



“Rest, Rory, and Resurrection: An Easter Message”

Chapel Talk by Head of School Lee Burns '87
Wednesday, April 16, 2025

As many of you know, I was fortunate to take a sabbatical for about three months starting in January until my return last week. A sabbatical is a time of rest, reflection, and renewal, derived from the Biblical concept of sabbath, in which God calls us to lay down our work to rest once a week and to worship and trust Him in assuring He will give us what we need without relying on our own efforts all the time. Sabbath is a gift to us for our well-being—spiritually, physically, and emotionally. It helps us flourish.

When the Board of Trustees offered me a sabbatical after my 10th year as head of school at McCallie and after my 24th year as a head of school overall, I was grateful but also not really sure what I'd do. How do you step away for a few months from people and a place and a sense of purpose you love? What would I do on a typical Tuesday morning? Where would I be? Would I feel guilty for having this wonderful opportunity? Would I be restless even as I rested? What would I learn about myself? How might I best take care of myself? How might I grow?

I did slow down and rest, and had some different rhythms and patterns, and I also undertook several adventures that were interesting and invigorating. I want to tell you about one of those.

For two weeks, I went to a wellness center in Florida called Pritikin that focuses on nutrition, exercise, and wellness. About 30 of us from around the country gathered for an intense daily regimen of multiple cardio, core, and strength workouts; lectures on nutrition and physical health; cooking classes; yoga; and individual meetings with nutritionists, doctors, scientists, and trainers. We were scheduled, almost non-stop, from 7:00 am to 7:00 pm each day. We could only eat the very healthy meals and snacks they prepared. They taught us to cook. They carefully monitored a variety of physical aspects of each of us, including the remarkable changes that can occur in just two weeks of new and different health practices.



I've not paid especially close attention to my eating over the years. I thought I had a pretty good—at least good enough—understanding of nutrition and food and had a relatively healthy diet. In reality, I did not. Nor did I understand and appreciate the enormous benefits of a healthy diet and the severe consequences that unhealthy eating habits, even for seemingly young and healthy people, can have in the immediate and long term.



In the United States today, 70% or more of the food Americans eat is processed or even ultra-processed food in most cases. It is food that has been altered from its natural state, with dozens or even hundreds of additives, preservatives, sweeteners, chemicals, and other artificial, man-made ingredients, many of which are very unhealthy, and many of which are highly addictive, deliberately addictive—as addictive, in fact, in some cases, as illicit drugs. And while these foods may taste good, and while their true impact on our bodies is obscured in confusing labels and misleading marketing and packaging, the effects of our food consumption in recent years are clear: alarming rates of diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular diseases, pathologies and cancers, and other significant health problems, even among children, teenagers, and young adults.

God designed our bodies to run on fruits, not Fruit Loops; vegetables, not veggie-chips; lean proteins, not Lean Cuisine; blueberries, not Baja Blasts. We are built for consuming authentic foods, not artificial ones. We need natural foods to flourish, be strong, and be our best. We need our grains and greens to grow.



Speaking of greens, like many of you, on Sunday afternoon I enjoyed watching the final round of the Masters. I found myself pulling for Rory McIlroy, who had won the other majors and many other tournaments over his exceptional career but never at Augusta. He'd been heartbreakingly close to winning it in 2011, and in contention many other times, and he faced lots of pressure and even criticism for being such an elite golfer but who was unable to win the biggest tournament and become one of six golfers to win the career Grand Slam. Entering the final day with the lead, it twice looked like he might blow it and lose again. He had a double bogey on one, and again on 13. He missed a short putt on 18 that would have clinched it. History seemed to be moving toward another McIlroy defeat, this one the most cruel and heartbreaking of all.

In the first playoff hole with Justin Rose, replaying hole 18, McIlroy hit one of the best and most clutch shots of his career—a 125 yard gap wedge to within four feet of the hole for a birdie putt to win. This time, though, he would sink it, and as the patrons jumped to their feet in celebration, he fell to his knees, and, as Jim Nance described it, “crumpled to the sacred sod.” Tears rolled down his face as he arose, his hands rose above his head, and jubilation raced through his body.



The patrons roared, reveling in the moment with Rory, who embraced his caddie, fellow golfers, family, and friends. He walked from the 18th green to Butler Cabin through a parted sea of green clad fans waving at him, clapping for him, and chanting his name. What a triumphant walk and reception at golf's most “holy” sight.

2,000 years ago, also on a Sunday, another man in his 30s walked through a throng of an adoring crowd adorned with green. Their green, though, was from palm branches waved in adulation, rather than the praise of patrons clad in green Peter Millar golf shirts and hats. That man had entered Jerusalem for the Holy Week, when thousands of Jews assembled to celebrate Passover, commemorating God's mercy and sovereignty as He had passed over the homes of Jewish families in Egypt while the first born son of everyone else died in one night so that Pharaoh would free the Jewish people.

The man who entered Jerusalem that Sunday of Holy Week was beloved by many. For three years, Jesus had walked among the people, in small towns along the Sea of Galilee, healing the sick, performing miracles, sharing the good news of salvation, expounding on the Old Testament, teaching and preaching, telling of God's love, loving the poor, feeding the hungry, offering hope, and changing lives. He was a man unlike any other: powerful yet humble, wise yet common, a star yet accessible, tempted yet sinless, both God and man. With the exception of the religious and political rulers who were threatened by his popularity, he was beloved.

He entered Jerusalem triumphantly on Palm Sunday, yet that week He would have an epic loss and then a very different victory, a very unexpected victory, following on the heels not just of double bogies and missed putts, but that week of a seemingly utter collapse...a disqualification, a death.

The Jewish people had, for generations, awaited on the long promised and prophesied Messiah to save them. Was this Jesus the Messiah who would vanquish the oppressive Romans and restore the nation of Israel to its former glory and glorious future? That of course would be the victory ushered in by their messiah, the expected victory.

Jesus, though, would be betrayed by his disciple Judas for 30 pieces of silver. On Thursday night, following the Last Supper with His disciples, he was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane as He prayed, subjected to a sham midnight trial by the Sanhedrin, deserted by his fearful followers, turned over to the Roman Governor Pilate to be judged, ordered executed, mocked and beaten, and brutally crucified on a cross between two thieves on Friday. It all turned and happened so quickly.

Jesus was dead just five days after his triumphant entry. "I guess he wasn't our messiah after all," his followers surely thought. There would be no dramatic finish, no comeback, no victory. Just sadness and loss and devastation. It was a cruel, heart-breaking defeat.

Yet God had sent Jesus, whom Christians believe to be His Son and one part of the Trinity, for reasons that the people of 2,000 years ago, and even of today, could not quite grasp. He didn't send Jesus as a political or military leader or a nation builder or to extol one group or to reorder one particular period in human history. He wasn't just sent to be a good teacher and moral leader. His mission was deeper and different than that...more transformational than that...more personal than that.

The Holy Week story doesn't end with the cross on Friday. That is, though, where it suddenly turns, like at Amen Corner at Augusta National on Sunday, where it all changes, where the drama really begins, where the unbelievable becomes believable.

That Sunday morning, Jesus rose from the grave. He defeated death.

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This Sunday, Christians around the world celebrate Easter, which marks the resurrection of Jesus, three days after His death. He died, brutally yet willingly, to pay the price for our sins, taking our deserved place on the cross, and to give us His perfect record so that we could be reconciled to a Holy God who is both all just and all loving. It is an elegant and perfect solution to how a sinful people could be in the presence of a perfect God: have a perfect man sacrifice in their place and give them His perfection as the ultimate gift of love and grace. His bodily resurrection gives us the assurance of our own resurrection, our eternal life, after our physical death. His sacrifice gives us the opportunity, through faith in Jesus, for our own eternal place and peace with God.

It is incredible, mind-blowing, and paradigm-shattering. I understand why many people have a hard time believing it.

We are accustomed to believing in ourselves—in our goodness, our agency, our self-sufficiency, our independence. We don't like being told we are flawed or wrong or not smart enough or hard working enough. To the extent we may think we need saving, we'd rather do it ourselves than have someone rescue us. Yet the Bible makes clear that we are all sinners living in a fallen and broken world and that we cannot fix or save ourselves. Despite our sometimes noble motives and good deeds, we are all still, at our core, flawed and sinful: selfish and prideful, among other things, and seeking to be the god of our own lives. We can't rescue ourselves, and we can't earn God's favor by our performances. We are stuck, distant from God and doomed, in need of being saved.



In a culture and school of high standards and excellence, you, like me, can struggle with the pressures of performance. Like many of you, I have and can work very, very hard to achieve high goals. I can accentuate my achievements, manage my image, and hide my flaws and failings. It is easy—and natural—to be shallow and selfish and success-driven. It can be hard to see and acknowledge our sins...and our need for help, even rescue.

“These messages are the junk food for our minds, hearts, and souls. They are processed—ultra processed—man-made. Alluring and appealing, yes, tasty as they go down, addictive for sure, but they are like the empty calories of junk food that leave us, eventually, with a stomach ache, hungry, and unhealthy... Jesus came that He would offer us something authentic, not artificial. Supernatural, not man-made.”

The prideful, performance-driven, image-curated life, though, is ultimately a dead end, with deep-seated anxieties and unhealthy coping mechanisms along the way. It is a life fed and fueled by false premises and promises: that money, power, success, and beauty are the keys to a fulfilling life; that your college choice and career define you; that one's happiness is the most important thing; that you should simply follow your heart in doing whatever you want or whatever is true for you; that your life is just about you. These messages are the junk food for our minds, hearts, and souls. They are processed—ultra processed—man-made. Alluring and appealing, yes, tasty as they go down, addictive for sure, but they are like the empty calories of junk food that leave us, eventually, with a stomach ache, hungry, and unhealthy.

Jesus came that He would offer us something authentic, not artificial. Supernatural, not man-made. At the Last Supper the night before His crucifixion, He takes the bread and says, “This is my body, which is given for you,” and He instructs his disciples to partake of it.

He says He is the bread of life, to feast upon Him—upon His unconditional love, upon His forgiveness, upon His grace and wisdom, upon His perfect record imputed to us, upon His hope and promises, upon His peace. He says to receive and trust, and be grateful and love.

On the cross, among His last words were, “It is finished.” His sacrifice for us, for our salvation, was completed. And with that, we could finish our strivings for performance and perfection, for God’s favor, for earning our way to heaven. We could finish our pursuit of the processed, the artificial. We could finish our legalism. We could finish our insecurities and anxieties. We could finish with our shame and guilt. We could finish with our fears. We could fixate on His love, hope and promises. We could rest...deep, truly sabbatical rest...resting on His work, not on ours. And in that rest, we could experience His peace and joy.

In winning the Masters, Rory McIlroy displayed one of the greatest moments of joy I have ever seen. It pulsed through every part of his body. And as great and genuine as that joy was, it is but a small foretaste of the greater joy that God offers us, both now and forever. May you embrace and experience that joy, this Easter season and always.

