

Since You Have Been Raised with Christ

LaGrave Christian Reformed Church

April 4, 2021-Easter Service

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Colossians 3:1-4

Let's begin this morning with an Easter quiz. Imagine that! A pop quiz on Easter morning! Don't worry, there are only two questions in this quiz. Question 1. When, approximately, was Jesus' resurrection? Easy, right? Jesus was resurrected on Easter morning three days after his crucifixion, and that all happened somewhere in the 30's AD. Good job. You're doing great so far. Gold stars for everyone. Question 2. When is your resurrection? Jesus' resurrection was in 30-something AD, when is yours? I can't collect your answers on this, but I'm guessing that most of us would answer that question by saying, 'my resurrection will happen after I die. Someday I will die, and then, because I belong to Jesus, when the trumpet sounds, I will be raised to new life and I will live with Jesus in the new creation forever. Jesus' resurrection happened in the past. My resurrection will happen in the future.' Okay. Let's go to our Bible reading to check that answer.

So according to our passage, when is your resurrection? Is it something in the future? Paul tells us the answer in the first 8 words of our passage. He tells us in a remarkable little phrase that, if you're not careful, you will read right past. But we don't want to read past it this morning, because so much of our Easter hope is in that little phrase. Paul says "*Since then you have been raised with Christ...*" You *have been* raised. Not you will be raised; you *have been* raised with Christ. According to what Paul says in verse one, the answer to our quiz question is, your resurrection took place on that first Easter morning when Jesus walked out of the tomb. His resurrection was your resurrection. You were raised with him!

"*But wait!*" you may be saying, "how can I be resurrected?! I don't feel resurrected! I'm 54 years old and my body feels less resurrected every day. It's in decay mode. And besides, there are a lot of other places in the Bible which clearly – CLEARLY – talk about our resurrection as a future thing. The trumpets will sound and the dead will be raised. Future. I am in my earthly tent right now and I long to be clothed in my heavenly dwelling. Future. What is Paul talking about when he says it's already happened?"

Paul helps us understand what he means in verse 3 of our passage. "*You died,*" he says, "*your life is now hidden with God in Christ. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*" Here's a picture of what Paul means. When you are in Christ, when you belong to him, your old self dies and your new creation self comes to life. Your new creation self already exists and Christ keeps it in heaven for you. It's hidden in Christ. It's almost like when you are in Christ, there are two versions of you. Right now, I'm living with the earthly Peter Jonker, and he can be a pain. I mean there are parts of him that are okay, but there are parts of him that are still a mess. But somehow up in heaven, the resurrected me already exists and he is with Jesus.

What does that resurrected me look like? Does Jesus have a blueprint of the new me in a heavenly file drawer? Does he keep the idea of the new and perfect me in his mind? Is there actually another Peter Jonker in heaven right now? If I could somehow look into heaven would I see another Peter Jonker there, a perfected joyful much more patient Peter Jonker? Could we wave to each other? I don't know exactly how this works. I'm not here to offer you a precise metaphysical picture. But somehow in Christ, your new self has been completely resurrected,

and someday when Christ appears in glory, the messy me will merge with the resurrected me and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Here's another way to think of what Paul is saying. In that phrase, Paul is trying to wake us up to the true story of our life. Paul tells us you are raised with Christ and the resurrection is your story. Jesus is holding the perfected version of you in heaven and pulling you towards him. Nothing will stop him from making you new. And someday, when he appears you too will appear with him in glory. Paul wants us to have a lively sense that we are part of a resurrection story.

Paul knows most of us do not have a sense that we are already resurrected. Most of us live as though our future is undefined. The future is as yet undetermined. It could go well, or it could go badly, and whether it goes well or badly all depends on what I do. Most of us get up in the morning with the sense that the quality of my future is up to me. Instead living by the resurrection story, most of us have a Thomas the Tank Engine story. For those of you that don't know, Thomas the Tank Engine is a British television show about talking train engines. All the characters in the story are train locomotives or conductors or other people involved somehow with trains. Thomas is a young tank engine who lives on the Island of Sodor. His friends are the other engines like Percy and Gordon. In each episode, there are lessons to be learned and problems to be solved and, by the end of each episode Thomas and his friends learn the lessons and solve the problems. At the end of an episode, after Thomas has solved the problem of the day, the railway boss, Sir Topham Hat, often says to Thomas. "Well Done Thomas! You're a really useful engine!" It's like the show's benediction. "You're a really useful engine!" That's how worth is measured in the world of the show. The engines will often say to each other, "Don't you want to be a really useful engine?" And the greatest compliment any engine can ever hope for is to have Sir Topham Hat come to tell them that they are a really useful engine.

Now, I'm not here to rip on Thomas the Tank Engine or to tell your kids not to watch it. In general, it's a good and wholesome show. I am here to tell you that the Thomas the Tank Engine standard is very much the default story of modern western life. In the west, we measure worth much like they do on the show. Thomas the Tank Engine is training kids to live in a western meritocracy. Sir Topham Hat's compliment suggest a story: life is a series of problems and challenges and, if you want to make it, you've got to be a useful engine. The future is undefined and full of problems. If you want your future to go well, you've got to prove yourself useful!! The more useful you are, the further you'll go. If you're a really useful engine, well done you! You will achieve success and happiness. But if you're not useful, well...it's the scrapyards for you my friend. So hop to it children! Everybody chug, chug, chug!

There are all sorts of places where this story is pressed on us. Nowadays no matter what job you do, some data master is measuring your performance, examining the metrics to see whether or not you are useful. And you better hit those benchmarks, those sales goals, those targets, or it's the scrapyards for you my little engine. Of course, there's nothing wrong with being useful. It beats being lazy and self-centered. The Bible is pretty clear about that. But when usefulness becomes the story of your life there are problems. First of all, you are anxious all the time. You walk out the door with your teeth clenched saying "Okay here we go again! I'm going to show the world what a useful engine I am!" And second, what about those who aren't so obviously useful, those who fall on the wrong side of the metrics. The old. The disabled. What does a society where use is the standard of worth do with those people?

On Easter morning Paul proclaims a different story for our life. Christ is risen! You have been raised with Christ! Jesus is making you new! It's not about your chug, chug, chug! Right

now, your new creation self is already in heaven, and Jesus is pulling you towards your glorious end. Your life is a resurrection story!

These two stories are competing for our attention every day. Last week Sunday night, I was the liturgist for the evening service. I was sitting over there where Bob is sitting and the Reverend John Mondy was preaching here. It was his first time in our pulpit. He did a great job. As I watched him preach I could see him do what all preachers do: he was trying to do well. Whenever you are at a place for the first time, you are a little more anxious because you want to prove yourself. You want to show that you're a really useful engine. As I watched John, I noticed something I hadn't noticed before. When you're sitting over there, whoever is preaching on the pulpit does so under this window. This is the resurrection window. You've heard me talk about it before. Jesus coming out of the grave on that first Easter. He's full of life and strength. His right hand is raised. He's saying don't be afraid! I've got it taken care of! The resurrection is your story.

In that moment, I saw the tension between the stories, the way they compete in our hearts. John preaching, a little anxious, trying to prove himself useful. And then the risen Christ standing over him saying, "Don't be afraid! I've taken care of everything!" I saw John there and I thought, "That's me every week." Every Sunday I'm up here chug, chug, chugging. I'm preaching to you, and I'm a little anxious and I'm thinking about doing a good job and proving myself useful. Meanwhile Jesus is standing right there, waving his arms saying, "Peter! Peter! Don't be afraid. I've taken care of everything. You have been raised with Christ. All these people belong to me and they have been raised with Christ. I've taken care of everything! You are all part of an Easter story."

That's not just how it goes for me, this is all of us. You may not have a window of the risen Jesus looming over you in the place where you work and worry, in the place where you chug, chug, chug, but I promise you that he is there too, waving his arms, trying to remind you of the same thing. This is a resurrection story. He's there at the graveside of your sister – this is a resurrection story. When the doctor says it's no use, there's nothing more we can do, he's there. This is a resurrection story! When parenting is hard and you're overwhelmed, feeling like you're doing it all wrong, he's there. "This is a resurrection story!" When you see that the social and political problems in your country are terrible but you don't know what to do, he's there. "This is a resurrection story!" What would the world be like if we actually had a living sense that the resurrection was our story? How would our life change if we had a deep consciousness that we have been raised with Christ? We would worry less. We would be more patient with each other. We'd take ourselves less seriously. We'd be less worried about failure. But we'd also be bolder. We'd love better and more deeply – we'd be more ready to take the risks of love. We'd be more willing to make sacrifices.

Maybe it would look like Heidi Neumark's church. Heidi Neumark was a pastor at a Lutheran Church in the South Bronx, in one of the poorest sections of New York City. There she pastored a church full of all sorts of people - homeless folks and drug addicts sat in the same pews as professionals. Ms. Neumark was liturgically adventurous, and so one Easter, as part of the morning service she decided to conclude the service by having some people stand up in the pew and tell the whole congregation how Easter changed their life. She chose three members who had good stories, she trained them how to give their testimony and told them when to stand up. They were meant to be modern day witnesses to the truth of the resurrection.

Easter morning came and she preached her sermon, and as soon as she said 'Amen,' the first person stood up. Her name was Angie and she said, "I know that he is alive because I was a

drug addict and because of my drug use I was HIV positive. Everything was falling apart and I was despairing.” But then Angie told how she found her way into a Bible study at church and how the care of the church opened her up to Jesus. Bit by bit Jesus raised her from the grave of her life! I know that he’s alive, because he’s alive in me. She testified that her life was a resurrection story. Then the second person stood up and told her story. ‘I know that he’s alive. My life is a resurrection story.’ The third person stood up and told his story. ‘I know he’s alive. My life is a resurrection story.’

After the third testimony the service was supposed to end. They were supposed to sing the closing hymn and go home. But something happened. To the complete surprise of the people who had planned the service, a fourth person stood up and told his story, then a fifth, then a sixth. The good news overflowed the banks of the liturgy. Easter kind of took over. People were so excited to tell everyone that they were part of a resurrection story. Human plans faded into the background and the resurrection shone forth.

People of God as you leave this place, don’t be afraid. Christ is alive and you have been raised with him. You are part of a resurrection story.

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