

“Life, Death, and Resurrection”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, April 7, 2013**

Old Testament Lesson – Psalm 16 New Testament Lesson – Acts 2:22-32

John Wilkinson in “Too Deep for Words”¹ recalls a scene from the movie *Four Weddings and a Funeral* in which the character Matthew (can think of no) words to say at the funeral of his friend Gareth.

So he reads a poem by W. H. Auden, titled “Funeral Blues,” as tears stream down faces and a fallen friend is rightly remembered. “That would seem to be what this day is about,” says Wilkinson.

“When there are no more words, we offer poetry: the poetry of our lives bound to one another; the poetry of the church when it is at its worshipping and serving best; the poetry of all creation as it groans to be born into something better, more loving, more joyful, filled with hope and peace and grace, filled with dreams and visions.”

In our New Testament lesson today, Peter uses poetry to put into words the meaning of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, the poetry of David in Psalm 116, which we heard Emily read for us this morning: “I saw the Lord always before me, for he is at my right hand, so that I will not be shaken; therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced; moreover, my flesh will live in hope.”

Today, we look at what it is to have Christ at our right hand and our lives full of hope. For Peter, knowledge of Psalm 16 and other Old Testament scripture is part of his tradition as a faithful Jew. And through Christ, Peter finds new meaning, value and promise in the scriptures, and he desperately wants to share this with others.

Where once they were the chosen people of Israel set on preserving their identity and upholding religious law, now they are the sent followers of Christ dedicated to expanding the Kingdom of God and upholding and enacting the love of Jesus.

Before Christ, the disciples and all faithful Israelites were an oppressed people, fearing the power Rome had to put down any uprising. After Christ’s resurrection, the disciples were still an oppressed people, but they no longer feared any earthly power.

¹ June 8, 2003, *Covenant Network Web Site*, covenantnetwork.org.

Because now they lived their lives in the power of the risen Lord – a power that not even death could overcome. So Peter is bold to say to those gathered, “You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs..., (this man) you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.” Right here, we see a new tradition being established around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

When Peter talks about Jesus’ “deeds of power, wonders, and signs” he’s pointing to his earthly life; what Jesus did and said gave meaning to his life. That the people handed Jesus over to be crucified speaks to his death on the cross – Jesus’ death had value; it was worth something; not a loss at all.

And that God “raised him up, having freed him from death,” of course, this points to the resurrection, the promise of new life, as everything old dies away and in Christ, there is a new creation. This is the emerging tradition in Peter’s time through which today we have Christ at *our* right hand and *our lives* through which are full of hope.

And yet, does this Christ and this new hope come through in the traditions we celebrate in life? What things do we celebrate? Is this the tradition around which we organize our lives? What do we use to mark the passing of time and to understand our place in the world?

Birthdays are a great tradition. But did you know that according to the *World Book*, people once believed that “on a birthday a person could be helped by good spirits, or hurt by evil spirits. So when a person had a birthday, friends and relatives gathered to protect him or her. And that’s how birthday parties began” – to protect us. And yet, shouldn’t it be Christ that provides our ultimate protection? Do we recognize and celebrate that on our birthdays?

Or look at the tradition of the bride’s white wedding dress? Today we think of it as a sign of purity, but it began more as a rebellious act. It used to be that brides wore more colorful dresses and wouldn’t think of wearing all white.

Then in 1840, Queen Victoria had the audacity to wear a white gown for her marriage to Prince Albert, and this was extremely controversial because in that day, white was associated with grieving the death of a loved one.²

² <http://www.howstuffworks.com/culture-traditions/cultural-traditions/10-strange-wedding-traditions.htm#page=10>.

What we wear says a lot about what we're up to in life. And yet, do we really clothe ourselves in the purity and faithfulness of Christ when we walk out the door?

And finally, think of the tradition of passing down financial inheritance. Throughout history, family inheritance has been divided based on cultural traditions designed to maintain and exert power. For some cultures, it's only male children that inherit, patri-lineally, while in other cultures, property is passed down along the female line, or matri-lineally.

And birth order also plays a role, and it's not always the eldest child who inherits the most, which as the youngest of three, I was quite interested to learn. Yes, in some cultures, it's actually the youngest child who gets it all – and that's called ultimo-geni-ture, in case you babies of the family want to do a little research to revive the tradition³. Let me know if you have any success.

⁴In each of these cases – birthday parties, wedding dresses, and family inheritance – the tradition has something to do with power – the power of good or evil spirits on one's birthday, the power of a Queen to change fashions across the globe, and the power of money to preserve and extend the family name.

Tradition is all about what we give power to in life, what we remember and celebrate through the generations, what we put our time and energy into.

The tradition that Jesus' followers uphold is the tradition of his life, death, and resurrection. This is what gives us **protection** against evil and keeps us living in the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this is what allows us to turn our grief into **hope** following the death of a loved one, this is what allows us to pass along true wealth from one generation to another – that being our faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, and the traditions we maintain because of it.

When we say that the life, death, and resurrection of Christ protects us from evil spirits, it's because in Christ, we can always repent from our misguided ways and instead live into the promises of God's power to create all things new again.

When we say that in our baptism we have clothed ourselves in Christ, we're saying that as followers of Jesus we look at ourselves in a whole new way, that we have thrown off the ways of this world in order to wear our faith on our sleeves for all to see and experience.

³ <http://www.answers.com/topic/inheritance#History>.

⁴ <http://www.answers.com/topic/inheritance#History>.

And when we follow Jesus' last earthly instruction by celebrating the Lord's Supper in remembrance of him, we are receiving and passing along an inheritance capable of sustain both body **and** soul – something mere money can never do.

But in order for us to receive this divine protection, this hopeful outlook, and this eternal assurance of Christ's everlasting presence, we have to pass along the tradition. Unless our faith is passed along from one person to another, the tradition dies with us.

This is why we go forth from this place of worship as brother's and sisters in Christ – protecting and celebrating each other's lives, and not only on birthdays.

This is why we seek to fashion our lives in observance of all that Jesus taught us – so that others will know us by our love for one another.

This is way we collect items for the Community Services League, fill backpacks with food for needy children, work at Harvesters, offer classes on good nutrition, and in countless other ways give in response to the physical *and* spiritual needs of others – we do this in order to testify to the world that the cross of Jesus is in fact empty – he is risen, he is risen indeed!

What Peter said some 2,000 years ago to his fellow Israelites, we say to one another – that “this (is the) Jesus whom God raise up, and of that, all of us are witnesses,” witnesses in how we live our lives.

As you go forth from this place today, how will you embody our celebration of the Lord's Supper, how will you take it on as a reflection – a remembrance – of Christ's life, death, and resurrection?

How will what you say and do this day and in the days to come reflect confidence in the care and protection we have as children of God, brothers & sisters in Christ?

What new ways of being – new ways of acting and responding and interacting – can you take on that will bring hope to others, the promise of new and surprising outcomes to life's old and insurmountable struggles?

What special traditions can you help to preserve or create in your families or among your friends? Think of how we celebrate birthdays, weddings and even how we relate to death – is Christ the focus at these times? How about around the dinner table, is Christ invited? Or at bedtime, in the morning, or at the end of the workweek or school day – what might we do to bring Christ more into focus in those and other parts of our lives?

Think about it. These are questions for you to answer – for me to answer. What does it mean to your life – my life – that the cross of Jesus is empty? Where is Jesus – in your life?

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we marvel at the mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. We are awed by his obedience, astonished by the depth of his love for us, and amazed by the display of your power over sin and death.

You are a God of wonders. You restore that which has been lost; bring new life from that which is old; offer healing and hope where there appears to be only sickness and death.

Your miraculous power continues to work in our lives and in our world. Open our eyes that we may recognize your presence in every person, in every situation, and in every place.

For we have come to realize through the seasons of Lent and Easter how much we need Jesus in our lives.

Give us strength in our weakness, and faith in the midst of our doubt. Make us a people who see each circumstance of our lives as a part of the story you are writing.

We pray all this in the name of the one you sent to set us free, Jesus Christ, who taught us to raise our voices in prayer, as together we say:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.