

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

Because He Lives

Romans 6:1-10

March 23, 2008

There's a story told of two garment workers in Birmingham. One was a cutter and the other was a stitcher, and they worked side by side. In the midst of their boredom, they started talking about vacations. The cutter said he was looking forward to his vacation, but the stitcher said he wasn't going on a vacation this year.

"Why not?" asked the cutter. "Because," said the stitcher, "last year I went over to Africa and went elephant hunting." "Did you get any elephants?" asked the cutter. "Naw," said the stitcher, "I found an elephant. He charged me, but my gun was jammed, and I got killed." A little stunned, the cutter looked at his friend and said, "What are you talking about getting killed? You ain't dead! You're sitting right over there living!" The stitcher looked down at his needle and fabric, then looked at the scissors in his friend's hand and replied, "You call this living?"

Many of us take one look at our lives and ask: Do you call this living? If so, then we need a fresh Easter! For in Easter is resurrection! In Easter is life! Because Jesus conquered the average, mundane life, we can conquer the average, mundane life! We can have life more abundant! And because Jesus conquered the death and the grave, we can conquer death and the grave! With the apostle Paul we too can sing out: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?"

As a boy, Leith Anderson grew up outside of New York and was an avid fan of the old Brooklyn Dodgers. The first major league game his father took him to was a World Series game between the Dodgers and the Yankees. But his excitement turned to disappointment when the Dodgers never got on base the entire game.

Years later he was engrossed in a conversation with a guy who's one of those walking sports almanacs. Leith brought up that game explaining, "It was such a disappointment. I was a huge Dodger fan and they never even got on base." The man's eyes bugged out as he asked, "You were there? You were at the game when Don Larsen pitched the first and only perfect game in World Series history?" "Yeah," Leith replied, "but we lost." Leith was so caught up in his team's defeat that he missed out on the fact that he was a witness to a far greater page of baseball history.

So let me ask you: What phenomenal thing is going on around you? Did you miss it? Let's put it this way: Is God pitching a perfect game in the world series of life, and you're missing out because you're so wrapped up in your own little team? The resurrection of Jesus Christ is happening every day in our lives and all around us! New life is springing up everywhere! Did you notice? Along with new life, we've been offered the opportunity to take our faith to a higher, greater level! Are you ready? Are you ready to go beyond just playing like you're a Christian? Are you ready to give God complete control so that He can grant you abundant life?

When Jesus was raised from the dead, it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When He died, He took sin down with Him, but alive He brings God down to us! The proof that we've been through the crucifixion with Him is that we're constantly becoming more like Him. As we die to our old self, our lives are being resurrected to be more and more like Christ.

It's fantastic the way that the resurrection life of Jesus invades every fiber of our being. When we decide that our old nature — the heredity of sin — should be identified with the His crucifixion, then His Holy Spirit invades us! He takes charge of everything; our part is to walk in the light of His truth and to obey all that He reveals to us. But keep in mind that the Holy Spirit cannot be a mere guest in our house; for when He comes in, He takes over!

And don't think that you can be good or holy on your own. "Self-righteous" is a ridiculous term simply because there really is no such thing; you can't be righteous on your own; you need God! You need God to change you, to transform you, to resurrect you, to make all things new! God puts the holiness of His Son into us, and when He does, He gives us a new nature so that we share in His resurrected life. We can now look upon our old self as dead, for we are now newly alive unto God! We can see ourselves as unresponsive to the old power that bound us to sin and alive to the new power that binds us to God's grace!

The apostle Paul couldn't help but connect the crucifixion and the resurrection. This is the way he put it: "Our old way of life was nailed to the cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life — no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this: If we get included in Christ's sin-

conquering death, we also get included in His life-saving resurrection." Have you made this decision about sin – that it must be killed outright in you? It can take a long time to come to such a decision. But it will be the great moment in your life when you decide that just as Christ died for the sin of the world, so sin must die out in you – not be curbed, not be suppressed, not be counteracted, but actually crucified!

I urge you to get some time alone with God this Easter to make the decision to say, "Lord, identify me with Your death until I know that sin is dead in me." Make the decision that the sin in you must be put to death, for this is the beginning of your new life. But for new life to spring forth, old life has to be laid to rest.

Your old life is a life based on sinful attitudes and sinful actions; your new life is the abundant life lived in His grace. It is sin that Jesus had to do something about, or you and I couldn't be offered new life. And what has God done about sin? Through Jesus shedding His blood for our sins, He has made a way for us to be forgiven. And along with forgiveness He has made a way for the power that sin has over us to be broken. Our sin-loving nature is supposed to be dead; so bury it!

There's an old, historic village in Salem, North Carolina. This morning, like every Easter morning, in the early hours of the day, thousands of people – many of them tourists who came especially for this event – made their way towards the courtyard in front of a centuries-old church founded by the Moravians. Before daylight, brass bands echoed hymns from different parts of the city as everyone converged on Salem Square to listen to the almost mystical sounding music. As the first hint of the rising sun began to soften the darkness, a hush fell over the vast throng of worshipers. And when the church bell tolled six, the bishop emerged from the church and announced in a loud, unwavering voice, "Christ is risen!" And the crowd thundered back, "Christ is risen indeed!" Then with the bands accompanying them, everyone joined in singing "Christ the Lord Is Risen Today."

After that, in total silence, they walked in faithful procession to "God's Acre," an ancient cemetery where all the graves with their newly polished tombstones are covered with flowers. Even the oldest graves, some of them dating back to the 1700s, were decorated with forsythia, jonquils, tulips, azaleas – whatever happened to be in bloom this early in the spring. And the service concluded there, with more singing and remembrance of those who have died since last Easter. There, in the awesome silence with the beauty of the flowers all around, it was as if the living were united with the dead in worship of the risen Lord.

A writer who witnessed the event some years ago said, "When you're in the midst of all this majesty and beauty, you cannot fail to believe in the resurrection." And so it is in thousands of churches on this greatest of days:

Easter! The day of resurrection! The day of eternal life! The day of joy and hope! The central day of the Christian's faith and witness! Yes, we have been crucified with Him! Yes, we are resurrected with Him! And yes, we will share eternal life with Him! For He has made us this promise: "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."

Throughout history, kings and dictators and presidents and politicians have promised the world peace and prosperity. Philosophies and religions have promised happiness and contentment. And today, everyone from authors to advertisers to self-help gurus to talk show hosts offer their own solution to humanity's problems. Without exception, all of their promises have failed to satisfy the deepest longings and needs of the human heart.

But long ago God made an offer to the whole world. It was an offer of mercy we did not deserve and grace beyond our comprehension. It was extended from a rough and rugged cross when God's only Son cried out, "Father, forgive them." Centuries have come and gone and kingdoms have risen and fallen, but even though it's been almost two millenia since Jesus opened His arms and held out His love as our only hope, the offer still stands.

Long before any of us took our first breath, God knew what He would have to do to make the offer that would give eternal life. He knew every step and every second of the sacrifice it would require. He knew the pain He would feel each time His offer was rejected, and He knew the joy that would come every time someone accepted His incredible gift. From the beginning, His heart waited for the moment when each soul He had created would have the opportunity to choose to love and trust Him. His offer of love still stands. His offer of mercy still stands. His offer of grace still stands. His offer of abundant life now and everlasting life beyond the grave still stands. And that offer is extended to you. That's what makes it Easter.

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