

*“Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)”*  
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia  
Easter Sunday, April 20, 2014  
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Holy Scriptures: John 20: 1-18    Colossians 3: 1-4

John 20

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. <sup>2</sup> So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, “They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>3</sup> Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. <sup>4</sup> The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. <sup>5</sup> He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. <sup>6</sup> Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, <sup>7</sup> and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. <sup>8</sup> Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; <sup>9</sup> for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. <sup>10</sup> Then the disciples returned to their homes.

<sup>11</sup> But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look<sup>[a]</sup> into the tomb; <sup>12</sup> and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. <sup>13</sup> They said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping?” She said to them, “They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.” <sup>14</sup> When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. <sup>15</sup> Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, “Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.” <sup>16</sup> Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew,<sup>[b]</sup> “Rabbouni!” (which means Teacher). <sup>17</sup> Jesus said to her, “Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” <sup>18</sup> Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, “I have seen the Lord”; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

**Footnotes:**

- a. **John 20:11** Gk lacks *to look*
- b. **John 20:16** That is, *Aramaic*

### **Colossians 3**

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.<sup>2</sup> Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,<sup>3</sup> for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.<sup>4</sup> When Christ who is your<sup>[a]</sup> life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

#### ***Footnotes:***

- a. **Colossians 3:4** Other authorities read *our*

### **“Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)”**

By: John Newton and Chris Tomlin

Amazing grace How sweet the sound That saved a wretch like me I once  
was lost, but now I'm found Was blind, but now I see 'Twas grace that  
taught my heart to fear And grace my fears relieved How precious did that  
grace appear The hour I first believed My chains are gone, I've been set  
free My God, my Savior has ransomed me And like a flood His mercy  
reigns Unending love, amazing grace The Lord has promised good to me  
His word my hope secures He will my shield and portion be As long as life  
endures My chains are gone, I've been set free My God, my Savior has  
ransomed me And like a flood His mercy reigns Unending love, amazing  
grace The earth shall soon dissolve like snow The sun forbear to shine But  
God, Who called me here below, Will be forever mine.  
My chains are gone, I've been set free My God, my Savior has ransomed  
me And like a flood His mercy reigns Unending love, amazing grace

### Sermon

For Christ-centered music and faith, and the people who bring the two  
together,

let the church say “*Amen!*”

For the spirituals and songs, hymns and psalms that stir our souls,  
calm our nerves,

point us toward the One who saves,

and inspire us to aspire for the greatest good, united in

Christ,  
let the Church say, "*Amen!*"

Today, my friends, we state the obvious, and rejoice.

Christian singer songwriter Chris Tomlin  
reflected on the amazing grace of the resurrection of Jesus Christ  
and then put it this way:

***My chains are gone, I've been set free  
My God, my Savior, has ransomed me  
And like a flood His mercy reigns  
Unending love, amazing grace***

A Sunday School teacher had a class of 4 and 5 year olds.  
She asked, "*If I sold everything I owned and gave away everything I had,  
would that get me into heaven?*"

"No!" the children shouted in unison.

*"If I cleaned my house every day,  
mowed my lawn and planted pretty flowers,  
would that get me into heaven?"*

"No!" they answered again.

*"If I was kind to animals and polite to my friends,  
would that get me into heaven?"*

"No!" came their enthusiastic reply.

"Well," asked the Sunday School teacher, "*how can I get into heaven?*"  
A little boy shouted, "*You have to be DEAD!*"

The Good News is that death does not have the last word.

Thanks to the grace of God,  
our last breath on earth is followed by our first breath in heaven.

On this blessed Easter morning our presence and prayers proclaim the  
obvious:

Your mother who passed away *lives again*.

Your father who died *lives again*.

Your son, your daughter, your sister, your brother  
whose burial you witnessed *lives again*.

Your beloved kinfolks, your friends, your neighbors near and far,  
and the great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us *live*

*again.*

***My chains are gone, I've been set free  
My God, my Savior, has ransomed me***

If the amazing grace of God is true,  
then any chains that bind and hold us back or down or apart are  
gone.

If the amazing grace of God is true,  
then death does not get the privilege of the last word.

If the amazing grace of God is true,  
then all will be saved.

The Good Lord is always at work and play on behalf of the whole people of  
God,

rolling away stones,  
breaking chains that bind,  
forgiving confessed sins,  
building bridges of healing and reconciliation.

The Holy Scriptures inform us and our experiences confirm  
that God is always

setting up ladders from earth to heaven,  
letting light into windows of the soul,  
cracking open doorways of opportunity,  
sending the Church to be a movement of

wholeness

for a broken and fragmented world.

Into our fragmented world, into our grief and despair, our suffering and loss  
Jesus Christ enters in and delivers Good News:

Jesus said, *"I am the Resurrection and the Life.*

*Those who believe in me,*

*even though they die, yet shall they live,*

*and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die.*

*I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the  
last.*

*I died, and behold I am alive forever more,*

*and I hold the keys of hell and death.*

*Because I live, you shall live also."*

Jesus could just as well have sang:  
*My chains are gone, I've been set free*  
*My God, my Savior, has ransomed me*

They say that a young mother took her daughter to the local funeral home. They went to pay their last respects to the girl's great-grandmother. The child looked and looked and took it all in, and finally asked,  
*"Mommy, why did they put Great-Grandmother in a jewelry box?"*

We put so much emphasis on what comes last.

Last respects.

Last memories.

Last words.

How many times have we contemplated the last words of Jesus?

How many sermons have you heard on the subject?

How many times have we discussed and studied Jesus' seven last spoken sentences

from the Cross on Calvary?

*"Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."*

*"I thirst."*

*"It is finished."*

He offered his last breath on earth, followed immediately by his next breath in heaven.

However, these were not his last words!

Jesus returned.

You see, He had something more to say, and something more to prove.

Jesus spoke with Mary in the garden, calling her by name.

Jesus spoke with the disciples and Thomas who were in hiding,  
offering God's shalom and wholeness.

Jesus broke bread and spoke with Peter and the disciples on the beach,  
calling them and us to love God's sheep and tend God's lambs.

Jesus returned to give to the whole people of God the Great Commission,  
saying, *"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations..."*

His last words were after death,

each one an introduction, an invitation, a prelude,

a foretaste and a forecast of what was yet to come.

His last words spoken after death were new beginnings.

*His chains were gone  
He'd been set free  
And now so are we*

One summer day in 2005, I sat with my father and his former co-pastor. George Calvert knew that he was dying, that death was imminent, so he asked Bruce McKay and I to help plan his funeral. The pastor who had preached with joy and sincerity for over 50 years said, “No sermon! Let the people speak.” George shared his last confession with us. He shared some last regrets and joys, some last minute instructions and his lasting, living hope. Stricken with cancer, he refused to allow the disease to define him. Instead he had spent the final 20 months of his life saying thank you and good bye; he had graciously given away many, many last words. Within a week of our conversation to plan his funeral he passed away, leaving behind a grief-stricken family and community. His soul was lifted into heaven, leaving behind a body that was all used up. I grieved after his body was committed to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. My sense of loss and pain and sadness felt unbearable. On the third day as I slept I dreamed a dream I had never had before. The dream felt more like a vision, a visitation, a happening. My father returned from the beyond, alive and filled with energy and enthusiasm, saying, “I’m fine! All is well!” The next morning I awoke refreshed and whole, filled anew with a sense of calmness and resolve to live and love. You see, I thought I had heard his last plans, his last confession, his last words. However, just as Jesus spoke with Mary in the garden after His resurrection, my father’s last words affirming life and life eternal were spoken *after death!* George’s blessed return from the afterlife convinced me that while his work on earth was finished

mine continues.  
Life is not over when we die;  
we are only changed, transformed, transcending and moving forward.  
Life is not over when our beloved pass on;  
we are changed as well,  
transformed and empowered to move on and move forward.

***Our chains are gone, we've been set free  
Our God, our Savior, has ransomed thee***

Barbara Johnson said that  
*"Remembering I've got a one-way ticket to heaven for my eternal  
life,  
I find the strength to handle anything this life can throw at me.  
It is all a matter of perspective."*

The Apostle Paul put it this way when he communicated with the Church:  
*"So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ,  
act like it.*

*Pursue the things over which Christ presides.  
Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground,  
absorbed with the things right in front of you.*

*Look up,  
and be alert to what is going on around Christ  
—that's where the action is.  
See things from his perspective.*

*Your old life is dead.  
Your new life, which is your real life  
—even though invisible to spectators—  
is with Christ in God.*

*He is your life.  
When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth,  
you'll show up, too — the real you, the glorious you.  
Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ." -- Colossians 3: 1-4  
(The Message)*

***Our chains are gone...***

This past week the news was filled with images of Boston Strong  
and memories from the bombing of the Boston Marathon one year

ago.

Adrienne Haslet-Davis, a dancer who lost her left foot in the attack,  
spoke at the interfaith memorial, saying,  
*“Our survivor community is not something any of us has chosen to be a part  
of.  
But there are many moments we could have not made it through  
if not for one another.  
If anyone is wondering what they can do, what you can do, I would answer:  
Look around. People in your community need your support.  
They need your patience and they need your time.  
...work together to make this world a better place.”*

***Our chains are gone, we've been set free***

Death and sin, senseless violence and oppression, bigotry and fear  
shall not and must not have the last word.

Let Christ's life and resurrection speak in and through you!

What would you do if you knew God would not let you fail?

Who would you be if you allowed God to unshackle you and set you free?

On this blessed Easter morning our presence and prayers proclaim the  
obvious:

Your beloved lives again!  
God is always at work and play in you,  
creating and sustaining a new life in Christ!

Let God break the chains and set you free  
and then, before your soul soars into heaven, use you up!

You know, we should not arrive at death's door all prim and proper  
in a pretty and well-preserved body.  
Instead we ought to arrive breathlessly,  
skidding broadside through the pearly gates,  
thoroughly used up, totally worn out,  
and loudly proclaiming, *“Wow! What a ride!”*



*All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!*