

Words on the Wall: He Rose Again from the Dead

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Romans 6:1-11

So it's Easter morning! Well not exactly but that's where we are today in the Apostles' Creed. "The third day he rose again from the dead." A few short words that tell of an event, a moment in history, when everything changed. That sounds dramatic because it is! The Apostle Paul is convinced that because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection a new reality is available for humankind. An entire old world had been terminated and a new one was being born. This new reality is not something people dream up in their heads or have to work hard to pretend they are living in. It is not a reality that exists far away somewhere or off in the future. Paul is convinced that it is real. It is here. And it is now. A new world order. A new reality. A new creation. And here's what else Paul believes: it's happening in you too. Not only does Jesus' resurrection change the reality we live in, Jesus' resurrection changes you. It changes us. Last week we read, from 2 Corinthians 5 "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new." Jesus' resurrection from the dead gives to you and me a new identity.

Well, I want to think about that a little because owning such a grand identity is no easy task. We are frail, limited human beings who often find it hard to know who we are and to feel secure in who we are. In fact we tend to have a lot of struggles around our identity, wrestling frequently with feelings of unworthiness, or inadequacy; feelings like I'm not good enough, or smart enough, or spiritual enough. A few days after I began my first pastoral position, I found myself walking down a hallway at Blodgett Hospital for my very first bedside pastoral visit. As I headed toward the patient room I was looking for, I heard a voice behind me (it was a Chaplain at Blodgett who was a member of my church) saying "Pastor Ruth, Pastor Ruth." By the time it registered to me that this person was talking to me, he had said it several times. "Oh, that's me," I finally realized. At the time we laughed about the fact that I wasn't used to being called Pastor Ruth yet. But on the way home, in the quiet of my car as I thought more about it, I had to admit that I also didn't feel worthy of that title. If only he knew what an impatient driver and mother I sometimes was. If only he knew that I just narrowly passed Hebrew in seminary. If only he knew all those things about me that we hope others will never know, then he'd realize I didn't deserve that identity.

I shared that story with a friend afterward, who promptly said to me, that's called imposter syndrome. I said, "What are you talking about?" He said, "Yes. It's a thing." You see, in 1978 two American psychologists identified a condition they called imposter syndrome. They described it as a feeling of phoniness in people who believe that they are not capable enough for the position they hold. While these people are in fact capable, at the same time they live in fear of being 'found out' or exposed for their inadequacies. I wonder if that sounds at all familiar to any of you.

The American author and poet Maya Angelou once said, "I have written 11 books, but each time I think, 'Uh oh, they're going to find out now. I've run a game on everybody, and they're going to find me out.'" Think about that. Despite winning three Grammys and being nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award, this huge talent still questioned her abilities. I've heard that American presidents can feel this thing, too. The first time they find themselves alone in the Oval Office, they think to themselves, "I hope nobody finds out I'm in here."

The Apostle Paul says our identity is critical to who we are, but we need to be clear about this; our real identity is ultimately not about our own capabilities. Our deepest identity is given to us by Christ. It is given to us, not earned. "For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his," says Paul, "we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his...count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Friends, there is nothing we can do to change that union, that identification with Christ. It's something God has done. God has united you to Christ. God has claimed you as a co-heir with his own son. The truest thing about you, your deepest identity, whether you believe yourself to be worthy or not, capable or not - is that you are a child of God.

The now-deceased preacher Fred Craddock once told of a time he was on vacation in Tennessee. He and his wife were having dinner at a restaurant when an old man started talking to them, asking them how they were doing and if they were enjoying their holiday. When the old man asked Fred what he did for a living, Fred saw the chance to get rid of him. "I'm a preacher" "A preacher? That's great. Let me tell you a story about a preacher." The old man sat down at their table and started to speak. As he did Fred's annoyance was changed to one of profound humility. The old man explained that he grew up as what was once called an illegitimate child. He was born without knowing who his father was, a source of great shame in a small town in the early twentieth century. One day a new preacher came to the local church. The old man explained that as a youngster he had never gone to church, but one Sunday decided to go along and hear the new pastor preach. He was good. The illegitimate boy went back again, and then again. In fact he started attending just about every week. But his shame went with him. This poor little boy would always arrive late and leave early in order to avoid talking to anyone. But one Sunday he got so caught up in the sermon that he forgot to leave. Before he knew it the service was over and the aisles were filling. He rushed to get past people and out the door, but as he did he felt a heavy hand land upon his shoulder. He turned around to see the preacher, a big tall man, looking down at him asking, "What's your name, boy? Whose son are you?" The little boy died inside, the very thing he wanted to avoid was now happening. But before he could say anything the preacher said "Wait. I know who you are. I know who your family is. There's a distinct family resemblance. Why, you're a son, you're a son, you're a son of God!" The old man sitting at Fred Craddock's table said "You know, mister, those words changed my life." And with that he got up and left.

As I look out over the sanctuary this morning, I don't know all of you. But I recognize each one of you, I know who your family is. There's a distinct family resemblance. Why, you are and you are and you are - children of God! You see in finding our identity in Christ, in realizing our union with him in his resurrection, we discover our belonging. But we discover something more than that too. We also discover our calling to "live into" this new identity, this new family, this new creation. Paul links our identity with our baptism and says that what happened to Christ physically has happened to us spiritually in that through baptism our old sinful selves died. They were drowned in baptism's waters. And then like Christ, we too are raised to a new life. I read that in the medieval church when a monk first entered his new monastic life, during the worship service the new monk would actually come and lie down at the front of the church, right where the body would lie during a funeral. They would literally put a funeral pall (which is a large white cloth) over him and they'd ring bells to signify that someone had died. After a long period of silence a song from the book of Colossians was sung, "For you have died and your life is hid with Christ in God." After a little more silence the monks began singing from Psalm 118, "I shall not die but live and declare the words of the Lord." After a final

period of silence, they broke into words of triumph from 1 Corinthians, “Awake, O sleeper, arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!” The bells of the abbey would start to ring, and the new brother was embraced into the new order.

New life in a new order. That’s us. United to Christ, you and I have died to one way of life and have risen to another. It happens in baptisms waters and by the Spirit’s power it happens every day in us. Martin Luther, when he felt the weight of life’s temptations and trials pressing in on him is said to have regularly cried out loud, “I am baptized.” And in that cry he would find the strength to go on. You know, living, as we do, in a world where the forces of darkness and death are reluctant to give way, we cannot live into our new resurrection identity without the strength, the power, the Spirit of God. God’s Spirit enables us to see and point others to the “Here and Now, New-Creation-Breaking-In, Kingdom of God.”

Friends, you live into that new creation: every time you die to an old sinful pattern/habit and put on something new, every time you release your claim on an old hurt and instead forgive, every time you set aside your fear and reach out to a marginalized neighbor, every time you cry out “I am baptized” and experience new strength. You live into the reality of God’s new creation every time you remember your deepest identity, that you are united to Christ in his death and in his resurrection, therefore you are forever, a beloved child of God. Sisters and Brothers, we live into the reality of God’s new creation every time we proclaim and believe that Jesus is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

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