

"NEW LIFE IN CHRIST"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

We are still resting in the "after-glow" of Easter. The "so-called" idle tale of the women in the garden has now been confirmed to be an "eternal truth". Yes...Christ is alive. The funeral has become a festival and those defeated and discouraged disciples of Good Friday are now on their way to becoming unstoppable Apostles-proclaiming the Good News of a Risen Christ.

And the quality of their lives after Easter reminds me of the legendary British pilot, Sir Douglas Bader, who died not too long ago. Sir Douglas lost his legs in a flying accident in 1931. After being fitted with artificial legs, he joined the RAF in 1939 and became an ace pilot. He had 22 enemy planes to his credit in the Battle of Britain back in 1940. In August of '41, he crashed and survived and was captured by the Germans but lost one of his artificial legs in that crash. The Germans so respected Sir Douglas that they asked the RAF to "airdrop" a new pair of legs for him, but that was a mistake. After his fourth escape attempt the Germans decided to lock up his new legs each night where he couldn't get to them. Quite a story.

Before the resurrection of Jesus, His disciples tended to be fearful, petty and rather contentious men, but after their experience with Him on the Emmaus Road and by the Sea of Galilee, they became men who were undaunted in their devotion to Him...in spite of beatings and imprisonment and even martyrdom.

SOMETHING HAPPENED

Something happened in their lives...something real and powerful....something dramatic and lasting that turned them around and changed them. Talk about new legs! - which took them far!

For you see, the real "dividing line" in human existence is not between physical life and physical death. The real dividing line in human existence is within the human heart. That's where the action is...between the heart that is cold and uncaring and the heart that is open, warm, loving, forgiving. It is between the heart that is defeated and filled with doubt and despair and the heart that is hopeful and filled with excitement and expectation. Jesus said:

"I am come that they might have life and have it more abundantly". It's clear that He was not referring simply to life beyond the grave. He was referring to a quality of life 'within'.

Plutarch, in his writings, tells of a man who attempted to make a body...a dead body...stand upright. He tried various schemes of balancing and experimented with different postures, but finally gave up, saying, "There is something missing on the inside!"

Which reminds me that there are a lot of people walking around today with something "missing on the inside". Some of them are in the Church. I heard a man recently who described his deceased neighbor. "I didn't know he was a member of the church...never saw him there...I guess most of his religion was in his wife's name" said the man of his neighbor. I've known people like that.

Raise a hand if you've ever heard of the name of Thomas Spooner. He was a 19th century professor in England who became known for interchanging words with the same sounds. The mistakes were funny and soon became known as "spoonerisms". For example, on one occasion Dr. Spooner meant to refer to the cheerful tidings of the Gospel, but instead he spoke of the "tearful chidings" of the Gospel. Believe me, there's a difference - a world of difference - between "cheerful tidings" and "tearful chidings" and it is to that world of difference between "cheerful tidings" and "tearful chidings" to which I would like to draw your attention for a few moments this morning.

The Gospel message is Good News. It is a celebration of what God has done for us in Christ...it is not solemn, but rather sensational. It is not a burden, but rather it is a bonanza. New life can be yours, and it can be mine. That is the claim of the Gospel. Christian faith is springtime. It is little children. It's the empty tomb. Joy. Hope. Acceptance. Love. Just reflect on the nature of this "new life" in Christ and see if you do not find cause for celebration. Reflect upon what your life would be like without it. Three ideas.

NEW LIFE IS FREE

First, always remember this that this new life is free. None of us earned it or deserved it. It's free which reminds me of that old story about the man who went up to heaven and was met at the pearly gates by St. Peter who said to him,

"Friend...it's going to take 1,000 points for you to be admitted....the good works you did during your lifetime will determine your points, so start counting."

The man stood there and thought...."Well, Peter...unless I was sick, I attended Church every Sunday and I found time to even sing in the church choir". "Ah, that's very good...a good start" said Peter. "That's worth 50 points!" "And what else?" "I gave 10% of my hard-earned income to charity....5% even went to the church" added the man. "Good" said Peter...."That's worth another 50 points. You're up to 100".

The man, realizing that he had only 100 points began to get a bit nervous and so he added. "There was that year back in 1995 when I taught Sunday School to a class of third graders"...."And that's great work for God". "Yes" said Peter, "I agree....we'll add another 50 points". "And Peter, I just remembered...back in the 1980's...I worked on some rummage sales". "OK" said Peter..."that gets you up to 200 points".

The man was frantic. He said, "You know Peter...at this rate the only way I'm ever going to get into heaven is by the grace of God". And with that Peter smiled...beamed and said, "Yes, my friend...you're right...that's worth 900 points. Come on in...you've made it!"

I like that. We need to be reminded from time to time that we are not working our way into heaven. We don't buy His love. We simply accept it. There's nothing you or I could ever do that would cause us to earn that kind of love. It's there and all we have to do is reach out for it. God has and will continue to provide. And if that doesn't want to make you dance a bit, nothing else will. That's the first characteristic of this new life in Christ. Friend. It's free. Cherish that thought and remember that centuries ago some battles and holy wars have been fought over this.

AND IT IS IMMEDIATE

There's a second characteristic about this new life in Christ and that it is immediate - it's in the "Now". Some think of the Christian faith as a sort of "pie-in-the-sky" type of faith. "Be good" according to the cynic's caricature "and you'll be rewarded when you die". People who have that kind of attitude toward the Faith have never had an Emmaus Road kind of experience or encounter with the Risen Lord out there on the road of life. Christian faith is an experience of new life in "the here and now".

A friend speaks of a church member of his down in Florida named Charlie who has this "here and now" attitude toward his life. According to this colleague, if you ask Charlie on a Monday if he's having a good day, he'll smile and reply, "You know...today is the BEST day of my life!" Ask him the same question on Tuesday or Wednesday and it's the same answer....it's still the best day of life. The answer is the same on whatever day it may be.

Charlie explains his happiness like this,

"Yesterday is gone forever. Tomorrow is not yet mine. Today is the only day I ever have.....so that makes it the BEST day of my life!"

I like that man's attitude. And I think you and I need to develop something of the same sort of perspective on life. Yesterday is gone - forever! None of us is promised tomorrow. Today is the only day we have. And the good that we would do, that good must be done today! That kind word we have been thinking of sharing - it must be done today! Tomorrow may be too late. If you're waiting 'til sometime in the future to laugh and to love and to live, you're making a big mistake. Get on with it today. Remember that Biblical word,

"This is the day that the Lord hath made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Or, if you're a financial type and some of you are, then remember this word that one of our choir members once shared with me:

"Yesterday is a cancelled check. Tomorrow is a promissory note. Today, my friend, is CASH."

And yes, "look back if you will....but don't stare". In a few days our Jewish friends will be celebrating Passover. Remember that when they were wandering in the wilderness following the Exodus, God sent them "life-giving" manna from heaven. But He only sent them a "one-day" supply. They had to gather it fresh each morning. Remember, too, that when Jesus spoke to His followers in the Sermon on the Mount, He instructed them not to worry about tomorrow, but to look to today. He pointed to the birds overhead and the wild flowers blooming in the fields. New life in Christ is NOW. It is the recognition that the God who created us is with us - NOW. Our lives are filled with joy and anticipation as we ponder the significance of being His children - NOW. New life is a free gift and it is immediate.

And one more thing to take along with us as we venture forth...

IT IS FORWARD LOOKING

This "new life in Christ" is forward looking. In Winnie-The-Pooh, Pooh and Piglet are out for an evening stroll and not much is being said. They walk in companionable silence.

Finally, Piglet breaks the silence and asks, "When you wake up in the morning, Pooh, what's the first thing you say to yourself?" Pooh answers, "Hmmm....I wonder...what's for breakfast?" "And what do you say, Piglet?" And Piglet answers,

"I say.....'I wonder what exciting thing is going to happen today....'"

The early Church could identify with that kind of anticipation, for you see, the New Testament is a record of "forward looking and hopeful" expectation. The people of Israel were looking for and waiting for the coming of the Messiah. The events of the life of our Lord were in anticipation of His death and His resurrection. As He left His disciples to go to the "Father", He promised that one day He would return and they waited in great anticipation.

And remember, too, that when St. Paul listed three things that are eternal, that are "forever", he listed hope. "Faith. Hope. Love" - these three, said Paul. And Christian faith is built on hope. Joy. Anticipation. Expectancy.

Whenever I walk by Fifth Avenue and 88th Street, I think of Frank Lloyd Wright, the architect of the Guggenheim. He was once asked what he considered to be his finest work. Remember his answer at the age of 90. "My next one" is what he said. "My NEXT one!" Better to travel hopefully than to arrive. Right?

This "new life in Christ" is forward looking. It's a free gift to anyone who will receive it. It is immediate - not a ticket to be used at a later time....but a ticket to get on board right now. And then it is to see a world that is filled with promise and possibility - a world in which a Creator God works all things to the good of those who love Him. The invitation is given to you to join the party and to begin celebrating this new life in Christ.

In his Tale of Two Cities, Charles Dickens has a character named Dr. Manette. The doctor has been in prison for close to 20 years prior to the French Revolution which freed him. While in prison he learned the trade of the cobbler and for years spent his days in a gloomy cell tapping shoes. But then finally there came that day when he was offered liberty and let out into the sunlight, but the curious thing is that the freedom terrified him. He had been living too long in the shadows of a cell and strangely had grown in his soul to love that gloomy cell and to feel secure in it.

Accordingly, a servant was given the duty of locking him in an attic room at night....a room about the size of his old cell....and there through the latticework of that room he could be seen in a twilight gloom...tapping out shoes. How utterly sad.

Perhaps there is some one present here this hour who has not yet really experienced the freedom of this new life in Christ. Perhaps you are fearful of giving in to such joy so that you still lock yourself up in a cell each night where you sit in the gloom....and tap out shoes.

Try to remember that the Christian Faith was never intended to be a faith of gloom, but of gladness. Come on out into the sunlight. Let the love of Christ flood your heart and soul this hour, this day and send you out of here with a song in your life. Yes, come and join the resurrection party. Come, celebrate this new life. Remember: it's free and it's now and it will take you nicely into the future of all of your tomorrows!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and Your nearness, O God, here in these moments, this Sunday...resting as we do in the afterglow of Easter. We remember how those on the Emmaus Road encountered the living Christ as they walked life's road. So may it be with each of us.

May there be that one person present this day who now accepts this new life given us in Christ. Then let it be radiated from each of us and through us to others. Give us the power and the grace to go out into our world and to live as though Christ were alive in us. In His name we pray. Amen.