

Mark 8:27 - 9:1

Colossians 3:1-11

July 31, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

PRACTICING RESURRECTION: PART I

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Whether it is with thanksgiving for a long life well lived or in utter shock at a promising life cut short, it is difficult to stand by the graveside and say our final good-bye to a beloved family member, friend, or neighbor. In the chill of winter or the heat of summer, at that moment it seems as if death, indeed, has the last word. There are perhaps no words more important for us to hear at the graveside than these: “In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our brother/our sister, and we commit his/her body to the ground, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord, says the Spirit. They rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”

Rev. Eugene Peterson died on October 18, 2018. He is probably best known as the author of *The Message*, a translation of the Old and New Testaments and a paraphrase from the original Hebrew and Greek texts. Many people may not know that he was a Presbyterian minister and founding pastor of Christ Our King Presbyterian Church in Bel Air, Maryland, where he served for twenty-nine years.

Rev. Peterson’s funeral on Saturday, November 3 was open to the public. After the service, his family gathered for a brief and private graveside service. One of his sons, Eric, later shared this reflection: “As we gathered around his casket for our final farewell, and just before offering the ‘earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ commendation, it seemed fitting that Eugene’s voice should be heard one last time. On a grassy hillside in the Conrad Memorial Cemetery of Montana, I read these words from his memoir, one of the last books he wrote.

*‘Resurrection does not have to do exclusively with what happens after we are buried or cremated. It does have to do with that, but first of all it has to do with the way we live right now. But as Karl Barth, quoting Nietzsche, pithily reminds us: “Only where graves are is there resurrection.” We practice our death by giving up our will to live on our own terms. Only in that relinquishment or renunciation are we able to practice resurrection.’*¹

As hard as it is to gather at the graveside, it is especially hard to walk away from the graveside. Life is different and always will be. As believers, we trust that God’s promises are true and have been fully realized for our loved one. But what about us? What difference does the resurrection make in our lives, not just, as Peterson wrote, “after we are buried or cremated . . . but first of all with the way we live right now”?

According to Paul, the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope we have in Christ's resurrection has **everything** to do with the way we live right now. Here's how *The Message* begins today's epistle lesson in Colossians 3:1-2: "So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, *act* like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ — that's where the action is. See things from *his* perspective."

Have you ever heard the expression, "Some people are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good"? It is attributed to Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Boston physician and father of Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. The phrase is often used to describe (usually in a negative way) religious people who seem to be more concerned with the life to come than with the life here and now. But that's not what the apostle Paul means when he writes, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." (Colossians 3:2) In his classic book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next."

Of course, the opposite of Dr. Holmes's expression can be just as true. We can be so earthly minded that we are of no heavenly good. By earthly minded and heavenly minded, I mean what we've been hearing about all summer. There are two orientations in life — what Paul calls "living in the flesh and living in the Spirit" — living for yourself or living for God.

Today's gospel lesson is a good example of what Paul means by living in the flesh and living in the Spirit. Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" This is the basic question of faith. What we believe about Jesus can and should make a difference with the way we live right now. Peter answered Jesus, "You are the Messiah," which, of course, was and is the right answer.

"Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. . . And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, 'Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.'" (Mark 8:8:27-33) Jesus could just as well have said, "Get behind me, Satan! For you are so earthly minded you are no heavenly good." Who knows what motivated Peter to rebuke Jesus? It seems pretty clear Peter didn't want to accept what Jesus had to say about what was going to happen to him and what it means to follow Jesus *in this life*. But Jesus was offering a new way of living, a new way of walking through *this* world, seeing the world from Jesus's perspective rather than shuffling along with our eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of us.

In 1974, Johnny Cash wrote and recorded his song "No Earthly Good." Here are the lyrics:

*Come heed me, my brothers, come heed, one and all
Don't brag about standing or you'll surely fall
You're shining your light and shine it you should
But you're so heavenly minded, you're no earthly good*

*If you're holding heaven, then spread it around
There's hungry hands reaching up here from the ground
Move over and share the high ground where you stood
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good*

*The gospel ain't gospel until it is spread
But how can you share it where you've got your head
There's hands that reach out for a hand if you would
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good*

*If you're holding heaven, then spread it around
There's hungry hands reaching up here from the ground
Move over and share the high ground where you stood
So heavenly minded, you're no earthly good*

In his book called *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*, N.T. Wright, British New Testament scholar and former Bishop of Durham in the Church of England, writes, "People who believe in the resurrection, in God making a whole new world in which everything will be set right at last, are unstoppably motivated to work for that new world in the present . . . Life after death, it seems, can be a serious distraction not only from the ultimate life after life after death, but also from life before death . . . Resurrection doesn't mean escaping from the world; it means mission to the world based on Jesus's lordship over the world."²

When Jesus's dear friend Lazarus died, Jesus went to be with Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, to mourn with them and to comfort them. Before Jesus even got all the way into Bethany where his friends lived, Martha went out to meet him. In her grief over the death of her brother, she also sounds a bit angry with Jesus: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him." When Jesus assured Martha, "Your brother will rise again," she responded with what she had been taught and always believed, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection of the last day." Then Jesus offered Martha, who was deep in her grief for her dead brother and firm in her belief that the resurrection was something yet to come, a new perspective, a new way of living right now: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" (John 11:17-27)

That's the question, isn't it? That's the question when we walk away from the graveside. That's the question as we live each day. That's the question in the midst of these difficult times in which we live. That's the question for our church. That's the question.

One observer puts it this way, “The resurrection of Christ is not just a guarantee of life after death, it’s a guarantee of life before death too: full abundant life in union with God. We are called to live in communion with this ever-present, all-permeating Breath of God, and let it inspire us to continue the mission of Jesus the Christ in the world: the redemption and salvation of all things.”³

Do you know the old joke? A pedestrian on 57th Street in New York City sees a musician getting out of a cab and asks, “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” With tired eyes, the musician looks at the tourist and says, “Practice, practice, practice!” You know the saying, “Practice makes perfect” — that the regular exercise of an activity or a skill is the best way to come proficient in it, or at least better at it.

Of course, when it comes to “practicing resurrection,” we can’t expect to become perfect in it, until the day when Christ, who is our life, is revealed and we are also revealed with Christ in glory. In the meantime, however, practicing resurrection means being earthly good because we are heavenly minded; in other words, being faithful to God’s calling and claim upon our lives right now because of the hope we have in God’s future in the resurrection from the dead through faith in Jesus Christ.

The apostle Paul was no slouch when it came to “practicing resurrection.” Here’s how he describes his motivation for living right now: “Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection from the dead] or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 3:12-14)

In conclusion, it’s worth noting that Paul very rarely writes his instructions about life in Christ to particular individuals. When he addresses “you,” he means “y’all” — the body of Christ, the community of faith, the church. “So, if y’all have been raised with Christ, y’all seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. All y’all set your minds on things that are above . . .”

So, brothers and sisters, let’s think about what the resurrection life means for all of us, together, united in Christ as the body of Christ, the community of faith, the Wallace Presbyterian Church, not just “after we are buried or cremated. . . but first of all . . . with the way we live right now.” Or, in the words of Colossians 3:1 from *The Message*: “So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, *act* like it.”

When I told Cheryl and Bill that my sermon title for today was “Practicing Resurrection: Part I,” I said, “Guess what next week’s title will be?” Yes, next Sunday we’ll hear some more about practicing resurrection, being serious about this new resurrection life with Christ, and acting like it.

Let us pray: Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for our new life which is hidden in Christ. Help us to continually seek the life above with Jesus Christ and not to be drawn away. Help us to live out what we have in Christ, who is our all in all. Help our lives to be shaped not by our circumstances, but by Christ, our hope in life and death. Amen.

NOTES

¹Found in “How to Live the Resurrection (Starting Now),” by Christine McParland, April 9, 2020 at www.tyndale.com.

²N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008).

³Michael J. Sanem, “Resurrection People,” April 9, 2018 at www.godinallthings.com.