

MAY GRIEF NOT DEFINE US

A television show I always look forward to watching every summer is America's Got Talent! This year I have been falling behind on watching the weekly telecasts. Recently I watched Episode Six of the auditions that aired at least three weeks ago. The one segment showed a father named Matt with his son and two daughters.

When he came on stage, he shared with the judges that he was going to sing for them. Simon Cowell then asked Matt why he had decided now was the time to audition for the show. Matt explained how his whole life changed on January 26, 2020. Matt and his wife had been married for 15 years. During that time, they had been blessed with their three children. He and his wife had recently retired from teaching so Matt could pursue his dream of singing and she could coach girls' basketball.

On the morning of January 26, 2020, Matt's wife kissed him goodbye to head off to basketball practice with Kobe Bryant and his daughter's team. Tragically Matt's wife died in the helicopter crash that also took the lives of Kobe Bryant and his daughter. After that tragic day Matt's focus naturally had to be on his three children. Matt admitted that if he could have it his way his wife would still be with him and their children.

After sharing his story with the judges and the audience, it was now time for Matt to sing. The song he chose was by Phil Collins called "Against All Odds." If you are familiar with the lyrics to this song, then you can imagine how emotional it was to hear Matt sing:

**So, take a look at me now, oh there's just an empty space
And there's nothin' left here to remind me
Just the memory of your face
Oh, take a look at me now, well there's just an empty space
And you coming back to me is against the odds
And that's what I've got to face.**

It was so obvious as Matt sang that he was singing to his wife. When he finished singing, Matt not only received a standing ovation, but he had people wiping their eyes from the tears and emotions they felt. Howie Mandel complimented Matt for having moved the hearts of complete strangers. Simon Cowell asked Matt what would happen if he went far and did well on the show. Matt paused for a minute and replied that he hoped that his family's life would not be defined by the grief they have been through, but rather by the joy they have found despite the grief.

Matt's response made me think of somebody else who did not let the grief they had been through define them. Mary Magdalene experienced her share of grief

when Jesus died on the cross. She grieved as she stood at the foot of the cross, watching Jesus agonize and suffer through crucifixion. She grieved more when Jesus gave up His Spirit and died on the cross. Her grief continued as she watched Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea place Jesus' body in the tomb. She continued to grieve while observing the Sabbath. Her grief continued that Sunday morning as she took spices to Jesus' tomb. Her grief magnified when she saw the tomb empty and worried someone had taken Jesus' body away.

If her story ended here, then Mary Magdalene's life would have been defined by grief. Thankfully, her story was defined by the joy of the resurrection instead. As Mary stood at the tomb, she heard her name called. She recognized immediately that it was Jesus, risen from the grave, who had spoken her name. She turned to Jesus and clung to Him because she was so happy that He was alive and risen. If it was not for the resurrection, Mary Magdalene's life would have been defined by grief. Thanks to the resurrection her life was instead defined by having the joy of being the first person that Jesus appeared to after His resurrection.

We have all experienced our fair share of grief and loss as a result of the pandemic. Perhaps we have lost loved ones like Matt, or maybe our grief is the result of lost experiences or opportunities. Grief is a powerful emotion and can begin to define us if we let it. Thankfully, we do not have to let it define us. Like Mary Magdalene, if we embrace the joy of the resurrection, and cling to Jesus, He can raise us up above our grief and bring happiness and contentment back to our lives. We owe it to ourselves, and to our loved ones not to let the grief we have been going through during this pandemic define us. May we let Jesus, and the power of the resurrection, define us in this way:

DESPITE THE GRIEF WE HAVE BEEN THROUGH, WE ARE DEFINED BY THE JOY THAT THE RISEN LORD GIVES US DESPITE IT.

At the end of Matt's audition, he got four yes's from the judges. As he was about to leave the stage his three children embraced and hugged him. They were all smiling having begun the journey of being defined by finding joy, despite their grief and loss. If we ***let Jesus do this for us***, I cannot help but imagine the three persons of the Trinity, God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit, embracing us and smiling too. When they left the studio, Matt said to his children, "Let's get some ice cream." Going for ice cream brings a lot of joy. Why not treat yourself to some joy after reading this by going out for ice cream.

God Bless and Keep Safe

Pastor Dean