

May 25, 2014

The National Presbyterian Church

Resurrection Life: Dying to Live

Matthew 16:24-26a, Philippians 3:4b-12; Romans 12:1-2

Dr. David Renwick

In our sermons since Easter, we have been focusing on the significance and the reality of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. We've been thinking about the resurrection from different points of view.

First of all we've been thinking about the resurrection as a specific event in the past, not merely as metaphor, a general spiritual truth. John Updike once wrote that we should "not mock God" by claiming that this event is merely metaphor (in his *Seven Stanzas at Easter*). No! This is an event in space and time. This is a matter of fact; and a "fact of matter"! You cannot read the Biblical accounts of the resurrection of Jesus, especially the 15th Chapter of 1st Corinthians, without realizing that those early disciples were transformed not by what they wanted to believe but by what they experienced, by what happened to them. The tomb was empty. Jesus was seen. Jesus ate. Jesus talked. Jesus was alive. So we've been thinking together about the resurrection as an event in history – an event with metaphorical meaning, to be sure; but not mere metaphor.

Second, we've also been thinking about the resurrection as confirmation, as God's "yes" to Jesus' claims to divinity. Jesus' claims to divinity end up being the claims of a mad person if all that happened was his death – a tragic death on that "Good" Friday. But if he rises again, if there is resurrection, then it becomes possible and indeed probable that his claims are true. The apostle Paul begins his great letter to the Romans by saying that the resurrection is God's powerful declaration that Jesus is the Son of God (Romans 1:1-4). So the resurrection is an affirmation from God, a confirmation of Jesus' claims to divinity.

Third, the resurrection is also a confirmation of the effectiveness of Jesus' death. We don't tend to think of our death as being "effective" or anybody's death as being "effective" – as accomplishing something: though there are some martyrs who by their deaths displayed a powerful witness to what they believed; and thus, in a sense, "accomplished something" in their death. But when the disciples saw not only that Jesus died but that he rose again they became convinced that in his death something was happening, something was being effected or accomplished. In particular, many of them aligned Jesus' death with the 53rd Chapter of the prophesy of Isaiah, in which we hear about a suffering servant who is wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, on whom was laid the chastisement that made us whole. And they said these two are the same (see Matthew 8:17, Acts 8:34-35). This is what was happening in Jesus' death. The resurrection is God's confirmation that his death was effective.

So we've been thinking of Jesus' death and his resurrection as specific event, as confirmation of divinity and of the effectiveness of death and last Sunday we thought about Jesus' death in terms of his death and his resurrection as being a source of power in our life – your life and mine: the resurrection not merely an event in the past influencing the disciples back then, but a confirmation of Jesus' ongoing life in the present. Or let me put it this way: if Jesus rose from the dead back then, he is still alive today, and he longs to live his life *in* us and *through* us, and *through* us to continue to live in flesh and blood in this world. This is his promise to us: to live not only *with* us but *in* us, to empower us to be what we could not be by ourselves.

We thought about this present power of the resurrection with the help of one of Jesus' stories, the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). In this story a person (a Samaritan) shows incredible love to somebody in need who otherwise might have been his enemy. It seems as if the Samaritan has endless resources to love – overflowing love, extravagant love, endless love, whatever the needy person needed he took care of it – a love which is only possible for anyone if endless resources are first poured into them so that they can then overflow from them. And this is what the gospel promises: that the resurrection life of Jesus will enter into us so that when we are called to love others as Christ loved us, we do so not in our own power but by the infilling and overflowing of the love of Jesus himself.

Much of the pain in this world comes from people who are operating on empty. Much of the dysfunction in this world comes from people operating out of a deep well of need. But Jesus says "I want to enter that well of need and fill you up until my life, my love, my unending resurrection life, unlimited, flows from you, and through you, into the world."

So we put the endless love shown in the parable of the Good Samaritan and placed it side-by-side with Jesus' teaching in the 15th Chapter of John's gospel in which he says

"I am the vine. You are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you [remain connected to me; live in me; allow my life to wrap around you, and your life to be wrapped around me] and you'll bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing [without that power we cannot do what God wants us to do, or be who God wants us to be]."

So the resurrection life of Jesus needs to be at work in your life and my life. Not as something we earn or deserve but as a gift. The risen Jesus does not stand beside us and say to us "When you're good enough I will empower you!" But he says to us, "I already know you are not good enough! But let me come into your life anyway and empower you anyway (Revelation 3:20):

"Behold," he says, "I stand at the door and knock. If anyone open the door I will come in to them and eat with them and they with me [I'll live with you; I'll make my home with you; and I will bear fruit within and through your life]."

This is his promise to us. So this is what we've looked at so far when it comes to thinking about the lasting, present impact of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today I want us to think finally about a “twist” that we find in the free gift of resurrection power. In pretty much all the stories, the parables, that Jesus tells, there is some kind of a twist, some kind of an unexpected turn, which takes the ordinary and sharpens it so that it digs deep into our lives. So here’s the twist in the story of the resurrection – just this: *that the living resurrected Jesus who wants to live in your life and mine is at one and the same time always the crucified Jesus. The living Jesus who wants to live in your life and my life is always the crucified Jesus as well. He is a Jesus who at the same time as he speaks about life is always speaking about death as well because he knows that there is no life until you pass through death.*

Listen to his words in the 12th Chapter of John’s gospel: “*Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies it remains a single grain. But if it dies it bears much fruit.*” In other words, Jesus is saying, if you want the fruitfulness that comes from Jesus the vine, you can only get it if you are willing to pass through some kind of death. Life only comes through death.

We hear pretty much the same thing in our earlier reading in Matthew’s Gospel (16:24-26): “*If anyone wants to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.*” The cross that Jesus speaks of here is not just an inconvenience along the path of life, or a rocky path here or there. Rather, the cross is an instrument of torture and death. Jesus continues: “*Let them take up their cross and follow me for those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life [experience some kind of death] for my sake will find it.*” The crucified and risen Jesus speaks about life and death in one breath. Death and resurrection are bound together in Jesus’ teaching – and in his life as well.

- This may seem obvious but it needs to be said: Jesus was only resurrected after he was crucified. Good Friday and Easter, death and resurrection, are inseparable not just in Jesus’ teaching but in his life as well. So what Jesus teaches as truth he also knows from experience: you can never get to resurrection unless you pass through death. This is profoundly challenging.
- Though on the other hand there is great comfort in this teaching as well: the other side of the coin is that for those who find their life through Christ Jesus, resurrection always follows death. It did with Jesus. It will with us too. Death and resurrection are tied together, both ways . . . resurrection only, but also inevitably, follows death. An enormous challenge, and an enormous comfort.

Let’s think of this comfort and this challenge in our time together this morning; first of all beginning with comfort. It’s the resurrection of Jesus following his death that tells us that whatever tragedy we face (and tragedy we are not protected from as Christ’s followers), whatever difficulty we face, whatever sorrow or disappointment we face, whatever evil we are caught up in, or are in the midst of, whatever form death takes within our lives – nevertheless . . . despair and hopelessness *don’t* have the final word, *must not* have the final word, *will not* have the final word for those who find their life in the life and death, the death and life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

One of my favorite movies is the movie from the 1980s called *The Mission*. Some of you may have seen *The Mission*. I've seen it a number of times, perhaps more than I can count. One of my favorite movies, but a sad movie, a tragic movie in many ways. It's about the sudden and brutal ending of the Catholic Jesuit Mission to Paraguay in South America the middle of the 1700s, following the treaty of Madrid in 1750 between Spain and Portugal. Because of the treaty, the successful Jesuit mission in Paraguay was closed down, brutally wiped off the face of the Earth. The story provides a great example of the fact that there are powers at work in this world over which we have no control, and which sometimes influence and impact our lives for good or evil, sometimes (for evil) stealing life away from us, leading to death, no matter what we do. The basic theme of the movie is (while there is artistic license) historical. In the 1700's, the powers in Europe – Portugal and Spain – were splitting up their conquests, negotiating, signing their documents, their treaties, not only among themselves but with the Catholic Church; and thousands, tens of thousands of people miles away were impacted, powerlessly, because of what was going on elsewhere. Human lives were being caught up in a game larger than themselves, which at times had the effect of destroying life and goodness along the way.

This happens, even to God's people: life, or what makes life worth living, is suddenly, irrationally, taken away. Death seems to win the day. It can happen because of political powers and the authorities. It can happen because of economic powers and authorities.

Some perhaps of you were caught in 2007 and 2008 in the midst of economic powers which were stronger than you were and your life was radically changed by that. Hopes and dreams gone. Death in a sense taking the place of life.

Some folks are caught up in decisions that were made long ago whether by ourselves, or by somebody else. Good decisions or bad decisions, but in hindsight decisions which in some way shape or form or bind us, that we cannot get out of, that trap us so that we feel as if we are caught in the midst not of not life but of death.

Some of us face physical illness or mental illness which dogs our steps no matter where we go or where we turn; we want to do this or that but we cannot, we are limited by our bodies, by our minds, by our weakness. So we feel as if death has the final word.

Or there are relationships in our lives over which we have no control. It could be that we have somebody who is our boss who is evil, and who will not do what is good for us or for anyone else, or who manipulates us to pursue their path of evil as well.

Or it may be that we have parents who need to be taken care of, or our children who need to be taken care of, and what we want for our life, what we consider to be life abundant slips away from us – out of our control because of some responsibility laid on us. So we do not live the life we want.

Or it may be, I doubt that this is true for many of us here today but perhaps for some: it may be that we face, have faced or will face genuine persecution in life simply because of our Christian faith.

John Allen, a reporter, the religion reporter for the Boston Globe wrote a book in 2013 called *The Global War on Christians* – in which he claims that Christians today are indisputably the most persecuted religious body on the planet. You may think why he's gone a little bit overboard there perhaps. Maybe we should check out his facts. But remarkably these facts have been quoted by people no less than British Prime Minister David Cameron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel who have agreed that this is in fact the case. So we have brothers and sisters in Christ who are faithful followers of Christ in their millions who find "life in abundance" stolen away from them because of the circumstances in which they live their lives -- varying kinds of death: from limitations of freedom all the way to physical brutality and torture and physical death itself.

Through one channel or another there are some of us here today who feel as if our lives are small, mere pawns in somebody else's game, and that death rather than life characterizes our experience, rendering us powerless, robbing us of life, creating a fear that our lives are meaningless and that God is absent or dead. *It's at that very moment that the connection between the death and the Resurrection of Jesus are essential for us to remember and to believe: to know, yes, to know that for followers of Jesus, Christ resurrection always follows death; that God works in and through death itself.* So that far from God being absent in the face of what looks like death that is precisely where God's resurrection power in Jesus is at work – whether we see it or not. This is the place where God has been and will be found.

This is something that journalist Mary Craig experienced in the 1950s and the 1960s, writing about it in a 1979 book called *Blessings*. In those decades she was raising her family. She had four boys. One of her boys had a disease called Hurler's Syndrome, sometimes known as Gargoylism. Another of her children had Down syndrome. In those days, in the 1950s and 1960s, if your children had syndromes like these you were pretty much on your own; the resources that we take for granted today were not readily available. So Mary Craig was struggling as a mother with four children, two of whom had serious difficulties. At the same time she remained connected to a friend who was working with those who had barely survived the concentration camps in Europe in World War II, but who had found a home on post-war Britain.

In this mix of her own family experiences alongside her growing relationships with survivors of indescribable terror and torture, she began to think about suffering, its power, impact and purpose, in the context of her Catholic faith. Among many profound statements, she writes this:

"The very heart and core of the Christian faith is a man dying in pain, a man who cried out in genuine anguish a few moments before he died on the cross – 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' It has always seemed to me that at that moment more than at any other, Jesus was one with all men and women who have ever existed or ever will exist sharing with them that sense

of abandonment, the desolating fear that their lives are without meaning. Yet Jesus' death on Calvary showed that despair, anguish, emptiness and darkness were not the end of the story. Good Friday is always followed by Easter Day as surely as spring always follows winter, and we continue to call it 'good'. The joy of Easter is compounded of suffering and death and resurrection, each element a vital one. Not resurrection merely by itself but compounded, bound together with suffering and death, despair followed by hope followed by assurance . . . But, it is no use thinking that faith in the redemptive power of the cross is some sort of easy comforting placebo. We shall not find there a pious refuge from the harsh onslaughts of reality. The cross will not protect us from pain. It will face us with it. God works not apart from the cross but in and through the cross. The cross offers us the present moment in which to search out and find unsuspected reserves buried deep inside us.

And then she quotes from Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. She says "*What makes the desert beautiful is that somewhere far below its surface it holds a spring of fresh water.*"

What makes the desert beautiful, the place of death, is that somewhere far below its surface it holds a spring of fresh water.

For those of us who are Christians we know who that spring of fresh water is. That spring of fresh water is our Lord Jesus Christ. That spring of fresh water is the resurrection power of our Lord Jesus Christ. The life of the one who was not conquered by death but who went through it and is alive forevermore and whose life longs to be lived within your life and within my life and even through the experience of death itself – especially through the experience of death itself in whatever form it may take within us, especially when we feel trapped and small – a pawn in the shenanigans of someone or something else. Resurrection, good news; resurrection, comfort; resurrection follows death for those in Christ Jesus.

But what if we don't feel this way? What if we don't feel trapped? What if what I've just described is not your experience, *but life is good? Life's going our way! We are in power! We are in charge! We can make of life whatever we want! What then?* What do we do then with this inseparable connection between the death and the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ?

- Do we just sit around feeling what some people have called "middle class guilt": that we have it so good when others do not?
- Do we just sit around waiting for this to be literally true not spiritually true? – waiting until we die, and then when we die we'll go to heaven: death followed by resurrection but only then?

If we were to ask that question of our Lord Jesus or of the apostle Paul I think both of them would cry out "God forbid! By no means!" The idea of sitting around waiting has got nothing to do with either Jesus or with the apostle Paul, or with anything that we find in the pages of scripture. I think what they'd say is something like this: *that if the cross has not been forced on us, if we do not feel the cross being forced on us by circumstances beyond our control, then we*

need to be proactive and we need to find a cross to carry. That is, we need to find a path of servanthood, we need to find a path of service, we need to find a path of sacrifice to pursue, through which, if we choose it, both the death and the resurrection of Jesus will be present as he has promised.

This action is a matter of choice but it is also of command of Jesus. Jesus commands us: *“Take up your cross – daily, and follow me.”* And the Apostle Paul echoes this thought when he tells the Roman church (12:1) to *“Present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God for this is your spiritual worship.”* This may seem to be a strange command – though in the end it is not too different from the observation that comes from Robert Frost that when we choose “the road less travelled by” we will find that it makes all the difference!

Keep in mind, when this talk of the cross and resurrection seems foreign or strange, that the “road less travelled by” is of course a road that is chosen not just by Christians.

All those who enter the military, for example, choose this less travelled by path in committing their lives to the nation they love. If you look up the Army web site you will find what’s called “The Warrior Ethos”:

I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat.

I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade.

Not easy. A freely chosen path of self-sacrifice. Hard! One might want to run away and say that the best life lies somewhere else – but this kind of sacrificial path is the chosen path of many who want to do something noble – whether in serving their nation through the military, or pursuing an academic, business, or athletic dream.

As Christ’s followers, we have been called to sign up for service that is no less demanding, and no less rewarding. The path may seem like death – a cross, a living sacrifice. The promise, though, is resurrection – Christ’s resurrection life, now and later, for ever. Glorious, but not easy.

I want to close this morning by reading something that I read last week. It’s from the early Christian church, from a book by Rodney Stark called *The Triumph of Christianity*. Stark, a sociologist and historian, looks at the early Christians and examines why there was great numerical growth in the early church. He concludes that it was not merely because of the Roman Emperor Constantine’s political blessing on the church, but that things were happening in the life of the early Christian community – choices about sacrificial living as followers of the crucified and risen Jesus – that led to church growth before the political blessing. So he writes:

"In the year 165 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius a devastating epidemic swept through the Roman Empire. Some medical historians suspect this was the first appearance of small pox in the West. Whatever the actual disease, it was lethal. During the 15-year duration of the epidemic a quarter to a third of the population probably died of it.

Then a century later came another great plague. Once again the Greco-Roman world trembled as on all sides family, friends, neighbors died horribly. No one knew how to treat the stricken nor did most people try. During the first plague the famous

classical physician, Galen, fled Rome for his country estate where he stayed until the danger subsided. But for those who could not flee the typical response was to try to avoid any contact with the afflicted since it was understood that the disease was contagious. Hence when their first symptom appeared victims often were thrown into the streets (DR: Not their *last* symptom but their *first* symptom.) . . . where the dead and dying lay in piles.

Toward the end of the second plague Bishop Dionysius of Alexandria wrote a pastoral letter to his members indicating that Christians (DR: followers of the resurrected but crucified Jesus) approached the plague from a completely different point of view.

‘Most of our brothers showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger they took charge of the sick attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ and with them departed this life serenely happy (DR: They found life but only in giving it up). Many in nursing and curing others transferred their death to themselves and died in their stead. The best of our brothers lost their lives in this manner. A number of Presbyters, Deacons and laymen winning high commendation so that death in this form the result of great piety and strong faith seems in every way the equal to martyrdom.

A remarkable calling. We ourselves may never be quite in such an extreme situation, but between that situation and our own, there are many choices in which we’ve been called to “take up our cross” and to be “living sacrifices.”

On that first Easter the crucified Jesus of Nazareth rose from the dead. Life, resurrection followed death. This is his promise and his pledge for those of us in Christ Jesus.

But there is no resurrection unless there is death first and the summons is always to put these together as the apostle Paul did as he wrote to the Philippians (3:10) – to experience both his resurrection *and* the fellowship of his sufferings, for through them both the life of Christ will be manifest *in* you and *with* you and *through* you and me, to the world.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2014 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/~natio100/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800