

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Vocabulary of Faith: Resurrection
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Exodus 14:21-27; Romans 6:1-11

I was discouraged. I was discouraged because all I ever did was die regardless of how many times I tried. What was I trying and where was I dying? I was trying and dying on Super Mario Brothers. I don't remember the exact year that we bought our son his first Nintendo, but he took to it like a duck to water. It was as if the controller was an extension of his brain. He would then say, "Dad, its your turn." And dutifully I would take the controller in hand and almost immediately die. I knew what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to do it...jump here, slide there, but it was no use. Granted with my son's help I did make it past level one, but in the end, no amount of instruction was going to help me be good at Super Mario Brothers, or any of his other games for that matter. It was incredibly discouraging to try so hard and to always come up short.

In some ways this is the way I feel about my life of faith, my following in the way of Jesus. I know what I am supposed to do. I know that I am supposed to love God with all of my heart soul, mind and strength and my neighbor as myself. I know that I am supposed to forgive as I have been forgiven, that I am to love and pray for my enemies, that I am supposed to share all I have with the poor, that I am supposed to be continually humble and self-effacing rather than proud, that I am to give to all who ask, that I am to pray without ceasing, that I am to work for justice in this world, that I am to honor the sabbath (which is often hard for ministers since it is the only day we work) and the list goes on. Each day I get in the game of following the way of Jesus, but then something happens. I drive into the parking lot at Kroger's, I read a story about people who hate and harm others, I am tempted by something new on eBay and suddenly all that knowledge and practice seems for naught. It is very discouraging to die one more time. Any of you ever feel that way? That you try so hard to follow Jesus and then something happens and it's as if it just flies out the window and you feel discouraged? If you do, know that this is nothing new, because it was where the Roman church found itself as Paul wrote to it.

The church at Rome was not a church that Paul had established but it found itself completely discouraged. They were so discouraged in fact that they had given up trying to follow in the way of Jesus and had returned to following in the un-way of Jesus. When I say the un-way of Jesus I am referring to a style of life that is the exact opposite of the way of Jesus, meaning a way of life defined by power, prejudice, hate and selfishness. In his letter, Paul calls this sin, but I like the un-way of Jesus better because we often limit sin to mean those things we don't like, whereas for Paul it entails a way of living. Why were the Roman Christians so discouraged? I believe they were because living the way of Jesus made them outcasts in the Empire. They were outcasts because the way of Jesus was exactly the opposite of the way of Rome. Christians were viewed as odd and even un-Roman. People lost employment, friends and family members because of their faith. To follow the way of Jesus was incredibly discouraging. Which is why Paul, in his letter to them, tells them that they should not be discouraged, but encouraged, because in the death and resurrection of Jesus, they had given the power and freedom they needed to follow in the way of Jesus.

I realize that this may sound a bit odd, that the resurrection of Jesus gave them the power and freedom to follow in the way of Jesus. I say this because most of the time when we think about resurrection we think about life after death. Resurrection is what we talk about at a memorial service or a graveside remembrance. It is that

assurance that our lives here are not all there is to life. And that is certainly true. Paul puts it this way in verse nine, “We know that Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.” And by extension over us. But, for Paul that is not all there is to resurrection. Resurrection is about the here and now. Resurrection is about what happens to us in this life. As Paul puts it, the death and resurrection of Jesus break the power, not only of death, but of sin, or as I have called it, the un-way of Jesus. What Paul means by this is that all those things that lead us away from the way of Jesus, no longer have control over us. What has control over our lives is the power of Jesus offered to us each day. And for that reason, we are not to be discouraged, but encouraged because even if we wander off, we have the power to try again.

Paul offers two images of the origins of this power and freedom to follow in the way of Jesus. The first is the image of our dying to our old selves that were trapped in the un-way of Jesus and being raised to be new persons who have the power to follow the way of Jesus. In verse four he writes, “*Therefore we have been buried with him in baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life.*” Notice first, that Paul links resurrection with life in the here and now, not in the eternal. Second, Paul says that something happens in our baptisms. That in baptism we are no longer children or adults of the un-way of Jesus, but that we have become people empowered to follow the way of Jesus. Let me ask, how many of you know who Peter Parker is? Right he is Spiderman. Consider his story. He is an ordinary kid until he is bitten by a radioactive spider. Then he is imbued with super powers and is capable of great good. This is the image Paul offers. We are no longer ordinary kids, but people capable of doing great good by living into the way of Jesus.

The second image has to do with being freed from slavery. In verse six he writes, “*We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.*” The image here is of the Exodus. Remember the story. The people were trapped on one side of the sea with the Egyptians in pursuit. God opens the waters and the people walk through them to the other side where they became free people, capable of living in the way of God in the promised Land. In other words, just as the people of Israel moved from being slaves in Egypt, to being free people in the Promised Land, so too we have moved from being slaves to the un-way of Jesus, to being free people capable of living in the way of Jesus. This means that the un-way of Jesus no longer holds us captive. We have the freedom to do what is right and good in God’s eyes.

I wish I could say this morning that because of the resurrection and the power and freedom it offers us, that we will be able to live perfectly in the Jesus’ way. I can’t because we won’t. Like me trying to master Super Mario Brothers, we will give it our best and sooner or later, we will find ourselves once again in the un-way of Jesus. We won’t slide, duck or jump in the right place...and it will seem as if we are back to square one. Yet, the good news is that not only will we never move back to square one but that we have infinite lives; infinite opportunities to try again and again to live in the way of Jesus. We have them because we are new people who have been given the power and the freedom to follow Jesus. What we will need then is continuing encouragement along the way. We will need opportunities to find the encouragement to keep moving forward. If you are looking for that kind of continuing encouragement, I have some good news for you. Over the next six weeks we will be showing you where you can find encouragement along the way. I would challenge you then to make a commitment to be here for the next six weeks during Eastertide as we explore those places where encouragement awaits in order for us to live fully into the Jesus’ way, blessing the world and blessing ourselves.