

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God, the time is here. Spring has sprung; the freshness of the world returns us to the timeless message. We have traversed once again through celebration, betrayal, torture, and death with Christ, and now we come to resurrection and new life. We come to recognize that even though in this life there will be death, sorrow, and tragedy, with Christ, these never have the final word. We are, ultimately, people of hope. Hold us, God, in our times of happiness, in our times of distress, to go through human reconciling but to ultimately recognize that, at the end of the day, we live in hope through new life.

Through the journey of Lent, we have traveled with the Savior to learn new ideas, to enter Jerusalem with such fanfare, and to find betrayal and death at the end of the week. We have sat in darkness for three days, only to have the light of new life, the light of Christ's resurrection at the end of the journey. We rejoice that not only does he offer new life: he defeats death, leaving behind the marks of death as he greets the world anew. Give us the courage to hear Christ's voice and to take hold of the new life he offers, for we recognize that the voice of Christ is an invitation for us to enter into the relationship he offers. We pray all these things in the name of the one who triumphs over death and all that life throws our way, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying...

SERMON

Have you ever been mistaken for the gardener? Well, to be perfectly honest, I have been mistaken for the gardener. Two years ago was when I proposed to my wife Catherine. My family knew ahead of time, but I wanted to let her family know that I was going to propose. I gave her mother a call. I said, "Hello, this is Jeff calling." When I didn't get a surprised response on the other end, I started to feel concerned. She simply said, "uh huh."

I was pretty sure that the family liked me, but I didn't call them often. I went on to say, "I'm going to propose today." Only THEN did I get a response. She, of course, was glad and told me eagerly, "Welcome to the family!" The excuse was that we had a bad connection, but I found out later that she didn't hear my name well and thought I was their landscaper. But when the name of her daughter came out clearly, the rest of the pieces fell into place. Her landscaper would not be proposing to her daughter, but there was an opportunity for new life coming through, both for her family and for us. And has it ever been worth it. When we take time to hear and see the opportunities in front of us, to hear our name, new life abides there still.

John has probably my favorite account of the resurrection. The details are nuanced to give accurate picture of what exactly has happened. It's not that Jesus has come back. It's not that he's alive again and walking around in the same condition. This is Jesus coming back with renewed power and a changed reality. The mission is the same, but the tools at hand are enriched. New life is here. Let's see what this account of Jesus' resurrection tells us this Easter morning and how it applies to our lives today, especially as we seek new life.

It starts out similar to the other accounts of the resurrection, but then it starts to take its own course. "Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb." So, she ran and told Simon Peter and the disciple whom Jesus loved, who both run to the temple. Mary sees the stone rolled away. The disciple whom Jesus loved sees the linen wrappings still lying in the tomb. Then Simon Peter comes and does what the other two did not: he goes into the tomb, only to find the cloth that had been on Jesus' head lying separately, nicely folded. Each has a piece of the larger puzzle, but they do not yet put them

all together. Scripture pulls out the conclusion that Jesus had conquered death, but, as it says, “as yet, they did not understand the scripture that he must rise from the dead.” As we see this piece by piece, we already know the conclusion: Jesus has risen from the dead, but there’s a twist here. John had already seen a rise from the dead: Lazarus. According to the New Interpreter’s Commentary, the scene with the open tomb, the linen wrappings and the cloth tell us a similar story but with an integral twist. While Lazarus emerging from his tomb continued to wear his linen wrappings, those signs of death remained in the tomb when Jesus emerged. This is a sign of new life that yells clearly, “Death has been defeated once and for all,” but it doesn’t quite add up to them yet. That will come in time.

So, the other two disciples leave the picture, and we are left with the mourning Mary. The most poignant piece of this entire scripture is the conversation between Mary and Jesus. She doesn’t recognize him. For us, it might be easy to shake our heads at her. We’re sitting here, as if we’re watching Candid Camera to see when she will get it. Wouldn’t it be obvious if the risen Jesus Christ were right before her, not to mention the two angels sitting in the tomb? Well, apparently not; she thinks he’s the gardener and converses with the angels as if they were normal passersby. On the other hand, John tells a different story than the rest of the Gospels; while the angels were more than willing to proclaim that “He is Risen!” in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, they make no such proclamation here. Instead, they let Mary Magdalene go through her grieving, as does Jesus. No one proclaims the good news at first. But we know what will happen, and we anticipate it just like a romantic comedy when you are just waiting for the two main characters to get together. “Mary!” says the Risen Jesus, and all at once, her eyes are opened. She knows the truth: Jesus has not been taken away. He is alive, and new life comes with him.

So what is this new life we're always talking about? I sat down and really tried to figure out what this meant to me. It took me many places, just from my own life. I thought of my marriage. I thought about coming to this church. I thought about graduation from college and grad school. I thought about taking care of our little guide dog in training, Phantom. That led me to some conclusions. Is it about salvation in the far off future? Partly, but we cannot make it the be all and end all. That neglects the call that we have in the present. Is it about changing ourselves completely? Hardly. Is it about being under the power of the Witness Protection program? Maybe, but not in this context. Newness does not necessarily mean differentness. Newness does not necessarily mean change. Newness means freshness. When we believe in and serve Christ, we are consistently offered new life, but we have to take hold of it, keeping Christ right in front of us. New life is not eternal life deferred to a distant future or in the background. It is eternal life in the now. In scripture, when we talk about "eternal life" in the original Greek, it is best translated as "life of the ages;" in other words, it is about living out the Kingdom of God in the present and the future. It is about the here and now, as God is about now. But it's different to everyone.

Not only is Jesus the literal Risen Christ, he also symbolizes how we can interact with new life. The thing about biblical characters is that they aren't confined to one time and place; they exemplify who we are as human beings. We fall into the same traps over and over again. More often than not, we are like Mary. She is in a very human position, really not worth our criticism. We see...well, usually what we want to see. We see only the possibilities we want. We see what was, what we loved and is now gone, as being the absolute of perfection; when that absolute is gone, there is nothing left but mourning. Jesus shows us something different. What God is doing may be those things we don't necessarily

expect or desire. The old may be gone, but it opens the door to something perhaps even better. Sometimes new life is standing right in front of us in a form that we do not expect. Maybe new life looks like something we don't want, so we don't label it as a possibility for new life. We see the gardener instead of the Lord. God's doing what God always does: push us out of our comfort zones. So, where do you need to find newness? How can you better connect with the one who calls? Do you need to let go of something, or do you need to take something you've been afraid to take up? How do you need to see your world or circumstances in a new way that seizes the calling Christ gives you? Where is resurrection for you today? I can't tell you the answer, but it probably means that we look up and see that someone is calling us; we aren't listening or choosing not to listen. Christ calls us each by name and all of us together as a community. He is the Good Shepherd, we are the sheep, and we know his voice. Sometimes, we have to wade through the garbage of daily life to hear where that voice speaks. Like Mary, we will find that it may be in the unlikeliest of places, even right in front of us. Ultimately, it is about the way we live in this world.

The way Christ affects us is never an end in itself; it always leads us to joyful service in Christ's name. My marriage, graduations, service in this church, Phantom, all those things I spoke about are for about ultimately serving others, not my sole enrichment. New life ultimately benefits the individual and the community. When we hear our passage from Colossians, it speaks of new life. Since we have been raised with Christ, it says, we must set our minds on things that are above, not things that are on earth. These things are shown in our Lord: self-sacrifice, love and care for others. When we seek new life, we uplift others.

In sports, I believe that is best seen in one word: momentum. It is the New Life of the team. The other night, the Colorado Avalanche played the Minnesota Wild in the

Stanley Cup Playoffs. Well, our home team fell down 4-2 with under 20 minutes left. In hockey, that can be a huge deficit, but they seized the opportunity in front of them. They chose to see the possibility of newness. They could have seized the obvious and said that this wasn't their game; there's always another day. But they took the tough path and went all out. Well, one goal came with 13 minutes left...and, with unrelenting pressure, the tying goal came with merely 13 seconds left. Hometown hero Paul Stastny stuck it in the top of the net. Momentum completely shifted, and belief in each other took over. Six or so minutes into overtime, the care and belief in one another showed as Stastny again struck, and the Avs won the game, 5-4. They seized a possibility for newness, and it took them to incredible places together, especially as they thought of each other. What about you?

This Lent, we've talked a lot about discipleship. We talked about the gifts we each individually and communally have. We talked about how faith is putting those gifts to use, not simply the cognitive process of believing. We talked about how we all naturally have questions that we must raise in order to continually allow our faith to grow. And now, we see new life gives understanding and grace to all of these above. We can only share our gifts, our questions, our faith because of the work of Jesus Christ. When our actions fall short of what we seek, we always have new life to foster us. In everyday life, it sustains us in subtle ways. Every morning, you have an opportunity for newness. With each moment, you have the opportunity to choose new life. With the changing of the months, you have an opportunity to seize new life when it comes your way. With the passing of the seasons, when old things die and new things come in all creation, you included, are given the opportunity to seize newness. The calling is always there. Will you open your eyes and ears to the newness around the corner, or maybe right in front of you? Amen and Amen.