

THE LIFE LAID DOWN, THE LIFE RESTORED

The Rev. J. Donald Waring
Grace Church in New York
The Fourth Sunday of Easter
April 25, 2021

Jesus said, *“For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.”* (John 10:17-18)

The past week has provided a study in contrast between the highs and the lows of humanity. In one instance we have soared. In another we have proved ourselves incapable of rising above the dust from which we are made. On Monday, three-hundred million miles away from here, a small robotic helicopter named *Ingenuity* lifted off the planet Mars and hovered for ten seconds above the dusty surface. It was hailed as “a Kitty Hawk moment” because every world gets only one first flight. For Earth it was the Wright brothers, for Mars it was *Ingenuity*. Specifically, *Ingenuity* was the first powered flight on the Red Planet, with the promise of many more to come. *Ingenuity* had hitched a ride in the belly of the scientific rover, *Perseverance*, which blasted off from Cape Canaveral last July and landed on Mars in February. Now, obeying commands from Earth the rover will conduct scientific experiments on the ground while the helicopter can fly above it to survey the terrain. The whole thing is a stunning demonstration of human ingenuity and perseverance. We have soared.

At the same time that the world was watching the flight of *Ingenuity*, the eyes of all were also upon a courtroom in Minneapolis, tensely awaiting a verdict in the trial of Derek Chauvin. As you know, Chauvin is the former police officer who stood accused of murdering George Floyd during an arrest last May. Floyd’s death unleashed a storm of protests against police brutality: protests that roiled the nation well into the fall. Now for the past month the fully televised trial set before our eyes again video of the terrible way that George Floyd died: prone on the pavement, hands cuffed behind his back, with Chauvin’s knee pressing down on his neck for over nine minutes. On Tuesday the jury returned its verdict after only ten hours of deliberation, finding Chauvin guilty on all counts. The country seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. Perhaps a measure of justice was served. But the scenes of George Floyd pressed to the pavement are, quite literally, a world apart from the flight of *Ingenuity* on Mars. There we soared. Here we have not.

The study in contrast between the highs and lows of humanity came to mind again when I delved into today’s reading from the Acts of the Apostles (4:5-12). The back story occurs earlier in the book (3:1-10), when the writer of Acts describes how the disciples Peter and John came to the Temple to pray. It was very early on in the Christian movement, perhaps just a year or so into it. The disciples still saw no conflict between their Jewish faith and their proclamation that Jesus of Nazareth was God’s promised Messiah. So they came to the Temple to pray as all good Jews of Jerusalem would do. The Temple was a sure sign of God’s presence with the people. It was the closest thing to heaven on earth, and on some level it conveyed that all was well. It was a place where spirits should soar, and the architecture was meant to impress and elevate the people. The easternmost gate into the Temple was especially magnificent, so much so that some even called it “the Beautiful Gate.” Huge double doors stood 75-feet high, richly adorned with polished bronze and surrounded by Corinthian columns. For good reason the Psalmist (122:1) declared, *“I was glad when they said unto me, ‘We will go into the house of the Lord.’”*

Nevertheless, on the very steps of the most Beautiful Gate into the Temple was a stark reminder that all was not well. A 40-year old man who had been born crippled was there begging: day in and day out, year after year. Apparently, his family would deposit him there in the morning and pick him up in the evening. So there he was, a glaring contrast to the Beautiful Gate. His mere

presence called into question all the promises that the Lord was in his holy Temple. All was not well as long as the crippled man was there, unable to rise.

The study in contrast doesn't end there. As Peter and John approached the gate the paralytic asked them for money. Peter answered that he had no gold or silver to give, but he had something better. "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk," he declared. Then Peter took the man by the hand and lifted him up. Every person gets only one first walk, and for the paralytic, this was it. He walked for the first time in his life. Not only did he walk, he leaped and jumped for all to see. You would think that everyone would rejoice over what had occurred. Most did, but not everyone. Here we see the painful pattern repeating itself again. In contrast to the rejoicing, the leaders of the Temple resented this thing that had come to pass. In fact, they had Peter and John arrested and brought before the Temple court to stand trial. Can you imagine – arresting someone for giving a crippled man the ability to walk?

Peter found their predicament as preposterous as anyone would, but he used the occasion to preach the straightforward gospel to the Temple leaders. It was not by his own power that the man was healed. It was not human ingenuity or perseverance that lifted the man off the ground. It was the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom God raised from the dead. Peter went on to declare that Jesus had become the cornerstone of salvation, or like the capstone holding all the beautiful Temple arches together at their peak. In fact, he proclaimed, salvation can be found in no one else. No other name under heaven can fully and finally lift us out of the dust from which we are made.

What did Peter really mean when he said that only in the name of Jesus can we find salvation? To answer the question we actually need to look beyond Peter. With all due respect for Peter, he didn't fully understand Jesus. In fact, he had a habit for grabbing hold of part of the truth and missing the bigger picture. For example, on numerous occasions Jesus had spoken plainly with the disciples about what lay ahead for him: crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus spoke of them together. But Peter latched onto only the word crucifixion and rebuked Jesus: "God forbid, Lord, this shall never happen to you (Matthew 16:22)." So for Peter the crucifixion was nothing more than a crime. It was a murder that never should have happened at all. The resurrection was merely God's undoing of it – God's pulling a good ending out of the ashes. He says as much in the sermon recorded in today's reading in Acts. "You crucified him," Peter charged. "But God raised him from the dead." In Peter's mind crucifixion and resurrection were a study in contrast.

While Jesus would not have disagreed when Peter proclaimed him the head and cornerstone of salvation, nevertheless, he understood his mission and ministry in a different way. For Jesus, crucifixion and resurrection were not in conflict with each other. Rather, they were always part of the one coordinated, concerted, divine act of salvation. We heard Jesus explain it in today's reading from the Gospel of John: *"I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."* We'll hear echoes of Jesus' words in today's closing hymn (205 v.3):

Your Name we bless, O risen Lord,
and sing today with one accord
the life laid down, the life restored. Alleluia!

Jesus went willingly, deliberately to the cross. We can give Peter a pass for failing to grasp it because it's a stretch for our modern minds as well. C.S. Lewis, the great Anglican apologist of the mid-20th century might help our understanding. He writes in his book *Miracles: In the Christian story God descends to re-ascend. He comes down; down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity ... But he goes down to come up again and bring the whole ruined world up with him.* Lewis then goes on to suggest a parable. Imagine a person in a row boat on a lake who has lost something precious over the side – perhaps a ring or some other piece of jewelry. The person then becomes a diver on a recovery mission, *rushing down through green and warm water into black*

and cold water, down through increasing pressure into the deathlike region of ooze and slime and old decay; then up again, back to color and light, his lungs almost bursting, till suddenly he breaks surface again, holding in his hand the dripping, precious thing that he went down to recover. That precious thing God goes down to recover is you and me, and the whole ruined world. The resurrection of Jesus is like the first flight of the new creation, with the promise of many more to come. In Jesus, with Jesus, because of Jesus, a new day has begun.

Not too long ago I was on a Zoom call with someone who was wondering about the Christian faith, and was asking me to explain it. Apparently, my words were not the straightforward presentation of the good news that Peter preached in the Temple. In fact, when I finally paused to take a breath the caller replied, "I'll have to think about that. It all sounds very abstract." Alas, I'm not sure I know how to make it any more concrete today, but allow me to try. Here we go: what it means to be a Christian in two easy steps. First, to be a Christian means to set your hope in Jesus. It is to trust that because of his death and resurrection, because Jesus laid down his life and took it up again, humanity itself is redeemed, and is in an upward swing. It is to trust that the deathward spiral of the old creation is reversed because Jesus was crucified, dead, and buried, then rose again from the dead on the third day. The new creation has begun. It is to risk believing that, despite what may be all appearances to the contrary, God has reclaimed this whole ruined world and doesn't intend to let go. Having such faith, St. Paul was able to write: *I consider the sufferings of this present time not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed in us. If God is for us, who can be against us?*

Second, if God is for us – if in Jesus the new creation has begun – then to be a Christian means we can risk taking steps now to live resurrected lives, even if they are just baby steps. What does a resurrected life look like? Peter and John extending their hands to the crippled man and lifting him up gives us one picture. Remember, it is not our own strength and ingenuity that we rely on to rise up and live a resurrected life. Peter and John healed the man by the power of the Holy Spirit, in the name of Jesus. It will look different in different people. It might mean extending the hand of friendship across the cultural divide, finding a way to apologize, showing grace under fire, or giving your time. But the common thread is elevating others – lifting them up, not pressing them down. It is daring to look at people in the light of resurrection. So for me it will undoubtedly mean not referring to my fellow motorists in the automobile community as morons and imbeciles when I am behind the wheel. "There goes a redeemed child of God," is what I should start saying whenever someone cuts me off and races to be first in line. It will be hard, but also my sacred responsibility! If in Jesus the new day has begun, then our vocation is to be renewed by the Word and Sacrament, and live into it by the power of the Spirit.

Our fellow Christians in the Orthodox churches are known for their magnificent mosaics and frescoes that draw them into the mystery of God. A particular scene often painted on the apse of churches above Orthodox altars depicts when Jesus descended not merely to this mortal life, but all the way down to the realm of the dead. The descent into hell is an article of the Apostles' Creed that has always lived on the margins of Christian thinking. The Scriptural support is under-whelming. Nevertheless, the teaching has persisted that between his death and resurrection, Jesus undertook what has come to be called "the harrowing of hell." Jesus raided the realm of the dead, rescued those who languished therein, and then "closed the yawning gates of hell," as the Easter hymn puts it. Many of these mosaics are remarkably similar: a determined Jesus, gripping Adam in his right hand and Eve in his left, lifts them out of the pit. Such scenes embolden my sacred imagination, and increase my faith that all of humanity rises up with the risen Jesus. Indeed, no corner of the creation will escape the light of the new day.

Jesus said, *"For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again ... I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father."*