

Matthew 28:1-10, 16-20 1 Corinthians 15:50-58 May 1, 2022

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

KEEP ON KEEPIN' ON

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.

In Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the founder and first king of Corinth. He was famous for his intelligence and his trickery and, most of all, for cheating Death not once but twice. The first time Sisyphus died, he descended into Hades and captured Thanatos, Death personified. With Death chained up and powerless, humans no longer died. The god, Ares, had to get involved to have Thanatos freed. The second time Sisyphus died (I guess the first time was reversed when he captured Thanatos), he had arranged with his wife ahead of time that she wouldn't prepare the customary offerings and sacrifices when he died. When Sisyphus again went to Hades, he begged Persephone to be allowed to go back to his wife to tell her how to complete the burial offerings. Of course, once Sisyphus returned to earth among the living, he didn't go back to Hades on his own. It is said he lived a very long time because Death didn't want to have anything to do with him since he had already been tricked twice.

Finally, King Sisyphus died for a third and final time. Zeus, the king of the gods, got involved and gave Sisyphus an eternal punishment so humans on earth wouldn't be tempted to try any of Sisyphus's tricks against Death. Here is how the hero Odysseus describes the fate of Sisyphus, which he saw when he visited Hades: "Then I witnessed the torture of Sisyphus, as he wrestled with a huge rock with both hands. Bracing himself and thrusting with his hands and feet he pushed the boulder uphill to the top. But every time, as he was about to send it toppling over the crest, its sheer weight turned it back once more, and once again towards the plain the pitiless rock rolled down. So once more he had to wrestle with the thing and push it up, while the sweat poured from his limbs and the dust rose high above his head."¹

You've probably had your share of Sisyphian tasks — problems that seem unending, exhausting, and make you feel as if all of your efforts are in vain. Some would say that is a mighty pessimistic view of life while others would say it's just being realistic. The tale of Sisyphus certainly makes us think about the purpose and/or futility of what we do and how we live our lives.

In a sense, the same can be said about your Christian life. What kind of Christian life do you lead? What motivates you to Christian service, if anything? What about your Christian faith shapes your behavior and your ethics as a follower of Jesus Christ? What keeps you going when the going gets tough? In other words, how do you keep on keepin' on?

Henry Allan "Harry" Ironside was a Bible teacher and preacher in the first half of the second century. He served as pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago from 1929 -

1948. He once said, “When you are studying your Bible and encounter the word ‘therefore,’ always stop and see what it’s THERE FOR! A reason certainly exists.” Well, a reason certainly exists for the apostle Paul to say “Therefore” in 1 Corinthians 15:58 as he wraps up his prolonged discussion of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead and what difference that makes for our lives. “Therefore,” Paul writes, “on account of, because of, as a result of all this, so then, consequently . . . because Christ has died and been raised from the dead, because he is the first fruits of all who have died believing in him, because you are no longer in your sins, because you have hope for the future, because you have the promise of life in Jesus Christ, because you will inherit the kingdom of God . . . on account of all of this, as a result of all of this, so then, consequently, **therefore** — “be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your work is not in vain.” (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Notice how Paul applies the promise of the resurrection directly to this present life and ties the power of the resurrection directly to how we are to live as believers and what we are supposed to do as followers of Jesus Christ. Paul gives us a command, an imperative — “Be!” — and it carries the sense of continuing to do something from this point forward, to keep on keepin’ on. Here’s how some different Christian writers have described the importance of that two word phrase, “Therefore, be . . .”

* Our sure future hope (resurrection/glorification) should serve to animate and energize present ethical behavior.²

* A firm belief in the resurrection and a solid hope for the future gives incentive for service in the present.³

* The resurrection is the necessary foundation for faithful action in the world. Those who affirm the truth of Christ’s resurrection will be given the moral confidence to live in a way that shows that their hope is not in vain.⁴

* The resurrection is not only about overcoming death. It shows us what our lives mean now. It means declaring the promises of God in our every day.⁵

* Living by the light of the life to come should not paralyze us but should fill our earth-life with purpose and power.⁶

In some of his other letters to believers in Philippi, Galatia, and Corinth, Paul writes about how the future hope of the resurrection can and should make a difference right here and now:

* To the Philippians, Paul wrote, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this 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 3:10-13)

* To the Galatian believers, Paul had this to say, “So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then,

whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.” (Galatians 6:9-10)

* In his second letter to the Christians at Corinth, Paul said, “Therefore, since it is by God’s mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.” (2 Corinthians 4:1)

On March 22, 1956, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a speech at the weekly meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association. He was only twenty-six years old and had recently been selected to lead the Montgomery bus boycott following the arrest of Rosa Parks. In his speech, Dr. King said, “Freedom doesn’t come on a silver platter. With every great movement toward freedom there will inevitably be trials. Somebody will have to have the courage to sacrifice. You don’t get to the Promised Land without going through the Wilderness. You don’t get there without crossing over hills and mountains, but if you keep on keeping on, you can’t help but reach it. We won’t all see it, but it’s coming and it’s because God is for it . . .”⁷ Certainly there must have been many times for Dr. King and the many others who were working for civil rights for all people when the task seemed Sisyphean, pointless, useless, never-ending. “But if you keep on keeping on, you can’t help but reach it . . .”

Fifteen years later, Curtis Mayfield released a song called “Keep on Keeping On” at the end of the turbulent 1960’s/beginning of the 1970’s. The song is not a religious song, but the first verse and chorus are a good commentary on Paul’s imperative to the Corinthian believers and to us as followers of Jesus Christ — “Therefore, be and keep on being, keep on keeping on.”

Everybody gather round and listen to my song
I’ve only got one
We who are young, should now take a stand
Don’t run from the burdens of women and men
Continue to give, continue to live
For what you know is right
Most of your life can be out of sight
Withdraw from the darkness and look to the light
Where everyone’s free
At least that’s the way it’s supposed to be
We just keep on keeping on
We just keep on keeping on
Many think that we have blown it
But they too will soon admit
That there’s still a lot of love among us
And there’s still a lot of faith, warmth and trust
When we keep on keeping on

A number of years ago, Lee Woodard and I were having one of our many lengthy theological conversations. I don’t remember the exact topic or context, but at one point

I said to Lee, “Getting into heaven is the not my main motivation for how I live my life.” Lee looked surprised and said, “You don’t want to go to heaven?” I replied, “That’s not what I said.” Lee asked, “Then what do you mean?” I explained, “I don’t get up every morning and think about what I need to do that day to make sure I get into heaven. I figure that’s God’s job. The Bible says, ‘if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.’ I’ve done that. No, I get up every morning and try to live my life in a way that shows I am thankful to God that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead.” I told Lee there were two important reasons I tried to let the hope of the resurrection shape my life in this way: (1) It reminds me that the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the hope it gives us is much more than just about me getting my ticket to heaven punched and (2) it reminds me that the resurrection calls me to live each and every day of this present life in the service of God. The thought is expressed much more eloquently in one of the concluding sections of “A Brief Statement of Faith” of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), which we sometimes use as our Affirmation of Faith in worship:

In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit,
we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God’s new heaven and new earth,
praying, “Come, Lord Jesus!”

The Christian life is a life oriented toward God and God’s ways. The power of Christ’s resurrection and the hope of our resurrection to come help us to be steadfast, immovable, and, we hope, always excelling in the work of the Lord, especially when the work of the Lord here on earth feels like we’re struggling to get the huge boulder up to the top of the hill, only to have it roll back down, and we have to start all over again.

Remember that phrase, “A firm belief in the resurrection and a solid hope for the future gives incentive for service in the present.” Here’s an interesting story that is a good illustration of that thought and the life-giving vision and power the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead brings to our daily tasks as we work for the Lord.

On September 2, 1666, a fire began in the King’s Bakery in Pudding Lane near London Bridge. Although fires were common, this fire soon burned out of control. Because of extremely dry conditions, the fire quickly spread through the city and efforts to put it out failed. Panicked people tried to escape by boat on the River Thames. King Charles II himself helped with the bucket brigades. The fire wasn’t totally extinguished until September 6. Only 20% of London remained standing. All civic buildings and approximately 13,000 private homes were destroyed. Somehow, only six people died. The fire raged so hot, the lead roof on St. Paul’s Cathedral melted, poured into the streets, and the cathedral collapsed.

The famous architect Christopher Wren submitted rebuilding plans for the city of London but there weren’t enough funds to pay for his design. However, he was commissioned to design and rebuild St. Paul’s Cathedral, a project that took ten years to

design and forty years to complete. The story is told that one day, Christopher Wren saw three bricklayers on a scaffold, working on the cathedral. One was kneeling, one was half-standing, and one was standing upright. They were all working very hard and fast. The famous architect asked each of them in turn, “What are you doing?” The first man answered, “I am a bricklayer. I’m working hard laying bricks to feed my family.” The second craftsman replied, “I’m a builder. I’m building a wall.” The third brick, who was the most productive worker of the group and the eventual group leader, looked at Christopher Wren and said, “I’m a cathedral builder. I’m building a great cathedral to the Almighty.”⁸

You know, there’s every possibility that not one of those three bricklayers lived long enough to see the completion of the rebuilding of St. Paul’s Cathedral. But that third bricklayer was inspired by a great vision and hope.

The Easter message — Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! — is for more than one day in the year. The hope of the resurrection isn’t just for some day out there in the future. The power of the resurrection is available to us today, as a gift from God, so that we can “be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of Lord, because we know that in the Lord our labor is not in vain.”

By the power of and in the hope of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we can keep on keepin’ on.

Let us pray: Risen Christ, may we who in baptism die to sin, rise again to new life and find our place in your living body. Give us grace to love one another, to follow in the way of your commandments, and to share your risen life. All praise is yours, now and throughout eternity. Amen.

NOTES

¹This information about Sisyphus is taken from Mark Cartwright, “Sisyphus,” December 14, 2016 at www.worldhistory.org.

²“Motivations for Ministry,” 1 Corinthians 15:58 Commentary, April 29, 2021 at www.precept-austin.org.

³Ibid.

⁴Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), p. 277.

⁵Brian Bantum, “Life after resurrection: Salvation is not a place but a way of life,” April 8, 2021 at www.christiancentury.org.

⁶Kenneth J. Foreman, *The Layman’s Bible Commentary*, Volume 21 (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1961), p. 110.

⁷Martin Luther King, Jr., Speech, March 22, 1956, Montgomery Improvement Association weekly meeting, as reported by Anna Holden, a teacher at Fisk University. Found at www.historicalthinkingmatters.org.

⁸Jim Baker, “The Story of Three Bricklayers — A Parable About the Power of Purpose,” at www.sacredstructures.org.