

**"Wow!"**

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Let's join our hearts together in prayer. Let us pray: **Gracious and loving God, in the midst of our Easter celebrations, complete with Easter bunnies and Easter eggs, help us to know the risen Christ who lives on with you and the Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.**

Little Philip, who was born with Down's syndrome and attended a third-grade Sunday School class with several eight-year-old boys and girls, was the subject of an article in *Leadership* magazine. Typical of that age, the children did not readily accept Philip with his differences. But because of a creative teacher, they began to care about Philip and accept him as part of the group, though not fully. The Sunday after Easter, the teacher brought a bunch of L'eggs pantyhose containers that look like large eggs, to Sunday school. The children were told to go outside on that lovely Spring day, find a symbol for new life, and put it in their egg-like container. After running about the church property in wild confusion, the students returned to the classroom and placed their containers on the table. Surrounded by the children, the teacher began to open them one by one. After each one, whether flower, butterfly, or leaf, the class would ooh and ahh. Then one was opened, with nothing inside. The children exclaimed, "That's stupid. That's not fair. Somebody didn't do what they were supposed to do." Little Philip spoke up, "That's mine. I did so do it. It's empty. The tomb was empty!" Silence followed. From then on, Philip became a full member of the class.

Philip died not long afterward from an infection. At the funeral, his Sunday school class of eight-year-olds marched up to the altar with their Sunday school teacher, not with flowers, but each to lay on it an empty pantyhose egg. Wow!

Today is the day of the empty pantyhose egg; the empty tomb; the risen Christ; the cornerstone of our Christian faith; the new life that gives us hope! Hallelujah!

In the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, written before the first gospel according to Mark was written and long before the last gospel according to

John was written, Paul says, "For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [that's Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died." While there are different details in each of the gospels, in Acts, and in the letters of Paul, there are three very consistent messages: that Jesus died on a cross; that Jesus was raised from the dead; and that the risen Christ appeared to many people.

John recounts the first Easter morning with the visceral reality of having been there. It's emotional, it's deeply personal, it's physical, and it touches our own difficulty in grasping the reality of the resurrection. Mary Magdalene went to the tomb alone, in the dark of the first day of the week. When she arrives at the tomb, the stone has been removed, and she concludes that grave robbers have stolen Jesus' body. There is then an incredible sense of urgency, where Mary runs to tell Peter and the beloved disciple, who's never named, but likely refers to John himself. Then they both run to the tomb, discover the grave cloths and the beloved disciple "saw and believed." At this point the beloved disciple saw and believed, but it's not quite clear what he might have believed – for Jesus' body was missing, and no one yet knew where his body might be.

Sarah MacWhirter wrote an interesting true story in the Globe and Mail about a South African man named Martin Pistorius. In 1988, when Martin was 12 years old, he came home from school one day with a sore throat, feeling sick. During the year that followed, Martin lost his voice and stopped eating; he lost voluntary motor control, and he gradually fell into a coma. He was strapped into a wheelchair and viewed by the world around him as a vegetable. The doctors told his parents that they didn't expect Martin to re-awaken or to survive for much longer.

About four years later, around age 16, Martin slowly began to regain consciousness. He fully regained consciousness by age 19, but he was still completely paralyzed, and unable to communicate with others. He had what is

sometimes called Locked-in Syndrome: a working mind in a body that doesn't work at all. Martin didn't die while in his coma, but some would consider his new situation to be even worse. He was alive, but everyone around him considered him as if he was dead. He was completely dependent on others and only saw what was in his limited line of sight. He watched how the sun light moved across the room, how the seasons passed, and he escaped into his imagination. At the same time, his parents grieved the son they had lost and tried to cope with their new reality.

Peter and the beloved disciple leave, but Mary stays weeping outside the tomb, mourning the loss of Jesus, grieving the loss of his body, and trying to cope with her new reality. The presence of the grave cloths, which led the beloved disciple to believe, should have signalled to Mary that grave robbers could not be responsible, for they would not have removed the wrapping from around his body – for ease of transport and also for the value of the linen cloth. Mary laments to the one we already know is Jesus, but she believes it's the gardener, who may have taken Jesus' body.

Then Jesus speaks Mary's name. It's deeply personal. It's particular to Mary and when spoken by Jesus, it's personal to their relationship. Mary responds using the Aramaic word "Rabbouni," which is a personal term of endearment for Rabbi, teacher or master. Jesus is the good shepherd, he knows his sheep by name, and they respond to his voice. Mary is transformed from weeping tears of pain and grief, to shedding tears of joy in the presence of the risen Christ.

In his resurrection, Jesus makes it possible for the disciples to share fully in his relationship with God. Jesus tells Mary to tell the other disciples, who he now calls brothers, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." What's true of Jesus' relationship with God is true of their relationship with God, and of our relationship with God because we are all members of one family in the risen Christ.

Martin Pistorius was conscious, but unable to communicate for a decade. One day, Martin's caregiver, Virna van der Walt, who always talked to him and treated him as if he could understand everything she said and did, noticed that Martin could use his eyes to respond to what she said. Virna recommended that Martin,

then 25 years old, be sent to the University of Pretoria for testing and they confirmed his consciousness. Over time, Martin gradually began to regain some of his upper body functions. His parents bought him a speech computer and Martin was slowly re-born to new life; interacting in community with others.

Martin met Joanna through his sister Kim in 2008. Joanna says that it was love at first sight. Martin proposed to her in a hot air balloon ride with the sun rising behind them and a beautiful waterfall cascading below them. They were married in 2009. Today, Martin has control over his head and arms, and uses a speech computer to communicate. He drives an adapted car, and is a freelance web designer, developer and author. He published an autobiography called Ghost Boy and has given several public interviews that you can watch on YouTube. Martin and Joanna have a son, Sebastian Albert Pistorius born on December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2018. Martin concludes his interview with Sarah MacWhirter with this advice, "There is always hope, no matter how small. And also, to treat everyone with kindness, dignity, compassion and respect, whether you think they understand or not. Never underestimate the power of the mind, the importance of love and faith and to never stop dreaming." Wow!

Martin rose to new life, but there's only one example of resurrection. Stories of butterflies, water bugs and even the re-birth of Martin Pistorius are inspiring, but they don't come close to the amazing wonder of God raising Jesus from death after three days in the tomb. There's only one resurrection, but through God's love, demonstrated on that first Easter morning, there's a lot of miracles; there's renewal and re-birth; there's forgiveness and there's new life. It's all possible through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, our risen Lord who welcomes us in love to be a part of the everlasting Kingdom of God. Hallelujah! Thanks be to God. Amen.