

Attaining the Resurrection
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
April 28, 2019 – PM Sermon
Rev. Peter Jonker
Philippians 3:7-14

Another Easter Sunday has past. The brass and timpani have sounded their fanfare. The Organ has played *Christ the Lord Has Risen Today*. The dancers have spun down the center aisle and waved their alleluias, and the gospel was preached. It was a joyful, uplifting morning of worship. For many of you, that wasn't the end of the celebration! Your celebration continued through the afternoon at a big Easter dinner surrounded by family and friends. Many of us enjoyed a day full of good food and good news. And now it's over. The leftover ham has been eaten, the trumpets have been put away, and the chocolate eggs are 50% off in the clearance aisle. So now what? What do you do when the joy of Easter gives way to the grind of regular life?

The question puts me in mind of another Bible related question I've sometimes wondered about. I always wonder what happened to the Prodigal Son on the day after he came home from the far country? The prodigal has just had one of the best days of his life. After insulting his Father and taking his inheritance he came home in rags. The money was gone. His head hung low, his back was bent with guilt; he thought he was a dead man. Instead his Father gave him a new life. The Father took away the guilt and gave him clean clothes. He embraced his long lost boy. He killed the fatted calf and threw a party. There was singing! There was dancing. There might have been trumpets, and I would not be surprised if there were some Alleluias. It was a mini resurrection. I'm sure the prodigal went to bed that night on a tremendous high. But what about the next morning? Dad wasn't going to kill another calf and throw another party. Now that the party is over and the music has stopped, what's the plan? What are his priorities?

What do we do the week after Easter? Paul gives us a hint. In his letter to the Philippians (the most cheerful prison letter in history) Paul shares his own post-Easter priorities with us. "You know what I've been trying to do lately," he says,

“Lately, I’ve been trying to attain to the resurrection from the dead. (3:11)”. “I am spending all of my effort, I am getting up every morning, I am pouring myself out as a drink offering so that I can know Christ and somehow attain to the resurrection from the dead.” This is very strange language. We don’t usually talk about the resurrection this way. How can a person ‘*attain to*’ the resurrection? Isn’t the resurrection a gift of God? And besides, don’t we *already* share in the resurrection? Doesn’t this same Paul tell us in Romans 6:5 “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we *will certainly* be united with him in a resurrection like his”? Doesn’t Colossians 3 say to us, “Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above.” Past tense. You have been raised with Christ. Like it’s already happened. Doesn’t the Heidelberg Catechism tell us that in Christ’s resurrection “we too are *already now* resurrected to new life”? (Q&A 45) This doesn’t sound like something we attain; it sounds like an unshakable gift that we already enjoy.

In an eternal sense the resurrection is an unshakeable gift that we already enjoy. On the day of their death, those who belong to Christ Jesus can be sure that they belong to Jesus; they can be sure that they will rise at the last trumpet. They don’t have to worry about whether or not they did enough to ‘attain’ the resurrection from the dead. Furthermore, despite his strange phrasing, Paul is certainly not concerned about his own eternal status. When Paul talks about trying to attain to resurrection from the dead and then says, “not that I have already attained it,” he is *not* suggesting that he has to do more to make it into heaven. Paul knows he belongs to Christ Jesus. Paul knows that nothing can shake him from the Father’s hand.

When Paul talks about attaining the resurrection he’s trying to make the resurrection a deeper reality in his daily life. When Paul talks about attaining to the resurrection he’s trying to bring a little more Easter joy into his regular week. For Paul, attaining to the resurrection means a little more alleluia in his mornings, a little more alleluia in his workday, a little more alleluia in his night. Our resurrection in and through Jesus Christ is steady and secure; it can never be taken away. But the reality of the resurrection, the fullness of living every day as Easter people, that’s something we can grow, that’s something we can attain.

About twelve years ago while I was serving on Calvin's campus at Woodlawn CRC, the Jonker family moved. We used to live in Alger Heights. We moved to Indian Village, near Christian High. Alger Heights is two miles further west down Burton Street from Calvin's campus and during the 13 years in which I lived in our old house I got used to the four-mile drive from Calvin to 2068 College. In fact I was so used to my old way of life that after we moved, during my first few months of driving home from work, instead of turning into Indian village at Chesaning Drive and going to my new house, I would just keep going down Burton like I was headed towards my old place. Sometimes I went more than a mile before I realized my mistake. I probably did this 10 times. I had a new life and a new home, but I was so used to my old life I sometimes just drifted back into my old paths. I had a new reality but I didn't always live out of that reality. And so it is with Easter. Easter is a spectacular change of address! As Paul says in Colossians we have been raised! Our lives are now hidden with God in Christ. It's a done deal. But it takes us a lifetime to adjust to our new reality. It takes us a lifetime to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

So how do we do that? How do we get a little more alleluia into our day? How do we attain to the resurrection? Paul actually gives us some ideas in our passage. Actually he gives us both positive and negative ideas. Before he tells us how to attain to the resurrection, he tells us how not to do it. In verses 4-6 Paul talks about his old life; a time when he was not attaining to the resurrection. He calls it the time in his life when he was living out of his confidence in the flesh. What does his fleshy, non-resurrection life look like? Well, he was going to church every day. He was reading his Bible a lot. He attended many Bible studies with his Pharisee friends. He worked his head off for the church - in the office morning, noon and night. He followed every rule and pursued righteousness with everything he had. That was his fleshy life. That was the shape of his life when he was *not* attaining to the resurrection. If that sounds strange to you, if that sounds like it can't be right, I invite you to read verses 4-6 again. Paul has a word for that old life, he calls it a pile of garbage. And garbage is a cleaned up translation.

Why were those things taking Paul away from the resurrection life? Because he was pursuing them according to the flesh, or as he puts it in both verses 4 and 5, he was pursuing them with confidence in the flesh. Meaning Paul pursued these

things with his own awesomeness in mind. His chief concern was attaining to his own prestige. He was pressing on toward the goal of his own awesomeness. He had tremendous zeal, but his zeal was for being the most righteous guy in the room. All that righteousness was about everyone around him saying, “Wow! How about that Paul! He’s so smart and he’s so dedicated. He’s one of the best preachers and writers in Jerusalem. Dude’s going to be a star! Did you see how many twitter followers he has?” Up until his Damascus road conversion Paul had spent his whole life trying to climb the mountain of personal success and greatness, and now he realizes it was a whole lot of garbage.

So that was his old life, his non-resurrection life. What does the new life look like? Instead of a life climbing up the ladder of awesomeness and personal achievement, Paul realizes that the road to attaining the resurrection leads down. Paul realizes that the way up is down. Paul says you attain to the bright glory of the resurrection, by going down into the place of suffering. Verse 10: *“I want to know Christ! – yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow attaining to the resurrection from the dead.”* The road up to the resurrection life starts by going down into sacrifice. The road to glory begins by willingly going down into other people’s pain, other people’s sin, other people’s struggle and pouring yourself out for their needs. It begins by going down into your own pain and your own needs and your own sin and surrendering every corner of yourself to God. That’s how you attain to the resurrection. The way up is down.

It’s one of the fundamental paradoxes of the Christian life and if you don’t understand it, you haven’t fully grasped the gospel. It runs throughout Christian teaching. The way to find your life is to lose it. Those who humble themselves will be exalted. The last will be first. Blessed are you when people persecute you. The height of glory is a man hung on a cross. It’s everywhere in the gospel. The way up is down.

It’s a hard truth to accept. In life we walk past so many broad well-lit paths all of them promising that they are the road to glory. Each of these paths have a flashing marquis at their beginning. Happiness this way! Step right this up and find the road of success! Pleasure and prosperity right here! Just follow this path. We walk by

these flashing marquis and the people inviting us in are good looking, they all have broad smiles. The road they mark out is smooth and seems to rise steadily upward. But then we get to Paul's road, and there's no flashing light, no marquis, instead there's a cross. Paul is standing at the beginning of this road and he's talking about suffering, death and sacrifice. The road he points to is narrow and dark and there are people suffering along the road, and there's confusion and complication. Is it any wonder people avoid this road?

And yet...when you become one with Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit you find yourself on this hard road. Every day you pour yourself out, every day you break off a piece of yourself and give it to others. It's exhausting and you wonder how long you can keep at it. 'How long can I go giving myself away like this?' But as you go you find that something wonderful is also happening. The Spirit of God is at work in you. You give something away and in its place something new springs to life. You find that God is transforming you from one degree of glory to the next, changing you bit by bit from clay jar into a luminous new creation. Paul describes the process beautifully in another place. When we walk the way of our Lord, *"we are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may also be revealed in our mortal body."* Given over to death so that the life of Jesus might appear in our mortal body. That's attaining to the resurrection. The way up is down.

Early on in this sermon I wondered what the Prodigal Son might have done on the day after his big coming home party. We don't know of course. But here's what I hope he did. I hope he spent the day giving himself away. I hope he got up early in the morning, got down on his knees and gave thanks that he was in his Father's house and not in the pig sty. I hope he sought out his older brother during the day and apologized to him and did his best to make things right. And if his brother rebuffed him or cursed him, I hope he absorbed it with grace, and didn't give up on the relationship. I hope that, after all these years apart, he worked hard at getting to know his dad again. I hope the two of them went out into the father's field and got down on their hands and knees and worked in the dirt to make the

field fruitful. I hope the two of them worked that together every day, growing closer to each other little by little. I hope the son put his hand to the plow, and never looked back. I hope he attained to the resurrection.

© Rev. Peter Jonker