

## **“Welcome Back”**

**John 20:19-31**

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How do you help someone rebuild their faith? I think Jesus pondered this question before and after his crucifixion. He knew that his death, especially the way that he died, shattered the faith of his disciples.

What were they to believe now? Where were they to go and what were they to do? Was their time with Jesus a pleasant memory, but no more than that? What were they to do with their grief, guilt, anger, fear and confusion?

Jesus was aware of their questions and struggles and knew he needed to help them reconstruct their faith and rebuild their lives. He had to give them back the future that his death took from them. This was why he returned to that Upper Room on Easter evening and appeared in their midst, commissioning and empowering them to continue their ministry.

It was also why he returned a week later and had that memorable encounter with Doubting Thomas in which Thomas made that bold declaration, “My Lord and my God!” No one was to be left behind.

Today’s text helps me to understand what it means to be the presence of Christ in a broken world. We are to help people rebuild their lives after a crisis.

**Who needs your help rebuilding their faith and future?** What happened to them? Did a loved one die? Did their marriage die? Did they lose their job or their health? Did a child get in serious trouble? Did they make a terrible mistake? How are they handling their grief, guilt, anger, fear and confusion? Have they gone into seclusion like the disciples or Thomas?

**What can you do to help them?** Let our text guide us because I find some very practical suggestions in it.

**Reach out to them as Jesus did the frightened disciples.** With God’s help, get beyond that locked door.

Recently I went to see Clint Eastwood’s latest movie, “Gran Torino.” It marked Eastwood’s return to a lead acting role after four years.

In this movie, Eastwood plays Walt Kowalski, a retired Polish American Ford automobile assembly line worker and Korean War veteran, haunted by memories of that conflict. He lives with his Labrador Retriever, Daisy, in a changing neighborhood in Michigan. It doesn’t take long to realize that he is grumpy and impatient, intolerant of anyone that is unlike him or does not meet his expectations.

At the beginning of the movie, Walt is attending his wife’s funeral, bristling at the shallow eulogy of young Father Janovich. At the reception after the funeral, Walt makes it clear that he never wants to see Father Janovich again.

That, however, does not deter Father Janovich. Repeatedly, he shows up on Walt’s front porch determined to forge a friendship with him. In the end, his persistence pays off and he develops a healthy and meaningful relationship with Walt that leads to the dramatic ending of the movie.

Obviously, I was intrigued by Father Janovich. I’m not sure I could have done what he did, but his impact upon Walt was not lost on me. Father Janovich was respectful, but not timid. He just would not take no for an answer. Sometimes we must not either.

**Like Jesus, show them your scars.** Be transparent. Share your story and struggles. Let them sense your pain.

Adoniram Judson was a Baptist missionary in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century who labored for almost forty years in the country of Burma, now Myanmar. His work progressed slowly in the beginning with only eighteen converts in twelve years.

During the war between England and Burma from 1824-26, Judson was imprisoned and lived in the most deplorable conditions. His wrists and ankles were chained. Each night a bamboo pole was

inserted into the chains and he slept suspended in air. As you would expect, his wrists and ankles were terribly scarred when he was finally released.

It was these scars, however, that preached the gospel after his release. When the people saw them, they recognized a level of love they had never known. As a result, a revival swept through Burma that led to unprecedented numbers of converts.

**Listen to people whose world has been shattered and faith is tottering.** I can only imagine the discussion that took place in that Upper Room after Jesus appeared. I am confident that Jesus was a good listener. He had been all his life as his ministry revealed.

Allow traumatized people to verbalize their feelings and doubts. Don't judge them; love them unconditionally. People have a tendency to talk to good listeners.

How Will They Hear if We Don't Listen? is the title of the book written by my friend and McAfee professor, Dr. Ron Johnson. I like it and the content of the book in which Johnson stresses the importance of listening to people to help them establish or restore their faith.

Some of the most satisfying conversations I have are with people who are rebuilding their faith. I find them to be refreshingly candid and meaningful. I learn a lot from them that I can use on my own journey and share with others.

**Share your faith with those who may have lost theirs.** Tell them what that empty tomb means to you.

This text helps me understand why the disciples were so successful in continuing Jesus' work and spreading the gospel. They had a story to tell that people needed to hear, a story about the re-birth of their own faith. I can hear Thomas now. "Let me tell you about the time my faith was resurrected." I would listen, wouldn't you?

**Who did this for you?** Who helped you when you were at your lowest? Who made their way beyond your locked door? Who took your doubts seriously and listened to you wrestle with your faith? Who showed you their scars and shared their story? Who witnessed the re-birth of your faith? I hope you have thanked them.

I also hope you have followed their example and helped someone else rebuild their life and reconstruct their faith. I can think of no greater gift you could give them.