

RISE

AN AUTHENTIC LENTEN DEVOTIONAL

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Introduction

I was recently watching the movie *Batman Begins* (for roughly the 83rd time). One of my favorite scenes shows a battered Bruce Wayne surrounded by the burning rubble of the family estate he inherited after his parents' deaths. He is the keeper of their legacy, the steward of the family name, the carrier of their memory—and he feels as though he has failed to do all of these things. His longtime butler and father-figure, Alfred, repeats words to Bruce that Bruce's father often shared with him as a child, in moments of discouragement in order to steady him.

He says, “Why do we fall, Bruce?”

Bruce's father's reply still echoes in his head: “So we can get back up.”

This is a wonderful moment in the film, but I'm not sure it's great theology: the idea that pain has a purpose. I don't believe our suffering is a premeditated test that forces us to find meaning, but I believe that pain is a present opportunity to choose: a sacred space where we get to decide who we will be and what we will believe and how we will respond. As people of faith, we get up when we fall because we are a people of hope, we accept the descent as the invitation to rise again. The spiritual journey—like the human experience—is not a level, linear path where pitfalls are uniform and where growth is predictable and progress comfortable. It is a messy, meandering, awkward path of stops and starts. It is made of both the falling and

the getting back up—and the former is often far easier than the latter.

Rising is inherent in our religious tradition: We allow our spirits to rise in the middle of the storms. We wait for the sun to rise, trusting that a joyful morning will follow a night of mourning.

We rise to our feet after falling to our knees in desperate prayer, assured that we are not alone in the struggle.

We rise in resilience when person and circumstance knock the wind from us.

We rise to meet the coming day, knowing we are held by a Love that endures through the blackest darkness.

We rise on the promise that death is not that final word.

Lent is not an event. It's not just one, glorious moment. As much as being about a single dawn arriving, it is about all the many not-yets, one-day-soons, and still-to-comes of this life in the waiting, about the painful in-between times that we'd like to fast-forward through on our way to peace and growth and clarity. That seems to be where the bulk of the rising happens. Maybe that's a good way to think of our time together here in these pages: in the valley places but with our eyes still looking up.

This is a season ultimately made of elevated hopes, raised expectations, ascending spirits, and radiant mornings, and we should never forget that. It is love helping us get back up. But before all of that, it is a road that travels through the darkness, through the waiting, through grief, and through the nights where hope feels beyond reach. Those are sacred spaces too, even if they are

less pleasant. Consider these pages a journey *to* something and a journey *through* something. As keepers of a legacy and stewards of a family name and carriers of a memory, we can be encouraged that when we are presently falling, the rise is never far away.

1) The Windshield and the Rearview Mirror

After the sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.

There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow. The guards were so afraid of him that they shook and became like dead men.

The angel said to the women, "Do not be afraid, for I know that you are looking for Jesus, who was crucified. He is not here; he has risen, just as he said. Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.' Now I have told you."

So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. Suddenly Jesus met them. "Greetings," he said. They came to him, clasped his feet and worshiped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me."

—MATTHEW 28:1–10

Spoiler alert: the tomb was empty. (I hope you don't stop reading now.)

It might seem strange to begin this journey with the end of the story (or at least with the culmination of the Lenten narrative), but I think it's helpful in framing every moment of the coming season for us. Starting in sunlit,

tomb-side morning euphoria reminds us that the assurance of the dawn's arrival isn't easily claimed in the lightless moments. In fact, it's something that we often imagine will never come. When our struggles are in the windshield, when they are part of our present discomfort, it's nearly impossible to remember that they will one day be in our rearview mirror: that in one way or another we will have passed through something and reached something else, and that it will yield a stronger, wiser, more perceptive version of ourselves. We can't fathom now that we will eventually experience stratospheric joy despite the depth of the despair preceding it, but that is the greater story.

When we step into these forty days as people of faith, we do so while having the end in mind, and so the pain we encounter in the gospels is always tempered by the knowledge of the glorious morning we know is coming. It will be a path woven through doubt, grief, fear, and hopelessness, but we know how it ends, and that helps. We understand that the journey to the empty tomb always passes through the desperate garden prayers, through the brutal chaos of the cross, and through the absolute certainty that all is indeed lost—but that is never the last word.

I imagine this declaration isn't so easy regarding the current burdens you carry and the battles you wage right in this moment. Today, take solace in remembering that this isn't the end of the story, that it may simply be the struggle in the windshield. Soon it will be in the rear view.

2) A Holy Unavailability

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions

went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!"

Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he traveled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

—MARK 1:35–39

"What was better when you were younger?"

Today, I posed that question on social media. The answers were a mix of lighthearted childhood touchstones such as sugary breakfast cereals and Saturday morning cartoons, personal mid-life lamentations about expanding waistlines and receding hairlines, and more somber observations about our public discourse and general level of empathy.

One of the things I think we were all better at in the past was *presence*. Before cell phones and prior to being perpetually available to everyone, when we were at the movies or at a concert or with our friends or walking in nature, we were fully there without interruption or dilution. We weren't continually being pulled to other places or alerted to more supposedly pressing matters or distracted with capturing our private moments for public consumption. This inability to be present comes from the fact that we are almost never truly alone or able to find protracted moments of complete solitude. Being unavailable is a lost art, one we would be wise to recover.

I love the moments in the gospels where Jesus withdraws to the silence and the stillness because they remind me that doing so isn't a betrayal of our work or the people in our path, but a way of preparing us to be fully present

to it all. In those times when we pull away from the crowd (if we can), our minds are recalibrated and our reserves replenished; and when we return to the world, we are better able to offer our undivided selves. So, yes, the technology will always be a challenge, but the real and enduring danger is our own preoccupation with being reachable and the fear that we will miss out on something if we are not. If you want to be better at presence, work on absence first. Today, may you give yourself the gift of disappearing. May you do the sacred work of being unavailable.

3) The Wall of Resentment

“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”

—MATTHEW 5:23–24

I was preparing to speak at a Boise church and started having a conversation with a couple in the front row about the relational fractures of the recent days and the toll it was taking on them. One of the women commented on how upside down things seemed and how frustrated she was with people she knows and loves, and she said with sarcasm, “John, I’m 59 years old and I’ve been suicidal many times, but until recently I’ve never been homicidal.” She laughed explosively afterward, realizing the darkness of the statement especially given the setting—but I knew what she meant. We’ve all been surprised by our vengeful hearts, and we know the wall anger makes between ourselves and others.

Grief, and even anger, are natural biproducts of being a person of empathy witnessing the cruelty in the world, but they can become a toxic cocktail and lead to something really unhealthy and unhelpful: resentment. This is that step beyond the natural mourning or reasonable outrage and into something worrisome, something punitive. Our resentment often comes from a desire to make someone “pay”: for their vote, their politics, their theology, their hateful words, their corrosive beliefs. We want people to be held accountable—whatever that looks like to us. And along with that, we often would like for them to feel remorse or sorrow. We want people to confess, to show contrition, to express regret, or at least to admit they’ve done something wrong. But the problem is, these are often things they aren’t able or willing to give us, at least right now. This unwillingness or inability is our invitation to decide what we will do in response. The issue with resentment isn’t whether or not we agree with someone. That’s almost irrelevant. The questions for people of faith, morality, and conscience are, how do I express disagreement, and what happens in my heart toward those I disagree with?

Today, consider the things you hold over or hold against someone, and how these might be holding you back from experiencing the fullness of the present.

4) A Nagging Pain

Just then a woman who had been subject to bleeding for twelve years came up behind him and touched the edge of his cloak. She said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be healed.”

Jesus turned and saw her. "Take heart, daughter," he said, "your faith has healed you." And the woman was healed at that moment.

—MATTHEW 9:20–22

Not long ago I found myself at the doctor's office after experiencing some prolonged lower back discomfort. The physician examining me asked a question that you've likely been asked by a medical professional at some point: "On a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you experiencing right now?" I managed a half-smile and said, "Well, I'm hoping this is actually a nine, but it could turn out to only be a three. I'm afraid that things could get a lot more painful than they are right now." The doctor laughed but I wasn't kidding. I'd had enough irritation to bring me into that office, and I was really hoping that feeling worse was not a strong possibility. It wasn't just the severity of the pain but the duration that had worn me out.

We can get spoiled reading the healing stories in the gospels because they seem so instantaneous and complete: Jesus encounters someone with an affliction, and in a moment they are given total relief. They proceed to leave the story, seemingly no longer burdened by their afflictions and never to be heard from again. But in reality, healing is rarely so cut-and-dried, and that can be frustrating. Our suffering lingers; our recovery is sporadic; our progress faces setbacks—and sometimes we get worse.

I'm grateful that the gospel writer tells us of the dozen years prior to the bleeding woman's meeting Jesus, because we can understand her frustration and find ourselves in her story of chronic sickness or struggle. The greater challenge is in reading of her sudden reversal and not getting impatient. We want that dramatic and decisive kind of relief, and yet that isn't usually how the road to the rise happens. This

season, you may be carrying a physical illness, an emotional burden, or a spiritual ailment that seems to be in no hurry to depart, and you may be in the early part of the journey and not necessarily near the end. Be encouraged. This doesn't mean you won't eventually find relief—it just may mean this day will be part of the waiting.

5) Love Remains

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in

his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other."

—JOHN 15:1–17

I don't like waiting: for takeout food, online orders, doctor visits—anything. As I move through the world, things almost never function as expediently as I'd like, and a smoldering restlessness is always rumbling just beneath the surface. Traffic tends to amplify this ever-latent frustration, and I can easily lose my religion in a good gaper delay or unexpected construction area. My continual impatience is compounded by a terrible affliction I suffer (one doctors have yet to properly identify), which causes me to always choose the wrong lane in a backup. Always. The very instant I complete my transition to what is clearly the faster option, it's as if the lane I'd just vacated suddenly glides briskly along and my new one now ceases to move. That is, of course, until I veer back to where I'd been originally seconds ago, upon which that lane once again screeches to a standstill. I soon look ahead into the distance and lament the place farther down the road that I would have occupied had I only stayed put. I watch another driver claim the smooth travel I missed out on, and in a fit