fair to him to be with younger children who don't have learning problems. Why, there is a five-year gap between his age and that of the other students!" Mrs. Forrester cried softly into a tissue while her husband spoke. "Miss Miller," he said, "there is no school of that kind nearby. It would be a terrible shock for Jeremy if we had to take him out of this school. We know he really likes it here."

Doris sat for a long time after they left, staring at the snow outside the window. Its coldness seemed to seep into her soul. She wanted to sympathize with the Foresters. After all, their only child had a terminal illness. But it wasn't fair to keep him in her class. She had 18 other youngsters to teach and Jeremy was a distraction. Furthermore, he would never learn to read or write. Why spend any more time trying? As she pondered the situation, guilt washed over her.

"Oh God," she said aloud, "here I am complaining when my problems are nothing compared with that poor family! Please help me to be more patient with Jeremy." From that day on, she tried hard to ignore Jeremy's noises and his blank stares.

Then one day he limped to her desk, dragging his bad leg behind him. "I love you, Miss Miller," he exclaimed, loudly enough for the whole class to hear. The other children snickered, and Doris's face turned red. She stammered, "wh-why, that's very nice, Jeremy. Now please take your seat."

Spring came, and the children talked excitedly about the coming of Easter. Doris told them the story of Jesus, and then to emphasize the idea of new life springing forth, she gave each of the children a large plastic egg. "Now," she said to them "I want you to take this home and bring it back tomorrow with something inside that shows new life. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Miss Miller!" The children responded enthusiastically - all except for Jeremy. He just listened intently; his eyes never left her face. He did not even make his usual noises. Had he understood what she had said about Jesus' death and resurrection? Did he understand the assignment? Perhaps she should call his parents and explain the project to them.

That evening, Doris' kitchen sink stopped up. She called the landlord and waited an hour for him to come by and unclog it. After that, she still had to shop for groceries, iron a blouse and prepare a vocabulary test for the next day. She completely forgot about phoning Jeremy 's parents. The next morning, 19 children came to school, laughing and talking as they placed their eggs in the large wicker basket on Miss Miller's desk. After they completed their math lesson, it was time to open the eggs. In the first egg, Doris found a flower. "Oh yes, a flower is certainly a sign of new life," she said. "When plants peek through the ground we know that spring is here. "A small girl in the first row waved her arms. "That's my egg, Miss Miller," she called out. The next egg contained a plastic butterfly, which looked very real. Doris held it up. "We all know that a caterpillar changes and turns into a beautiful butterfly. Yes, that is new life, too" little Judy smiled proudly and said, "Miss Miller, that one is mine."

Next Doris found a rock with moss on it. She explained that the moss, too, showed life. Billy spoke up from the back of the classroom. "My daddy helped me!" He beamed. Then Doris opened the fourth egg. She gasped. The egg was empty! Surely it must be Jeremy 's, she thought, and, of course, he did not understand her instructions. If only she had not forgotten to phone his parents. Because she did not want to embarrass him, she quietly set the egg aside and reached for another.

Suddenly Jeremy spoke up. "Miss Miller, aren't you going to talk about my egg?" Flustered, Doris replied, "but Jeremy - your egg is empty!" He looked into her eyes and said softly, "yes, but Jesus' tomb was empty too!" Time stopped. When she could speak again. Doris asked him, "Do you know why the tomb was empty?" "Oh yes!" Jeremy exclaimed. "Jesus was killed and put in there. Then his Father raised him up!" The recess bell rang. While the children excitedly ran out to the school yard, Doris cried. The cold inside her melted completely away.

Three months later Jeremy died. Those who paid their respects at the mortuary were surprised to see 19 eggs on top of his casket, all of them empty.

What I love with his story is it reminds us of the meaning of the resurrection and also the power to transform.

Jeremy, in his wisdom, knew what Easter was. He looked at his life not as one of setbacks, but rather with hope, and in his heart, he also knew Jesus loved him and would raise him up too. Life as we all know has such suffering in it, but as Jesus passes over from death to life, we too arise. Jeremy's tomb is ultimately empty for he lives with the angels and saints, and through Jesus, we too arise. While we need to grieve and acknowledge the reality of our loss, we also move forward in hope knowing that death is swallowed up in the victory of the Lamb.

Easter completing our Lenten journey also transforms us, and we like the apostles who leave the upper room and the women leaving the tomb to speak about the resurrection have the power to transform. Jeremy gave everyone around him something powerful: hope. We can do that in part so well through our actions which can speak louder than words. Visit loved ones who may not be able to get out rather than just sending them a card. Make it a point to visit a cemetery and care for a grave to pass on to others, especially kids, why we honor the dead and maintain our connection with them. Show kindness to that person at school or work you may have been

avoiding. Walk away from gossip and opportunities to put one another down. Talk about your faith and why you have it and what you believe, even if it's on a "hot button" issue that might ruffle feathers; get people to think more deeply about things. The faith isn't meant to be kept secret, but shared.

Have a very blessed Easter, and as you leave Mass, may the joy of the Resurrected Christ fill your hearts with hope, and may that hope be something we fill the world with. Alleluia, He is Risen!

Easter Blessings to you and your loved ones,

Fr. Paul