

**CHRIST IS RISEN!
WHAT'S NEXT?
Exodus 32:1-6
1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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At Easter we identify Christ's resurrection to be the essential cornerstone of our Christian faith. Without his resurrection there'd be no Christianity. If Jesus didn't step out from the tomb 2,000 years ago, he'd be a forgotten man today, a footnote in history, known by only a handful of the scholars of antiquity.

But by being bodily raised from the dead, Christ impacted the world as no other could. Countless lives are raised up to a quality of life impossible to achieve without him. What's more, his resurrection validated his crucifixion for the sins of the world, making our salvation possible which again would be impossible to achieve without him.

Why else do we go to the Empty Tomb, except to experience Christ's risen presence, hopefully as fully as his first disciples? Like them, we come from the pain of our own Good Fridays, shouldering burdens, harboring self-doubts and contending with a restlessness which can only be satisfied through divine intervention.

It's these infernal hallmarks that, despite divine intervention, still enslave us because although Christ's sacrifice on the cross justifies us in God's eyes, we're not entirely justified in our own because there's still unfinished business needing our attention.

I often share with my young friends at the county jail this metaphor illustrating why our self-destructive habits and thinking continue to hold us back even though Christ's death and resurrection has already set us free. Here it is:

Imagine yourself sitting in your cell when suddenly Jesus appears, unlocks the door and says, "You're free to go, let's get out of here." But oddly enough even though you hate being there you're too afraid to take that first step into freedom. Why? Because your new found freedom will obligate you to live responsibly. Your bad habits and distorted thinking must come to an end. No more blaming others for your troubles. Worn out excuses won't cut it anymore. Your only option for sanity is finally removing your mask and facing yourself, warts and all. Only then can you begin the necessary heavy lifting, risk taking and growing pains, but most of all it's time to stop looking back to where you came from.

Isn't this the same challenge our Hebrew ancestors faced after being liberated from slavery in Egypt? Their forty years of wandering in the wilderness wasn't just punishment for making the Golden Calf (actually an Egyptian god meant to be given as a

peace offering to their former taskmasters once they returned to Egypt with their tails between their legs). It was also time to be purged of their slave mentality and start living as free people under God. Those forty years became a time of heavy lifting, risk taking and growing pains, learning how to live outside their comfort zones as they earned the freedom God gave them.

Keep in mind, God gave them more than just political and social freedom, it went far deeper than that. They were given the freedom to become what they were supposed to be in the first place, human beings created in the image of God. Until they claimed that freedom they'd have the excuse they needed to live recklessly. That's why claiming your God-given humanity is essential for true freedom.

I once had a conversation with a thoughtful man who happened to be a research scientist at Johns Hopkins. When he told me he graduated from seminary before going on to graduate school to earn his Ph.D. in biology, I became curious and asked him why he didn't seek ordination. He replied he never had the slightest intention of becoming a minister. Then why seminary? He told me, "I went to seminary to learn what it means to be human."

Real freedom means learning how to become a human being in God's image. But don't confuse that with being "only human." Isn't that the excuse we fall back on whenever we screw up royally? "Hey, I'm only human!" Truth is, Christ came to free us from being "only" human so we can begin becoming "fully" human.

Of course, only Jesus of Nazareth could ever claim to be fully human. That's why what he did on Good Friday and Easter morning, combined together, gives us the freedom to be raised up with Christ. Through the cross our sins are forgiven and through the Empty Tomb we're promised the abundant life. But it's up to us to accept it, which is something we're reluctant to do.

Maybe that explains why we're still stuck in our cells: we're the spitting image of our Hebrew ancestors who had to wander in the wilderness until they cast off their old ways. But have you noticed they never really did cast off their old ways? Even after entering the Promised Land they still consistently broke the covenant with God and each other, from one generation to the next. Like Lot's wife, they kept looking back to the good old ways that truth be told really weren't so good.

Then what's the point, why even try becoming fully human if the deck is already stacked against us?

Before answering that question you need to first name the one responsible for stacking the deck. Certainly not God. Sure we can follow Job's wife's advice, curse God and die. We could also blame others, but even if they're as guilty as sin, it's still not enough to free us from the cells we've locked ourselves into.

Last Sunday we recounted Christ's resurrection appearances to his disciples. Today as we recall those first Easter stories, I hope we can see what it means to claim Christ's resurrection for ourselves.

Keeping in mind the biblical contention that God working through Christ secured our salvation and makes our resurrection possible, there needs to be the admission, on our part, that God can only do so much. Unlike the caterpillar who sleeps in its' cocoon and is miraculously transformed into a butterfly, without any risk taking, heavy lifting or growing pains, being human beings in God's image, we have a responsibility to take on. This is what Paul meant when he wrote to the Philippians, "Work out (not "work for" but "work out") your salvation in fear and trembling."

It's not enough to just sit back and wait for God to wave a magic wand. Instead God wants you and me to take the initiative. If you believe Christ died and was resurrected and you believe, as Paul, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," then surely you can "work out," or better still intentionally allow Christ's risen presence to emerge from those empty, broken places deep within you.

Please understand, I'm not advocating rugged individualism or pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Obviously, you can't fix, heal or save yourself. But I am advocating taking on the responsibility, as much as it depends on you, to grow from who you have become to who God wants you to be.

Of course, I'll be the first to admit, it's easier said than done! Changing unhealthy thoughts and habits of a lifetime means deliberate risk taking, heavy lifting and growing pains.

Nietzsche, no Christian he, famously said, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger," perhaps not realizing centuries before him, the Apostle Paul already elaborated on his startling observation.

"And not only that, we boast (or embrace) our suffering knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint because God's love has been poured into our hearts..."
(Romans 5:3-5)

According to Paul, and I dare say all the authors of the sixty-six books of the Bible, not to mention Jesus of Nazareth, we've never been offered a cheap and easy gospel of happiness and prosperity with all your problems solved and neatly dispatched for your comfort and convenience. Woe to any false prophets who preach otherwise! Instead, the inspired writings of both the Old and New Testaments preach the Good News of the Kingdom not of this world. No one ever promised all your dreams will come true, and the scriptures warn that any cheap and easy formulas for successful living are not only a sham, but an abomination. Next to Jesus, the 20th century prophet and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer best and succinctly spelled out the minimum requirements for Christian discipleship far better than anyone else I've ever read. *"When Christ calls a man, he invites him to come with him and die."*

Why would Bonhoeffer say such a thing? Because he learned the hard way that before you can experience the full, abundant life, before you can be raised from the dead, you must first put to death anything keeping you from giving yourself to Christ.

Question, what is it in you that must to die before you can become fully alive and fully human? The short answer: whatever it is, known to you, that keeps you locked up in your cell.

Another question: why is Jesus asking these hard questions, to put us on the spot and make us squirm? You know the answer, he not only loves you, he equally respects you; he knows you have it in you to claim for yourself everything he promised.

Do you want a life that counts for something? Are you ready to take that next step into the eternal freedom of being a child of God and a disciple of Christ? Is becoming Christ-like, compassionate and kind, brave and truthful, focused and determined your hope and prayer? Then answer Jesus when he calls you and cooperate with the Holy Spirit when he empowers you. Just don't stand there, do something. Claim the freedom God wants you to experience by allowing your old self to be put to death so your new self can come alive as Christ rises up to live through you.

Otherwise, stay as you are locked up and frustrated, held back and left behind. Christ makes the alternative possible. It's your choice. God bless you either way.

Amen.