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“After Grave Circumstances Comes New Life”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Eastertide, Sunday, May 15, 2022

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Worship Theme:

Welcome home!

Welcome to Christ’s Church, where you and yours belong.

God’s grace has the power to give new life, fresh starts, renewed purpose.

Receive the Holy Spirit!

Receive the Spirit for the purpose which God intends!

Let us worship God together.

Holy Scriptures: John 5: 25-29 2 Corinthians 4: 13-15

John 5:25-29

‘Truly, truly, I tell you all, the hour is coming, and is now here, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live.

For just as the Living God has life internally, just so God has granted the Son also to have life internally. And God has given the Son authority to render justice, because he is the Son of God.

Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgement.’

2 Corinthians 4:13-15

Now we have the same spirit of faith that is in accordance with scripture: “I believed, and so I spoke”; and we believe, and so we speak. We know that the one who raised Jesus the Messiah will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us with you into the presence of the Christ. Indeed, the whole is for your sake so grace through many more may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God.

Sermon

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

“...the hour is coming,” said Jesus,

“when those who are in their graves

will hear God's voice and will come out..." –John 5: 28

Christian singer songwriter Chris Tomlin reflected
on the amazing grace of the resurrection of Jesus Christ
in light of Chris Tomlin's own personal circumstances,
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***

The Good News is that death and death-dealing things do not have the last word.
Thanks be to the grace of God,
our last breath on earth is followed by our first breath in heaven.
If God's grace is true, then all will be saved.
All may receive new life, in this world and the next.

Thanks be to God, *"...the hour is coming
when those who are in their graves
will hear God's voice and will come out..." –John 5: 28*

Taken metaphorically,
this Word of God from John 5
testifies that the graves we find ourselves having fallen into
have a way out, that God in Christ knows the way home.
The graves we've gotten trapped in,
the graves in which we feel lost
or find suffocating or demoralizing,
these grave circumstances do not have the last word.

"Christianity has died many times, and risen again and again," said G.K. Chesterson,
"for it has a God who knows the way out of the grave."

May God speak through the Church – which is all of us –
to tell the world that we have a God who knows the way out of graves.

May the Church claim our mission and deliver the message
to call folks out from their fears and failures and foibles
into new life in Christ.

*"Between the resurrection of Jesus and the final resurrection,
the Church is called to life,
a life apart from all the dead and death-dealing things*

*that would prevent us from living fully in Christ,
i.e., "Those who are in their graves" in John 5:28.*

What might those graves be and what might be in them?" (Wilda Gafney, P. 181)

Feel free to share aloud with a trusted soul, with your pastor, with God.

What robs you of life?

What things are pulling life away from you?

What is keeping you from living life fully?

What eats the life out of you?

Hope and help are here; listen for the voice of God.

My chains are gone, I've been set free

My God, my Savior, has ransomed me

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!"*

My chains are gone, I've been set free

My God, my Savior, has ransomed me

For those of us challenged and confronted and circumvented by grave matters,

by life's obstacles and opportunities,

may we find comfort in the Holy Scriptures.

We are not alone!

God is with you!

The Lord provides help, healing, and hope.

From Genesis to Malachi, from Matthew to Revelation,

the Word makes us aware that God – and God alone –

is continually rescuing folks from all walks of life,

calling people out from graves,

pointing the way to safety and sanctuary,

rejuvenating and resurrecting souls

from spiritual death and death-dealing things.

Thanks be to God, after grave circumstances comes New Life!

In the opening passages of the Gospel of John
we bear witness to a whirlwind of spiritual experiences.

In order to help us catch our breath
and to understand what we just witnessed,
the 5th Chapter of the Gospel of John
includes a discourse,
a discourse by Jesus of Nazareth spoken at the temple.

Other words for discourse are sermon, homily, speech.

Also fitting synonyms are dialogue, discussion, conversation that matters.

We find it most appropriate, most suitable for we readers of John's Gospel
that Jesus pauses here, in the temple, in God's House,
here in Chapter 5,

to let us glean some perspective from all that preceded,
He discourses – preaches, teaches, reaches out --
to help us put what is going on here
in the bigger context,
to guide our hearts and minds
to grasp the deeper meaning -- the deepest meaning –
of what we just witnessed in the first few pages of John.

John 1 opens with the declaration of the Logos, the Word of God:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth..."

Immediately we find ourselves with John the Baptist,
who points us, the whole people of God,
toward the one who is to come...

Here He is! says John, pointing us to Jesus,

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

Into a fragmented world with one foot in the grave
comes the One sent by God,
delivered to drench us

with a refreshing baptism of a Big Love
and a grace that renews and resurrects.

Jesus of Nazareth, newly baptized and empowered by the Holy Spirit,
quickly calls Andrew and Simon, then Philip and Nathaniel,
saying "Follow me",

They do, choosing to let go of their past, to risk everything to rise and shine in the Light.

John 2 takes us to Cana, to a fabulous wedding feast,
a guest list complete with Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her son.
The wine runs out.
Mother Mary informs and inspires Jesus to do something.
He instructs the staff to fill empty vats with water,
then to draw some out and present it to the steward of the feast.
Amazed, delighted,
the steward compliments the host for the wine,
not knowing the miracle that just happened.
This sign manifested God's glory.
The party that had begun to die is given new life.

Much of **John 3** takes place under the stars.
We overhear Nicodemus and Jesus converse
on being born again, *anōthen*, from above.
In the dark of night,
staring into the shadowy abyss of Nicodemus' fears, foibles, and frailties,
Jesus offers Brother Nick the light of God's loving grace, saying,

*"For God so loved the world that God gave the only Son,
that whoever believes in him
should not perish but have eternal life.
For God sent the Son,
not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through Him."*

Three years later Nicodemus returns to the forefront,
having been freed by God's amazing grace
from whatever grave difficulties circumvented his life.
Right after Jesus was crucified,
Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea
provided and cared for Jesus' body in the tomb,
a grave that ultimately failed to hold the Living Christ.

John 4 introduces us to a Samaritan woman at the well,
the well of Jacob.
She of dire circumstances,
alone and bereft, possibly shunned, deeply in need of communal healing,
is asked by Christ to draw some water for him.

The Samaritan woman said to him,

"How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?"
Jesus answered her,
"If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you,
"Give me a drink",
you would have asked him,
and he would have given you living water."

She bravely testifies that she is awaiting the Messiah,
who will show us all things.
"I who speak to you am he," said Jesus.
When she returned to town,
she was so filled with the Living Water of New Life
that she left behind both her water jar and her fears,
telling any who would listen, *"Could this be the Christ?!"*

John 5 opens on a lovely Sabbath day,
at the temple in Jerusalem,
beside a pool of healing waters by the Sheep Gate.
We join the faithful to witness God in Christ healing a man,
a man who had been ill for 38 years.
Jesus asked him, *"Do you want to be healed?"*
"Sir, no one will help me,
and when I get near the pool of healing waters,
another steps down before me."
Jesus said, *"Rise, take up your pallet and walk!"*
At once the man was healed!
Arising to walk, putting some pep in his step,
the man left behind 38 years of physical illness and spiritual despair,
days and nights of being ignored, unrecognized, disrespected.
Everyone wants to be recognized and respected.
Even if there is no cure,
there is healing, there is grace, there we are,
like the man, told to rise up from whatever graves we find ourselves in,
to move forward in Beauty and in the Light.

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

Jesus said in his discourse in the temple in Jerusalem:
'Truly, truly, I tell you all,
the hour is coming, and is now here,
when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God,
and those who hear will live.
...God has given the Son authority to render justice,

*because he is the Son of God.
Do not be astonished at this;
for the hour is coming
when all who are in their graves
will hear his voice and will come out...*

In the Gospel of John, "...the wonder of the teachings" of Jesus about the eschaton
--the coming of the Beloved Community, the Kingdom of God--
the wonder "...is that the present and the future
are held together in a shared vision."

(New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. IX, Luke, John. P.585)

The Gospel reveals that Jesus is the fulfillment
of traditional eschatological expectations.
Yet the Gospel writer fulfills them in such a way
that they are redefined by the present reality of God in Christ.
The Good News is that Jesus Christ
"...is at the center of the believer's present
and will be at the center of the believer's future." (P. 585)

In other words, my friends,
we celebrate a shared vision
that God's love is with us in the here and now,
in the midst of all of life's circumstances and situations,
while at the same time we affirm
that God prepares a way forward,
a way of eternal life, a way to life everlasting.

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."*

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

Our Easter faith in eternal life gives us the strength
to survive, thrive, and strive in this life.
Each new day brings reminders of the Good News
in the midst of tragedies and suffering,
especially suffering caused by human hands and minds.
You are a sign of God's hope,
to be an engaging and empowering source of divine love in such a time as this.

There are more human beings enslaved today than ever before;
and it is happening here in Atlanta.
The income inequality gap has never been greater;
and it is wider and worse here in Atlanta than any other American city.
The racial divide is widening;
fear of natural human orientation is ever-expanding;
denial of civil and human rights threatens to become the new norm;
and it is happening here in Atlanta.

Do you think folks in the surrounding neighborhoods will find it acceptable
if *We the People* and *We the Church*
closed our eyes and buried our heads in the sand?
Does anyone in the community really expect the Church
to stand up for peace with justice?
We certainly could choose to preach a pie in the sky religion;
it's easy peasy;
all we have to do is simply practice an only-Sunday-morning-faith
while denying a 24/7 world.

Or, my friends, we can choose this fine Sunday morning
to live into an Easter faith.
Our Easter faith in eternal life gives us the strength
to survive, thrive, and strive in this life,
to confront grave circumstances and seek new life in Christ.
When we live out our Easter faith
then death and death-dealing things
like senseless violence and war,
bigotry and fear,
systemic racism and repression of women's rights
shall not, must not, cannot have the last word!
When we live out our Easter faith
the Living Word of Jesus Christ speaks in and through you!

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

Speaking with a friend about new life after grave circumstances,
she said that for many in
her LGBTQIA+ Community,
which she named the Alphabet Soup Community,
*"We give thanks for the good things where we once were,
and hopefully we're healthier now where we are."*

It certainly helps if the Church decides to be helpful rather than harmful.

The Church is called to be present and a presence in the struggle,
to reclaim our identity as a rescue mission.

Each rescue from grave circumstances
involves two sides, two parties, two hands:
one hand reaching out for help
and a second hand reaching out to help.

Not as an Us-Them; rather as an I-Thou relationship.

Our salvation is found in the place of struggle,
whether you are in need of rescue or revival
or can help a soul in need with a smile or a dollar or a good ear.

In the graveyards of despair and trauma, loss and grief,
the Church is called to be *En La Lucha*, in the Struggle.

Our role and responsibility is not to fix but to be...
not to clean but to welcome...
to hear and see and respect, not to save...

Trust Jesus to do the fixing, the cleaning, the saving.
Trust the Church to simply be,
to simply welcome,
to simply recognize
the children of God in our midst
crawling and calling to come out
of their grave circumstances into new life.

We are commissioned to sit with one another,
to advocate, to encourage, to empower one another,
...to make a path and space at the healing waters
or to exclaim, "Take up your pallet and walk!"

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

Adrienne Haslet-Davis, a dancer who lost her left foot
in the attack at the Boston Marathon,
spoke at an interfaith memorial
to commemorate the bombing there.

Adrienne Haslet-Davis said:
*"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."*

The Apostle Paul put it this way when he communicated with the Church in Colossae:
*“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 God’s perspective.*

Your old life is dead.

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

Christ 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.” Col. 3: 1-4 (The Message)*

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

An elementary school was having its end-of-the-year festival on the playground.

Snacks were running low.

A teacher volunteered.

The teacher walked into the cafeteria,
then through the kitchen
and into the freezer
to grab some ice cream sandwiches.

The massive freezer door closed.

Startled, the teacher pushed and pushed on it to reopen, but it held firm.

Trapped, upset, the teacher beat on the door,
calling out as loudly as possible,
hoping someone might hear,
yet knowing the building was empty.

Everyone was on the playground.

Suddenly the door opened.

The custodian was there!

A savior!

The teacher started to say thank you, thank you,
when the custodian stepped inside the freezer,
allowing the door to close.

“Jesus Christ! Now we are both trapped!” the teacher exclaimed.

Calmly, the custodian turned around,
pulled on the handle,
and the door gently, gracefully swung open.

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