

***How to Get an A***  
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***Easter Morningsong Service***  
***April 21, 2019***

Ephesians 2:1-10

*Our Scripture passage today is from the Pauline letter to the Ephesians. The main theme is what can be accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It explains the life of members of the community before they had Christ in their lives, and then contrasts it with the life they experience after they have Christ in their lives. This section is appropriately titled “From Death to Life”—a theme which ties in perfectly to the Easter message we celebrate today.*

*Hear now the word of God:*

You were dead through the trespasses and sins <sup>2</sup>in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. <sup>3</sup>All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.

<sup>4</sup>But moreover, God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us <sup>5</sup>even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— <sup>6</sup>and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, <sup>7</sup>so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup>For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— <sup>9</sup>not the result of works, so that no one may boast. <sup>10</sup>For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Prayer for Illumination

Lord God, illumine our hearts and minds that we might hear your powerful word for our lives this very day. In your holy and gracious name we pray, Amen.

## Sermon

Ever since I was very young, I wanted to get A's in class. My first B was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and I cried and cried. My parents told me that it was no big deal. But it was to me. I doubled down on my efforts and did not make another B until my Junior year in high school. And though I didn't cry over that one, I know I was disappointed, because I knew I could have done better. I was quite a nerd at heart.

Fast forward a decade, and a couple of B's later, to when I was a 29-year old first-year seminary student. Having lived and worked in the real world at that point, I no longer worried so much about getting all A's, but I did feel a little overwhelmed in this new realm of learning. You see, my original degrees were in science and engineering, where there was almost always a clear-cut answer.

Plus I had spent the last 5 years in business consulting, where we were explicitly instructed to write no more than one-page summary reports, because that is all executives would read. And so, I had gotten really good at writing efficiently.

But then I found myself in a strange new world called seminary, where professors wanted us to write 15-20 page papers thoroughly explaining our theological reasoning. Needless to say, I had a huge learning curve that first year.

In one such class, we were asked to write a 20-page paper on the meaning of the Gospel. I had spent hours upon hours laboring over this paper, trying to meticulously and eloquently expound theologically what the Gospel, or "good news" as it's translated, means for our faith.

On the day the paper was due, the professor gathered all of them up at the beginning of class. As he held the stack of papers in his hand, he said, "I look forward to reading these. I will go ahead and tell you that if you did not mention the resurrection, you will not get an A, because there *is no* Gospel without the resurrection of Jesus Christ."

It was several weeks before he handed back the papers, and I spent much of that time truly thinking about what he said. And wondering to myself, "Did I explicitly mention the resurrection? I know I talked all about the joy Christ brings our lives,

but did I mention his resurrection?” Well it turns out I did just fine on the paper, but because of my professor’s comment, I’ve never again talked about, or more importantly lived out, the Gospel without thinking specifically about the vital significance of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

It made me reflect upon how many people and places spend the majority of their time focusing exclusively on the death of Jesus. And it’s true that his death *was* the ultimate sacrifice. But if the resurrection isn’t mentioned, then does death have the final say? As my professor told us, it is the *resurrection* of Christ that trumped everything. It trumped the crucifixion, the brutal Roman government, our sins, and of course death itself. There is no Gospel without the resurrection.

And the promise of resurrection is not only that Christ rose from the dead, but that he brings us new and re-newed lives as well. And today, on this glorious Easter Sunday, we get to celebrate the grace and joy of the resurrection. Because Christ is Risen! ***Christ is Risen Indeed!***

Our scripture passage today starts with death. It talks about being dead through sins. And how following the course and powers and desires of the secular world is deadening, self-centered and disgraceful. And what’s amazing is that this was written almost 2,000 years ago to people in the Roman capitol of Asia Minor. And yet, here we are today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the United States plagued by many of the same things. We too chase our self-centered secular desires to the detriment of our relationship with God and others.

How long does it take us to realize the stifling hold that the values of the secular world has on us? How long until we yearn to be freed from the pressures society places on us to earn enough, buy enough, have enough, own enough, vacation enough, look like enough, to essentially be enough? How long until we say enough is enough?

Paul calls people living like this children of wrath, which is a really scary statement. Curious to learn more about this phrase, I dug into the original Greek, and it essentially means living with furious passion. It sounds like living in an

addictive cycle. Many of these secular things we indulge in may feel good short term, but they are only temporal. None of them bring authentic, long-lasting joy.

In today's world, we are bombarded with messages that tell us to take the easy way out and that we *deserve* the instant gratification of things like the extra-large cupcake, the latest exorbitantly priced gadget, or the all-inclusive vacation halfway around the world. Go ahead, they say, just charge everything to your credit card and worry about it later. But instant gratification is just that, INSTANT—you can have it instantly, but the satisfaction disappears just as quickly as it comes.

And I can call us out on all of these things because I struggle with them too. Every single day. Our consumeristic society is structured to constantly bombard and tempt us with these indulgent messages and images. And most of the time, we buy into them. And often they leave us feeling shallow and empty. But right about that time another “opportunity” to feel good comes along, and we fall back into the same cycle. It's hard and it's tiring, and it's often overwhelming.

But there's this one fabulous word in our passage for today that turns everything around. It's a conjunction. An adversative primary particle to be exact. And after Paul finishes the depressing obituary of our life full of deadening actions as children of wrath, he uses this revolutionary word that begins our Easter message for today and our lives. And this Greek word is translated into the English phrase “but moreover.”

But moreover, God who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

But moreover, by grace you have been saved.

But moreover, God raised us up and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.

But moreover, in the ages to come, God might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

But moreover, by grace you have been saved through faith.

But moreover, this grace and salvation is the gift of God.

But moreover, we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

These two words of conjunction switched the whole direction of this passage and portrays the fruits of the resurrection. Did you hear all the amazing things that came after these words? That's the grace of the resurrection that we are gifted to live out every day.

It's a reminder that no matter what the secular world throws at us, we can cling to the hope and promises of our redeeming Lord. Because though we were dead through our sins, God made us alive together with Christ. Morning by morning new mercies we see. Great is God's faithfulness, indeed.

And did you hear that by the gift of the grace of God we were created for good works as our way of life? I love this thought. Good works is not what we do to earn salvation. Good works is what we do because of the grace we have been gifted by God.

I ran into a tennis friend recently who told me the most remarkable story that has to do with God's grace and living that out in good works. Some folks, like me, might even deem it a resurrection story.

You see, this man was a beloved tennis coach at a club in Greenville for decades. But then he suffered a devastatingly debilitating injury in a car wreck. He was on I-85 on his way to work one morning when he got hit from behind by a huge, heavy duty pick-up truck. My friend who got hit was in a tiny pick-up truck, and his head whipped back and hit the back windshield. His leg also got caught under the seat, messing his knee up.

He loved his tennis pro job, and he was pretty upset about having to miss a month of work because of his knee. But little did he know he'd be out much longer than that. A week after the wreck, he woke up with a huge migraine and started

stuttering and throwing up. His wife thought he'd had a stroke. But it was a migraine as a result of the brain injury. For the next several years, he suffered from ticks, turrets, stuttering, and migraines. He had 18-40 migraines a month, and he said he would lay on floor and throw up for hours at a time.

He did lots of speech and physical therapy, but without real significant improvement. He saw specialist after specialist. And they all said, "This is your new normal. This is the new you. This is how you'll live the rest of your life, and we're sorry about that."

His marriage could not sustain the trauma, and he underwent a divorce. His coaching career was essentially over as well as he couldn't teach because he didn't have the stamina or the speech for it. His doctors told him to go ahead and file for disability. He couldn't drive for 8 months. And once he could drive, he couldn't even go through a drive through because he stuttered too much for them to understand him. He was understandably anxious and depressed.

Over three years of enduring all of this, another Christmas season rolled around. And so he decided to do something different that year. He wrote a card and a Christmas story to his parents every single day from Dec. 1-21. He included something fun or meaningful with each one. They absolutely loved it.

On Dec. 28, he went to one of his therapy appointments. He had been keeping a daily migraine chart, which they reviewed. After looking over it, they said, "You haven't had any migraines since Dec. 1. What was different this month?" He quickly put two and two together and realized it was helping others. It had all started with the daily Christmas cards to his parents.

So he began to look for more people to help, realizing that by doing good works for others, he was healing as well. He prayed God would send him many people to help, which to his delight happened, and he just kept getting better and better. And to this day, he rarely has migraine episodes anymore.

Today he is back at his job full time as a tennis teaching pro at the club in Greenville. In fact, that's where I ran into him when he told me this story. He was also recently inducted into the hall of fame at his college alma mater. And he tells

me he still looks for ways to help people every single day, because it brings him great joy. And he gives all credit of this “new normal” to God. He feels fully healed and redeemed and like he has a new lease on life.

Finally, there is one more story of rising from the ashes from this week to share. Many of you probably stared in disbelief, just as I did, at the images his past Monday as the Notre Dame Cathedral burned. My heart sank as the spire toppled over. I lived and worked in Paris for a year in 2000, and passed Notre Dame every day. It was a special part of my life. And so many people around the world felt the same way and deeply grieved as it burned. I even pulled out my scrapbook from that year to remember what it looked like in all its glory. My heart was so heavy and sad.

But the next morning on the news, I saw the most amazing image from inside Notre Dame, which we’ll pull up on the screen now. And there above the burnt rubble, hung the golden cross, unscathed. This image to me is the perfect symbol of the Easter message. That Christ reigns no matter what. That the resurrection of Jesus Christ trumps everything. That there is no fire, no destruction, no smoke, absolutely nothing that can destroy the hope of the resurrection. Not for Notre Dame, and not for us.

There will be dark times in our lives like fires, car accidents, grueling medical conditions, and even the more common difficulties of resisting the temptations of every day secular culture. These are the Maundy Thursdays, Good Fridays, and shadows of the cross in our lives.

But moreover, there is also the hope of the empty tomb, the immeasurable riches of the grace of God, and the promise of new life in Christ.

My professor had it right: there’s no Gospel without the resurrection. It trumps everything else. And it’s the way to get an A not only on a paper, but more importantly in life. So go, my friends, and strive to live into the gift of the Easter resurrection joy every single day.

*For Christ has risen. **Christ has risen indeed!** Amen and Amen.*