

SALVATION
THE POWER OF JESUS' DEATH AND RESURRECTION
AT WORK WITHIN US

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 & John 20:1-18

The Apostle Paul goes into a synagogue in a far flung city of the *diaspora*. He's asked to speak to the congregation. He steps into the *bimah* and says, "I have some good news, and I have some bad news. Which would you like to hear first?" The head rabbi replies, "Good news and bad news? Tell us the bad news first. The good news will console us." Paul says, "Okay, here's the bad news. The Messiah has come, but he's been killed and buried." "What!" exclaims the rabbi. "That's terrible news! What could possibly be good news?" Replies Paul, "The good news is – that's the good news."

I'm sure Paul would have gone on to tell the rest of the story – how God raised Jesus the Messiah from death on the third day and appeared to many including Paul himself. This, he reminded the Corinthians, is the good news he had received and passed on to them, the good news they had received and in which also they **were being saved**.

Being saved: most people think of salvation as something that only matters after you die. Those who are *saved* get to go to heaven. Salvation is typically thought of as a sort of *spiritual* status conferred by confession of faith in Jesus Christ. It's something that happens to you in a tent meeting or revival. And yet Paul speaks here to the Corinthians of *salvation* as something that is still in process, still in formation. He tells the Corinthians that "they are being saved."

One of my favorite Christian writers, Barbara Brown Taylor, professor of Christian Spirituality at Piedmont College, turned some of her undergraduate students loose on describing Paul's understanding of salvation. They came up with the image of pregnancy. Barbara Taylor describes their findings:

When you come to faith in Jesus, they said, then you become pregnant with salvation. Even if it has just begun, it is still a fact. It is a growing part of you, and if you mean to keep the child then there is no going back. The presence of this new (life) inside of you changes the way you think. It changes the way you live. You cannot know everything about it until it comes to full term, but meanwhile you are part of a process that is underway. (B.B. Taylor, "Easter Preaching and the Lost Language of Salvation, Journal for Preachers, Easter, 2002, pp. 22-23)

Salvation comes through the amazing story of Good Friday and Easter. "The memory of the cross is transformed by the discovery of the empty tomb. The stink of death is contradicted by the fresh smell of a new morning, as Jesus' friends stumble upon a kind of life they have not known before – so boundless, so wholly unexpected – that it permanently rearranges their previous understanding of reality. In the presence of the risen Christ, they understand that there is no wreckage so total that God cannot redeem it. There is no cause so lost that God cannot breathe new life into it. (B.B. Taylor, *ibid.*, p.

18) This is the message of salvation. The cross and the resurrected Lord is the foundation for our new life in Christ.

“*Salvation*” is an abstract word and yet *salvation* is a living, dynamic pregnant process of God working in us. It is a transformation from a negative condition connecting one to death... to a positive condition connecting one to life and immortality. It brings forgiveness of sins. Jesus’ death and resurrection connects believers to a power that is personal, transcendent and transformative. It connects people directly to God. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul wrote, “*If anyone is in Christ there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!*” Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection there is a fundamental change in the order of reality. This is an incredible change. It is not moving the furniture around; it is knocking down the house and building a new one.

But what does this new life in Christ, this thing we call “*salvation*,” look like? What does it feel like? How do we know it when we see it? I think the best way to see it is to look for examples.

Mary was the very first witness to Jesus’ resurrection, the first to meet her risen Lord. I can’t imagine a change more shocking and profound than Mary’s overwhelming grief at her teacher – her Rabboni’s – terrible death, her bitter frustration at finding his grave empty, his body apparently dumped somewhere else, only to come face to face with the living Lord and have him call her by name. *Mary!* Everything changed the instant she heard that voice. Everything she had known was turned upside down. Death had just been turned on its head. Darkness to light, defeat to victory. Absolutely everything would now be seen from an entirely new perspective. Even the good things from the past had changed. She could no longer hold onto Jesus as she used to know him. She had to let go and discover his new existence. Talk about a new creation!

You would think that the power of this new life would be obvious to anyone who saw it. Christians who were pregnant with the possibility of new life and salvation would obviously be different, transformed, alive with the joy of Jesus’ resurrection. In his classic apologetic, *Mere Christianity* C.S. Lewis suggests the reason that it’s now so obvious. The transformation Christ is working in people begins with where they are. A deeply troubled person in the process of God’s redemption might be very changed, but to someone who didn’t know him or her would still seem a troubled person. Another individual who had all the refinements of intelligence, private schooling and wealth might appear most charming when he in fact was well down the road to ruin.

Still we can see many concrete examples of the process of salvation making a huge concrete difference in people’s lives. People in recovery from alcohol or other addictions so often start their recovery with a moment of awakening when they realize their own powerlessness, their own inability by their own strength to change their behavior. It is often at that moment that they *are given* the will to change. They call it a *higher power*. They begin to seek help and are strengthened through the fellowship of other recovering

addicts to live each day as a new opportunity to choose life instead of death. That recovery from death to life is what salvation looks like. It's a growing process.

I see that process of death and resurrection, of *salvation*, at work in many people...

- In a friend whose depression was so severe that she despaired for her life, who slowly through faith and prayer and counseling and also medication rediscovered how to feel. She believes that God has been at work in her through all the means of her healing and celebrated her renewal of life by renewing her baptismal vows and allowing herself to receive Holy Communion. Today she is one the most joyful people I know.
- I see that process of salvation at work in another friend who asked one day to dedicate a musical project – he was recording a solo jazz-guitar album – to God. He went on to make the album and a second. But his dedication of his gift to God led him to take the leadership in a contemporary worship service as leader of the band. A dozen years later he is faithfully leading that group of Christians in song.
- I see that process of salvation at work in another friend who was so brutalized growing up that he thought himself worthless, no good, a failure. He is learning to see his worth in God's eyes, to trust that he is loved and to venture out in loving others.
- I see that process of salvation in faithful, gifted people who share their gifts with others. I see it in leaders who share their vision for Christian community, who instruct others, who lead by example.
- I see that process of salvation being worked out in people who are weak as well as people who are strong, in broken lives being healed as well as gifts freely offered by those who are well.
- I see that process being worked out where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, in prayer, in Bible study, in service to those in need, in worship and in fellowship with other Christians.

How is that good news of salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection at work in you? How is it a living, pregnant force of new life for you? What are the signs of that new life growing in you? How can you nurture that life? How can you continue to grow in it?

When Mary, crying inconsolably, unbelievably sad and defeated heard what she assumed to be the gardener call her by name, "*Mary!*" everything changed. A whole new world opened. And it opened not just for Mary, but for all of us.

The foundational message of Jesus death, burial and resurrection is good news. It is the good news by which we are being saved. May that salvation grow in us. May that new

life come to full term in us. In the words of the Poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, “*Let him easter in us, be a dayspring to the dimness of us, be a crimson-cresseted east.*” **Amen.**