

Above and Beyond

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The Sunday of the Resurrection
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I have taken as my text the third verse of the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians, in which Paul, who was at the time imprisoned in Rome, writes to his fellow Christians at Colossae, "For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."

I intend to address myself to that text shortly, but before I do, I would call your attention to the front of this morning's bulletin, on which you will find a quotation from the late Professor Jaroslav Pelikan, distinguished historian of Christian thought for many years at Yale University. Professor Pelikan says this: "If Christ is raised, nothing else matters. If Christ is not raised, nothing else matters."

That, my dear Easter friends, is all you need to know about Easter. If Christ is raised, nothing else matters; if Christ is not raised, nothing else matters. Those few, profound words express the heart, the meaning, and the purpose of Easter. If you never remember another thing about Easter, you would do yourself a great favor by going home this afternoon and committing Professor Pelikan's words to memory, because I can guarantee you that sooner or later those words will do you good.

If Christ is raised from the dead – and we believe that he is – then none of the other stuff of life that lays such perpetual and inconsequential demands on us matters. Getting into the right school doesn't matter. Getting into the right preschool doesn't matter. Securing the right job doesn't matter. Getting out of the wrong job doesn't matter. Your grade point average doesn't matter. Who writes your letters of recommendation doesn't matter. Where you went to graduate school doesn't matter. If you went to graduate school doesn't matter. Who asked you to marry him doesn't matter. If anyone asked you to marry him doesn't matter. Whether you were married thirty days or thirty years doesn't matter. Saving up for a comfortable retirement doesn't matter. Even the anxious waiting for the test results doesn't finally matter.

Above and beyond all of that – there's the title of this morning's sermon – above and beyond all of those pestering, festering, and sometimes fearsome demands, and above and beyond all of those shiny baubles for which we spend our hard-earned cash for which we have spent our days of toil, Christ has been raised from death, and compared to whether Christ is raised from death to new and everlasting life, none of those things matter, because Christ's victory over pain, sin, and death itself is what matters to those of us, Paul says, who have died with Christ in baptism and whose lives are now hidden with Christ in God. That's what matters. It's what matters in this world and it's what matters in the world to come. Our lives, if we have died to ourselves in order to live to God, are no longer our own, but they protected, secured,

hidden – to use Paul’s language – with Christ in God, and that is the gift of Easter, and that’s what matters.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is new life for every person who will genuinely accept it, but the only way to accept it is to live it, and you don’t get to wait until after you die to live your new life in Christ if you continue to live your old life here. As far as we can tell, when you come face to face with your maker, it’s too late to start living the new life in Christ.. When you’re dead, you’re dead. I’ve said that to you many times, and I’m going to say it to you again on this Easter morning to remind you that if you are not living the new life God has offered you in Jesus’ resurrection, then the most important part of you is dead – dead, dead, dead.

Now listen to me carefully here so that you don’t, as most Christians have done for most of Christian history, fall into the heresy of Gnostic dualism.

When I speak of the most important part of you, I’m not talking about your soul or spirit or psyche or personality as distinct from your physical body. I’m not talking about some sort of spiritual ghost inside the machine of your carcass. The Bible does not teach that there are two versions of each of us, the visible version that walks and talks and enjoys a dry martini, and the invisible version that is carried around by the visible version throughout this vale of tears and that gets sprung from its fleshly prison upon death and floats off to live in heaven with God and the angels and the departed relatives we liked on earth. That’s the Gnostic view of things, it’s called dualism, and it’s not biblical anthropology.

In the Bible, we are a psychosomatic unity – Genesis chapter two shows that we are animated dirtbags, to put it plainly – and both the old life we were given by the world and the new life we are given by God in Christ Jesus are one unified life, body, soul, the whole shebang. I said to you just last week, but it bears repeating, Christianity is an all-or-nothing game. Your life is either all old or it’s all new, and the part of us that determines which of those we will be is not our soul; it’s our will, that psychosomatic steering wheel that drives our actions down this path or down that one. It is the human will that is the most important part of us, not because it’s separate from the body, but rather because it is determinative for the body, it determines what the body is going to do.

“The good that I will I do not,” Paul famously wrote to the Romans, “and the evil I will not is what I do.” Paul saw the problem, but he couched it badly, for he went on to use language that we have interpreted to mean that our thoughts are good and our bodies are the problem, and this dualism has caused no end of problems for us and for our ancestors, not to mention what we’ve done to God’s creation.

No, the problem is not the body, for if the problem were the body there would have been no resurrection appearances of Jesus to his followers after his death. His resurrected body was not identical to his pre-crucifixion body, to be sure – the Gospel of John makes that fact abundantly clear – but Jesus was raised from death as a psychosomatic unity that affirms the goodness of his body, our bodies, and everybody’s body. The resurrection of Jesus is the start of that new creation which in no way despises the old creation; the new creation – the new life in Christ – is the restoration, affirmation, and declaration of what the first creation was always meant to be.

“So if anyone is in Christ,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” There’s nothing in those words about the spirit being good and the body being bad, and there shouldn’t be, because the

body is not the problem. The will is the problem, and it is the will – your will, your rudder, the steering wheel of your very self – that Jesus lays hold of and points in the right direction if you will only get the heavy hand of yourself out of the way.

“Whoever will,” we used to sing in the Baptist church, “whoever will. Send the proclamation over vale and hill. ‘Tis a loving Father calls the wand’rer home: Whoever will may come!”

You are the “whosoever” of Phillip P. Bliss’ hymn, and anytime you’re ready to accept the gift of Easter for yourself, it is waiting for you. Not just today, on Easter Sunday, but on every Sunday, when we gather as a church to celebrate the resurrection, and every Monday and every Tuesday and every Friday and every Saturday, when I hope and pray that you yourselves, in your own way, are celebrating the truth of the gospel.

But it is my duty as your pastor to solemnly warn you this morning as I have warned you before: God may have forever, but you and I don’t. Having just had my fifty-eighth birthday, and having just recently worked myself over at the gym for the first time in nearly twenty years, I can tell you that the tempus is indeed fugiting, as a friend of mine recently put it. None of us is getting any younger, and the life we’ve been given by God on this earth is a one-shot deal. If you’re going to say yes to the new life in Christ Easter offers us, you’d better get on with it. You’re not too young, you’re not too old, you’re not too rich, and you’re not too poor. You’re not too Protestant, you’re not too Catholic. You’re not too religious, and you’re not too spiritual. You’re not the wrong skin color and you don’t live on the wrong side of the tracks. You’re not the wrong gender and don’t have the wrong sexual orientation. Nothing in all creation, again to quote Paul, can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, but you won’t know that great and glorious truth until you live that love in your own life – in this life – in everything you do, day in and day out, without exception.

Friends, I could go on and on, and if there were any Sunday in the church year when I as a preacher of the Christian gospel have a right to go on and on, it would be today, Easter, the Sunday of the resurrection, but instead I’m going to heed the advice of the pastor in the Lutheran church in Garrison Keillor’s hometown of Lake Wobegon, who said that an Easter sermon should have a short introduction and a shorter conclusion and that the two should be as close together as possible.

He lives – and so can you. Alleluia and amen.