

LIVING OUR EASTER FAITH

If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

Colossians 3:1-4

George Burns, the legendary comic, was once asked what the key ingredients are for a great sermon. He took several puffs from his cigar and a twinkle came to his eye. “The secret of a fine sermon,” he began, “is to have a good beginning and a good ending; and *to have the two as close together as possible.*” I appreciate the invitation to speak to you this Easter morning, and welcome each of you to this service of worship. If during the course of my remarks it seems doubtful that I have taken Mr. Burns’s homiletical suggestions seriously, I want you to realize that I at least tried.

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Church in Colossae, a city which was located in what is now the country of Turkey. Some biblical scholars guess that Paul wrote the letter while he was in prison. No one is certain. It does appear that, in spite of his extensive travels, Paul had never been to Colossae. But, being the old warrior that he was, he was attempting to watch over that little church from a distance.

The church had its problems. A false and destructive teaching – one that stressed self-abasement, angel worship, and the legalistic abstention from particular foods – was threatening to take hold of the congregation. The Colossians, Paul believed, were in danger of sliding back into a pagan caste of mind and of forgetting about Christ and the enlightened freedom they had in his spirit. So Paul encouraged the Colossians to remember their Christian calling, their Resurrection faith. **“If then you have been**

raised with Christ,” he began, **“seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hid with Christ in God.”** Then Paul underscored the distinctive promise that accompanies the profession and discipline of the Christian faith. **“When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”**

Paul was not saying that the Christian life is otherworldly, that it is a kind of “pie in the sky, by and by.” Instead, he was emphasizing that our lives as Christians, here and now, should mirror the new, transcendent reality we have come know in the Easter event, or the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We have died to the values of this world and, like Christ, are resurrected to a new life. This life makes us new beings. We have a new identity and a new mind-set. This new reality, in turn, leads us to glory.

Be assured that the Colossians understood what Paul was telling them. They were familiar with the basic tenets of the Easter faith. Each of them had, once upon a time, confessed their faith in Christ. Each had been taught that, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, a cosmic drama had unfolded. The world had previously been without hope. The inhabitants of creation were all like sheep, each going his own way, when God reached out, in His infinite love and mercy, and reconciled all of us unto Himself. It was a victory won once and for all. This is the story line of Easter. It is the Gospel message. It was nothing new to the Colossians.

BUT . . . the meaning of Easter was fading into obscurity for them. They were no longer living as if they believed it. The values by which they were conducting

themselves were not Christian. They were no longer on the road to glory. They needed a reminder, and so Paul gave them one in the passage I read to you a moment ago.

Now here's a question for you: What do you think the Apostle Paul would say about how you and I, as Christians today, are living out our Resurrection faith? Sure, today is Easter Sunday, and we are here to celebrate; but have we, like the Colossians, become oblivious to what Easter really means insofar as how we conduct our lives? These are hard questions, because they are uncomfortable ones. They are as uncomfortable for me to preach as they are for you to hear. I admit that, when I began reflecting upon Paul's words in my preparation of this message, I was tempted to look elsewhere for a text from which to preach. This one was too direct and too blunt. Its implications were too harsh -- and, yes, too much to the point. The passage would, I feared, be inappropriate for Easter, although it is, in fact, about Easter.

Many social and religious commentators have spilled a ton of ink responding to the issue of Christianity's apparent loss of influence in Europe and America. Even I myself have written about this matter. But, at some point, you and I must recognize that mainline American Protestants are, well . . . you and I. Our churches, since the 1960s, have been losing members by the millions. However we choose to interpret this sobering fact, at some point the matter becomes very personal, does it not? It becomes necessary for us to take a long, hard look at our own values and how we are managing our lives. Could it be that you and I are a microcosm of what is wrong with the mainline church? The nineteenth century German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, once addressed a scathing challenge to Christians, when he stated, "I might believe in the Redeemer if his followers looked more redeemed." Might the problem be with us?

A Christian I know recently stated to me that he was troubled by the climate of disorganization in his church. He stated, “Nobody appears to be in charge. There are no clearly defined lines of authority. Problems seem to be addressed on a ‘catch as catch-can’ basis.” Does that sound remotely familiar? You know, it’s not so clear at First Christian Church to whom we should go when a problem arises. We do also often seem more reactive than proactive.

Perhaps you’ve had the experience of someone pulling you aside before or after church and whispering in a hushed tone, “You know, the church is in financial trouble.” Or, “Our Christian education program is faltering.” Or maybe you have heard someone say, “We need to re-embrace our liberal heritage and act more like Disciples than fundamentalists.”

All these statements, whether accurate or not, suggest that there’s a sense that something is wrong. Whatever that may or may not be, I want to remind you that you and I are this church. What is happening or not happening here, in the life of First Christian Church, is largely a reflection of our own minds and hearts. Isn’t that what Paul was telling the Colossians, when he instructed them to set their minds upon transcendent truths?

Allow me to speak to you very frankly, and in the spirit of the Apostle, for a moment. Being an elder in a Disciples church is not only the highest honor that can be bestowed upon a member of the church, it also constitutes an enormous responsibility. Think about that. Would anyone say it’s not so? Contrary to popular belief, being an elder is not simply about showing up for Sunday worship occasionally, most commonly when it is your time to officiate at the communion table. Eldership responsibilities, when

taken seriously, are weighty ones. Elders are the spiritual overseers of the church! The elders of this church, for example, are to oversee your spiritual life and mine. When was the last time an elder telephoned you and asked how things are going? When was the last time that one sat down with you and prayed? Is it improper for me to ask what it says about a church when the elders are a dysfunctional body who oversee little or nothing? What does it say about a church when a faithful member, even an elder, of many years dies and only a few on the board of elders take the time to attend the funeral? What does this fact imply about the level of dedication and commitment at the highest levels of a church? The same thing it implies, I guess, when a person accepts an invitation to be on a vitally important council or committee in the church, attends a meeting or two, and then quits without a word.

What does it say about the mission of a church when expenditures for social outreach and evangelism are virtually nonexistent, while spending on itself – for upkeep on the building, utilities, and ministerial staff – constitutes the sum total of the budget? How do you think the Apostle Paul would respond to that? Do you think he would applaud that church and pat it on the back? Do you think that church is living out the Easter faith?

Now, someone is sure to interject, “Oh, but wait! Hold on! That’s not us! We are merely in transition and are preparing to call a new minister. Once this happens, everything should be fine.” Perhaps the new minister will be everything for which all of us have hoped. I trust that we will at least be fortunate enough to find a genuine Christian servant and steward to help lead us. But to regard a minister as the panacea for what ails us is fantasy. It’s fantasy! At some point, you and I must set our minds and

hearts on things above, not on the things of this earth. No church that takes its mission seriously ever calls a minister to come in and to do what the rank and file are supposed to be doing. Everyone of us must live out our Easter faith.

Just as Jesus made a decision in that miserable wilderness of Judea, when tempted by the devil, to die to the values of this world – materialism, egoism, political power -- Paul implies that we too once made such a decision. He declares that we too have died and that our lives are hidden with the Resurrected Christ in God. *Are they really?* Why, then, are some of us are still consumed by an inflated sense of self-importance? Others of us are absorbed in pursuing “the good life,” as defined by Hollywood and Wall Street of course. We’ve become too comfortable to shake out of our complacency. Still others of us try to anesthetize the pain in our lives by watching and listening to mindless television shows (you know what they are) or to one athletic contest after another. With any luck at all, Jesus Christ won’t return during a Dallas Cowboys football game! Many of us would not take kindly to the interruption!

The words of Paul to the Colossians are words about the unique and unprecedented event of Easter, but they are also words of reprimand and judgment. I can’t for the life of me read them any other way. I wish that I could, but Paul was telling the Colossians: **“You people think you are on the road to glory. But you are not. You have forgotten what it means to live out the Easter faith. Your values, demonstrated in your everyday actions, are all too visible for everyone to see. Those values show the world what you are.”** I don’t know about you, but Paul’s words absolutely take my breath away, and are like a knife through the heart. How could the Colossians hear them and not cover their faces in shame?

The question for us is: how can we hear them and not do the same? You and I are losing our church. Do you hear me? This also means that the Corpus Christi community is losing what has been or could be again a beacon of truth, of reconciliation, of healing, of peace, of social conscience, and of love. You may be sitting here thinking, “Scott, who are you to speak to us this way, especially on Easter Sunday?” Let me answer the question: I come to you as your postal carrier this morning, bringing you a letter straight from the Apostle Paul with a few words about living the Easter faith. It is a letter written not only to the Colossians, but to you and to me.

If this were the end of Paul’s message, most of us, including myself would leave here feeling defeated. But, thankfully, there is more in Paul’s message than judgment. There is hope. God is still in charge of this world. His Will is not thwarted by what you and I do or fail to do. He has always worked through “a righteous remnant,” from the beginning of the world to the present. He will invariably find those who will heed Him and do His Will. As the hymn proclaims, “God’s truth marches on!” Yes, and does it! Our misfeasance, our malfeasance, and our nonfeasance will not frustrate the Will of God. It never, and it never will!

There are those in this church who are part of God’s righteous remnant. This church has had its share of saints, and some of them are, thanks be to God, still with us, body and spirit. There are those here, in this church, who have truly died with Christ, and have been resurrected to a new life with him. They live out the meaning of their Easter faith each and every day. (I would love to name a few of them for you, but it would embarrass them.) Their lives are hidden with Christ in God. When a good deed is to be done, and there is no one else to do it, they can be counted on. The prophet’s words are

applicable to them: “They shall run, and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint.” They are on the road to glory. Because they are living their Easter faith.

What about the rest of us? We belong to God as well. God has not forgotten us. He continues to beckon us to His service, and is doing so at this very moment. When we stumble in life, He’s there to pick us up. When we weep, He’s there to comfort us. When we stray, He’s there to welcome us back. God has never abandoned us. We may sometimes think He has, but it’s not true. I implore you to look back upon your life and to explore the deepest, most intimate moments of it and then to tell me that God was not there. Maybe it was about your health, or your marriage, or your children, or your business, or (God forbid!) an addiction. Although everything seemed hopeless and for naught, you recognize now that God was with you. Our vision is not twenty/twenty when we are in the midst of a blinding storm, but afterward we discern that it was God who was carrying us through it.

What am I saying? It’s simple: there is work to be done here. It is the work of our time. God is giving us the honor and the privilege of doing it. It involves saying to ourselves: “This needs to be done, and I am going to do it. Not because it is convenient. Not because it will bring me acclaim. Not because it will make me popular. Not because I can exert my will over others. I am going to do it, because God wants me to do it. And I want to praise Him and bless His name. I want my life to be hidden with Christ in God. I want God to smile upon my effort during whatever time I have left.” This is the meaning of living out the Easter faith. God always does His part. The question is whether we will do ours. Amen.