

## On To Dry Land: Welcome Home!

There was a little girl who walked to her house through the cemetery every day after school. She loved to feel the breeze in her hair and to watch the birds. Sometimes she just threw herself on the rich, green grass, and watched the clouds turn into castles and angels and great white stallions. She loved hearing the birds singing. As she skipped around gravestones, she whistled her favorite tunes and sang songs. At times she knelt down, and read the names and dates on the tombstones, and slid her fingers over the beautiful pieces of granite.

One day her friends asked her, "Why do you walk through the cemetery every day?"

She answered, "Because, it's the way home".

I like that story, but it only tells the half of eternal life. What if there is a way home other than through the cemetery?

Is eternal life something we can experience on earth, while we are still in these bodies, before we receive the resurrected body like the one now occupied by Jesus Christ? Jesus teaches us that 'home' is found not just through the cemetery, but that resurrection life can be known on this earth.

But, because of our human nature, our journey toward the joy of coming home, hearing whispers of eternal joy, seeing glimpses of the Spirit's victories, that journey home begins in the proverbial belly of the whale. Could that be a way home too, not to the next life, but to the next stage of this life?

We are all like Jonah at some point in our lives. We want to run away from God, from God's call on our lives, the call to forgiveness, to redemption, to resurrecting love. We run as far away from God as we can that God won't bother our busy lives, won't upset our priorities. But then something happens, and we find ourselves in the middle of a surging sea, going down as far as one can sink, in debt, in distress, in despair over our inability to find our own way home.

(SLIDE) And it is then, we are finally willing to receive it, that God sends the huge fish. Jonah had been running from God, and the only way to save the sailors on the boat in which he was hiding was to have them throw him into the sea. But God did not abandon him there. God never stops pursuing Jonah.

God will not stop pursuing you either. NO matter how long or how far you have run, God is going to find you. You may feel like you are about to drown, that the seaweed is wrapped around your head and you cannot escape, but God is there to save you. Some huge fish is coming your way, to swallow you.

And when God sends that huge fish to swallow you it is not to destroy you, but to give you life. That is the sign of Jonah, a sign which Jesus himself claimed as a sign of his life. Jesus going into the tomb for three days and three nights was, he said, the sign of Jonah; a sign not of destruction, but a sign of rescue.

Perhaps you find yourself in that 'three days and three nights' part of life. What in the world are you to do now? (SLIDE) Jonah prayed. From the deep he called for help. Now, I would like you to look carefully at these words: 'from the realm of the dead'. The idea translated here is that of 'Sheol', which was the concept of the 'bottom of the world'. This was the place the 'dead' go. But, it is not to be understood as the word 'tomb'.

The words which Jonah uses in his prayer are better likened to the word 'womb'. It is a birthing place. It is a place to grow and gain the life we need to exist on the outside. The belly of the huge fish is not a tomb, it is a life-giving womb. It is a place where deliverance begins.

So it was with the tomb of Jesus. The tomb, which the world considers a place of final resting, of death, is instead a womb in which the body of Jesus was transformed. And so it is for us when we find ourselves stuck at the bottom of our life's experiences. When you feel you have sunk as far as you can sink, God sends

a huge fish to rescue you, to prepare you for what's next. When you find yourself in that place, call to God for help, and God will listen and prepare you for your journey home, into the light, into the joy of eternal life you can know while still on this earth.



During the last three weeks I decided that we sent out a message of God's redeeming love over the internet in a video declaring God's love for people just as they are. Here's the cry for help that persuaded me that in this experiment we discovered God at work in Sheboygan, rescuing searching souls with our message of Easter love.

(SLIDE) One person who responded to our ministry message is the owner of 'StupidAtheist.com'. What this person asked after watching our 100 second message of God's pursuing love was this: 'what happens if you cannot accept God's love?'

Do you see it? The question is not, 'what if I cannot believe in God?' The question is 'what if I cannot accept God's love?' That is a person in the belly of the whale calling for help. Now, just in case you are watching today, my friend, know this: You are not stupid. You are smart enough to ask the right question. And, regardless, accepting God's resurrecting love is not a matter of knowledge. There

is no test. God loves you. That's why the Spirit showed you that video message, and that's why you asked the question, because you have been found, friend.

(SLIDE) So, like Jonah, when we find that being the womb of the huge fish, we look again toward the temple of God, that is, toward the presence of God, toward the community of God. You all, by being here or watching us, you are looking again to be a part of God's community.

This is home. What is home, anyway? I love Robert Frost's definition: 'Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.' He writes that in his poem, 'The Hired Hand'. I am using it here to be the definition of God's community. We gather as a community of Jonah's who have found by God when we thought we (SLIDE) 'barred forever' in the bottom of the sea. But then, the LORD brings us up from the Pit.

The Tomb becomes a Womb. Home is our future, and, yes, we have to take you in, friends. Better than that, we want to take you. We want to give you second chances, which Pastor Donna is going to tell you about next week. We want you to know that you are, today, receiving new life. (SLIDE) Those who turn away from God's love cannot hide from that love. We turn away from God for a time, serving other false gods which we think can rescue us. We all have done it.

But then, in the end, we find out that they don't provide the pathway to our home either.

But, when we finally accept God's delivering love, then we will say (SLIDE) 'Salvation comes from the LORD.' God is going to send you a rescue boat, and you will be brought home. (SLIDE) Look at the desperate faces of both those being rescued and those doing the rescuing. On which side of this exchange are you today? Are you so close to the land that you can almost touch it, or are you (SLIDE) this little one being received into the open hands of the Rescuer?

Do you want to be 'next' in that line? Well, God brought you in this boat (look up and you will see we are sitting in a boat), for a reason. If today you can say with Jonah that salvation comes from the LORD God, then you are ready to take that last step, to be delivered on to dry land.

Now, look, for some of us, it might feel, as it did for Jonah, that we are being vomited out of the belly. We would so much prefer to birth ourselves, to find our own way, just skipping this whole God-thing. But God brought you into this boat today for a reason: because the work of the Church is to receive people on to the dry land, to welcome them home.

Your destiny is not the tomb, but a womb, so that you with Jesus experience the sign of Jonah: you are transferred from darkness to light, from sea to shore, from death to life. “For if God had made us in order to punish us, we might well have despaired and questioned the possibility of our own salvation. But, if he created us for no other reason than his own good will, and with a view to our enjoying everlasting blessings, and if he does and contrives everything for this end, from the first day until the present time, what is there which can ever cause us to doubt?” (Chrysostom, ACC)

(SLIDE) If you find yourself in the belly of a great fish, thank God for making the ‘tomb’ a ‘womb’ through which God will deliver you onto ‘dry land’. God has in mind this day to help you ‘enjoy everlasting blessings’. The time in the womb is a brief ‘three days and three nights’. Your time of darkness is ending. Your time of deliverance nears.

(SLIDE) Coming home, you see, is not the end of the journey. It is the beginning of a new journey. Once you have made it to dry land you can start walking with a community of pilgrims who, just like you, thought they were drowning, stuck in what seemed like a tomb of death.

So, I say to my atheist friends, my 'spiritual but not religious' friends, my friends drifting at sea, drowning even, it's time to come home. This is your Resurrection Day, the day on which Jesus and his Church put your feet onto dry land.



The cemetery is not the only way home! There is another way, and you have found...or rather, God has found you!

“Welcome Home.”

Oh Happy Day!