



Take Your Best Shot

Special Occasion: *EASTER*

As a child, did you ever have a confrontation with a neighborhood bully? There were certain little phrases we used in those moments to try to intimidate the enemy: If it was just a verbal battle, we might say, "Anything you say bounces off me and sticks to you." If we were trying to avoid getting punched in the nose we might say, "My father can beat up your father!" If you grew up in the 80's and watched Clint Eastwood movies, you might have looked him in the eye and said, "Go ahead, make my day." One of my favorites is a simple challenge: "Come on. Take your best shot."

Whether or not you have occasion to use those phrases, we've all heard them. It sort of makes me think of the Easter story. In the Easter story, in a certain way, we here the phrase, "Take your best shot" over and over again. Easter is really the story of different people taking their best shot to deal with the reality of Jesus.

In recent weeks, everyone has been talking about *The Passion of the Christ*. Controversy swirls around this movie as people ask, "Who really killed Jesus?" Was it the Jews or was it the Romans? Or was it some malevolent personification of evil, lurking in the shadows, waiting for an opportunity to take his best shot at the Christ?

Early in the life of Jesus we're told that he was confronted by Satan out in the desert with a string of temptations. Jesus took each shot squarely in the mouth, but he stood firm each time. When it was over, the gospel writer says, "When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time" (Lk. 4:13). For the next three years, there is no record of Satan taking any shots at Jesus. It's not until, we come to the week before his death, the Passion Week, that we hear about him again. In that week, the devil ignited a short fuse that would take just a few days to burn down and explode like a massive bomb on the afternoon of the crucifixion. In that explosion, various groups of people come to a crossroads in which they're taking their best shots. Let me give you some examples. You might even see yourself in one of these groups.

I. Jesus' enemies took their best shot to kill him.

A. Judas: It started with Judas. Judas, one of Jesus' select friends, took his best shot. He went to the chief priests and said, "What are you willing to give me to

betray him to you? They weighted out thirty pieces of silver. From then on he began looking for an opportunity to betray Jesus" (Mt. 26:15). The story of Judas has been played out in countless lives since the beginning of time. He wasn't a violent man. He'd invested three years in following Jesus, but now he could see that the whole endeavor wouldn't amount to anything. They'd had some good times, but now it was time to cut his losses. Someone said, "A friend you can buy can be bought from you." Judas was that kind of friend. When push comes to shove, it's all about what you get out of it. You have to look out for number one. That was Judas' best shot.

B. The Jewish leaders: He found willing accomplices in another group—the Jewish leaders. From the first day Jesus showed up on the scene, he'd been nothing but trouble for them. He'd called into question their whole way of life. He was a radical who threatened everything they knew. For some time they'd been scheming, looking for some way they could expose him. But they had to be careful. The people considered him to be a prophet. Some even said he was the King of the Jews. If they moved too fast the people might turn on them. They had to wait for an opening. Maybe they could trap him; force him to say something they could use against him. But now with Judas' help they had someone on the inside. They arrested him and brought him before the high priest. Witnesses were brought forth to testify against him. It didn't matter if their stories didn't match up. In times like this the ends justify the means. "I mean we heard him say he was the Son of God. Blasphemy! You can't say that and get away with it." There are people today like that. People who hold on for dear life to what they know, like clinging to the seat of an airplane that is about to crash. Anything outside of the box is a threat to their whole existence. This was their best shot.

C. Pilate: They brought him to Pilate. The Roman governor. Pilate took his best shot too. Pilate is an intelligent man; he knows how to run things. He's good at what he does. He's a professional, but this thing is beyond him. The Jewish leaders have an agenda. The crowd is out of control. This troublemaker from Galilee won't say a word to defend himself. His wife sends him a message, something about a dream; a warning that this man shouldn't be harmed. Pilate's training hadn't

prepared him for this. The only thing he could do to maintain order was comply with their request, but this man's blood wouldn't be on his hands. In the human experience, there are different kinds of evil. There is the evil of irrational, brutal, angry resistance to God and all that is good. But the other kind of evil simply says, "I'm not responsible for this. It's not my battle. I can't do anything about." It's the evil of standing by and doing nothing. It's people sheepishly peering out of their apartment window, watching an old man get mugged and beaten and saying to themselves, "I can't control that. It's not my evil. I'm just trying to get by here." That was Pilate. That was Pilate's best shot.

D. The crowd: The other kind of evil is seen in the hearts of the crowd that stand before Pilate. For three years they've heard the message of Jesus. He's pulled them toward himself with his teaching, his miracles and his unimpeachable character. But slowly they have become hardened, resisting him and his purposes. Now they're here in Pilate's courtyard. Pilate even offers to release him if the crowd wants, but they would rather have a murderer released. Three times we hear them cry out with increasing venom: "Crucify him!" What you see here is a crowd out of control, possessed of hatred, meanness, and cruelty. When a person chooses to resist God and his purposes, what often happens is they push harder and harder against the truth, just to keep the resistance going. The crowd is a perfect example of what happens in human lives when we resist the truth. We become more and more solidified in our resistance. The crowd wants just one thing: they want this person named Jesus dead. That's their best shot.

E. The Roman soldiers: There is just one more group. The Roman soldiers. In Pilate's praetorium they stripped him and draped him in a purple robe. They twisted together a crown of thorns and pushed it down on his head. They mocked him and spat on him and beat him over the head. The interesting thing is I don't think they really cared that much about him. Unlike the crowd, they had nothing personal against this man. I can see them talking over their shoulders to one another: "Nasty job, but someone's got to do it. At least we can have a little fun." They were caught up in the grind of a crummy assignment in a backwater part of the Empire. It was just part of the job. All in a day's work. At 5:00 p.m. they would punch out, go home, and have dinner with their kids. That was their best shot.

We ask the question, who killed Jesus? Maybe the best answer is that the entire human race killed him. We all took our best shot. Somewhere in

this crossroads of evil, somewhere along this burning fuse, we were there. We might be there in the "cut your losses" attitude of Judas, or the "hold on to what you know" attitude of the religious leaders, or the passive complicity of Pilate, or the angry rage of the crowd, or the calloused, institutionalized brutality of the Roman soldiers. In our own way, we each took our own shot.

But there was a whole other group of people in the Easter story who took their best shot. They took their best shot in the 72 hours following the death of Jesus. If the first group is made up of the enemies of Jesus, the second group is made up of his friends. Let me give you some examples of this second group. Maybe you'll find yourself in this group as well.

II. Jesus' friends took their best shot after his death.

A. The women: First, there were the women. Early Sunday morning they took spices and went to the tomb of Jesus. Who are these women? They're the women who had followed Jesus for three years. They'd served him and supported him. They'd listened to his teaching. They were there when he was crucified. These women dearly loved Jesus; they were his devoted friends. But now he's gone. They'd watched when he was buried in Joseph's tomb. They return to that tomb with a mission—to honor the dead body of their Master; to bring some dignity to his death. There's something so kind and tender about this, but there is also something so tragic. This is the best they can do. It's their admission that the life of Jesus is over, Camelot has ended. As they carry that load of embalming spices to the tomb, they're saying that the days ahead will never be like they were for the last three years. There's no tomorrow. Honoring the dead body of their Lord is their best shot.

B. Cleopas and his wife: Luke also tells us about two disciples, one of them named Cleopas, the other might very well have been his wife, who decided to leave Jerusalem and walk to Emmaus, about seven miles away. Perhaps they're just walking home. They're so disappointed by all that had happened to Jesus. It didn't make sense. It didn't jive with what they'd expected. As they walked, "they were talking with each other about all these things which had taken place." One of my favorite things to do with my wife is just walk. Sometimes when life isn't making any sense and we feel kind of trapped in the four walls of our house, we just walk and talk it out. I have a hunch that for Cleopas and his wife this was one of those walks. They were trying to make sense out of nonsense. This was their best shot: to talk it through; to somehow wrestle this thing to the mat by figuring it out.

C. The eleven: The Apostles had a different response. There were just eleven of them now. They were all gathered together. John, who was there, says "the door

was shut...for fear of the Jews.” Isn’t that interesting? Without Jesus by their side, fear sweeps in and takes over the void. Here is a picture of eleven men, one of whom recently said he was ready to die for Jesus, cocooning themselves behind locked doors in fear of being caught. This isn’t what Jesus taught them to do. He taught them not to lock the doors but to leave them open so they could charge through them into the streets and make a difference. He said, “Just as the Father has sent me, so I send you.” Don’t lock the doors. Don’t be afraid of the world. But this was their best shot, and sometimes it’s ours as well. I see myself in these disciples. It doesn’t take much for my spiritual bravado to turn to mush. I’ve locked the doors on occasion. I’ve allowed my faith to dwindle to the point that instead of charging out into the world I’ve run from it. My best shot was just to survive; just to stay in my cocoon.

All three groups—the women, Cleopas and his wife, and the eleven—typify what happens when your faith collapses. The women take their best shot by doing something to honor the memory of their dead friend. Cleopas and his wife take their best shot by trying to talk it through and figure it all out. The eleven take their best shot by going into survival mode and locking the doors. When faith collapses, that’s about all you can do.

But the story doesn’t end there. That’s why we’re here this morning. Neither the convergence of evil as seen in his enemies, or the collapse of faith as seen in his friends, could rub out the reality and the power of Jesus Christ. All four gospel writers unanimously agree that Jesus Christ rose from the dead three days after his crucifixion. Consider the impact this had on both his friends and his enemies.

III. Despite their best shots, Jesus rose from the dead.

A. His enemies: Consider Judas. Before the resurrection even took place, Judas knew that he was wrong. After watching the trial of Jesus, Judas “felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders.” He said, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood.” But it was too late for Judas. Instead of turning to God in faith and repentance, he went out and hung himself. The man whose best shot was to cut his losses ended up losing it all.

What about the Jewish leaders and the Roman soldiers? After Jesus was crucified and buried, the Jewish leaders remembered how Jesus had said he would rise in three days. So they came to Pilate to get permission to secure the grave. Pilate said, “Fine. Whatever you want to do.” So they stationed Roman soldiers at the tomb and set a seal on the stone that covered it. It’s funny, in a certain sense the enemies of Jesus took his resurrection claims more seriously than his friends did! They were just as afraid

of Jesus after his death as they were before.

But there was no guard or seal that could keep Jesus in that tomb. On Sunday morning, the soldiers discovered the stone was rolled away and the body was gone. Fearing not just for their jobs but for their lives, they reported to the religious leaders that he was gone. Then they cut a deal. It worked out good for everyone. It was a “win-win.” The religious leaders said, “We’ll give you a bunch of money and you say his disciples came by night while you were sleeping and stole his body. If Pilate hears about it, we’ll cover for you.” You get the feeling that these guys are worried. Even their best shot hadn’t worked.

B. His friends: The friends of Jesus were different. They weren’t always easy to convince, but with enough evidence their faith was rebuilt. The women came to the tomb with their spices and found that the tomb was empty. An angel told them, “He is not here. He is risen.” On the way to tell the disciples, Jesus met them and greeted them and told them, “Do not be afraid. Go tell my disciples that I’m alive.” The Scripture says they were filled with fear and great joy. Their best shot was to go through the motions and honor the dead body of Jesus, but he gave them a whole new purpose for living.

Cleopas and his wife had a similar experience. As they were walking along, trying to figure it all out, Jesus joined them and began to explain how Scripture taught that he would suffer, but on the third day he would rise again. In their grief, they didn’t recognize the risen Christ, but their hearts burned as they listened to him. Later, when they sat down to break bread with him, “their eyes were opened and they recognized Him and he vanished from their sight.” It was Jesus! They, too, were filled with joy and ran and told the disciples.

Finally, while the eleven apostles were locked in their little cocoon, Jesus himself stood in their midst. They were so frightened they thought they were seeing a ghost. He spoke to them, “Why are you afraid? Why do you doubt? Touch my hands and feet. It’s me. A spirit doesn’t have flesh and bones.” Then he asked them for food. What a thing to ask for! He just rose from the dead and he’s thinking of food! They found a piece of fish and watched him eat it. Then he said to them, “All this was written about in the law and the prophets. You’re my witnesses. Now unlock the doors and go and tell the world that forgiveness is possible through faith in my name.” Their best shot was to lock the doors and keep the world out, but Jesus barged right into their little cocoon and gave them a whole new purpose for living. The greatest testimony to the reality of the

resurrection is that men and women whose faith had completely collapsed were somehow revived. They'd taken their best shot just to survive in the aftermath of what seemed a great tragedy. But they became powerful witnesses of the resurrection, willing to give their lives to spread that message.

CONCLUSION

Where do you stand this morning? Which group are you in? At one time or another, all of us were in the first group, and some of us still may be. We may not perceive ourselves as being as violent as his enemies. But sooner or later we have to come to a decision: Are we going to follow Christ, or are we going to continue taking our best shot to rub him out of our lives?

Some of you are in the second group. You remember the days when your faith was alive. You had trust and joy. You were walking with the Lord. You felt sent out by him and were excited to see him use you. But somewhere along the line something happened and your faith collapsed. You find yourself going through the motions of your religion like the women who came to the tomb, but with no hope and no joy. Or you find yourself in endless dialogue trying to figure it all out. Or you find yourself shut up behind locked doors trying to keep the world out. Easter Sunday is a time to renew your faith in the risen Lord.

A few years ago my wife and I were in Russia with some friends. We had the opportunity to visit a very old Russian Orthodox church in the heart of Moscow. It's a beautiful church with many very old and very precious frescos and icons which are a part of that tradition.

We also got a chance to sit down and talk with the Orthodox priest who served in that church. He told us about the time in the 1920's when the Communists were extending their political stranglehold over all of what became the Soviet Union. One of the things they did was close all of the churches. The particular church we were in became a post office and all of the frescos of Christ were actually plastered over. They were taking their best shot to rub out the memory of Jesus from the minds of the Russian people.

But in the 1980's Communism and the former Soviet Union collapsed. Slowly, churches like the one we were in that day were reopened as places of worship. They even were able to chip the plaster off of the walls. When they did they found that the frescos of Christ were still there. I'll never forget that old priest, with his black robe and long beard, say to us, "When we saw the frescos, it reminded us that Christ had been there the whole time, and no matter how hard they tried, He couldn't be rubbed out."

That's the message of Easter. Take your best shot. God has taken his, and he's overcome the world by raising Jesus from the dead.