

Easter

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan
April 3, 2018*

Scripture

*We were buried with Christ into death
in order that we, too, may live a new life.*

Romans 6:4

Sermon

I've been preaching for 30 years. That's a lot of sermons. I try not to repeat myself. But I'll warn you, there's one thing I always say in my Easter sermons. I make sure to repeat it every year. It's this: Easter is not about a dead person coming back to life. No; Easter is about resurrection. And resurrection is much more!

To repeat: Easter is not about a dead person coming back to life. Otherwise Easter would be about . . . Lazarus. Remember him? Lazarus was dead and buried for four days. Then Jesus said, "Lazarus, come out!" And he did (John 11:38-44). But Easter is not about Lazarus. Because Easter is not about a dead person coming back to life.

Otherwise Easter would be about . . . a little girl, the daughter of Jairus. Remember her? The house was filled with people who were weeping and wailing, because the little girl was dead. But Jesus said, "Little girl, get up!" And she did (Mark 5:38-43). But Easter is not about that little girl. Because Easter is not about a dead person coming back to life.

Otherwise Easter would be about . . . a widow's son. Remember him? Jesus bumped into his funeral procession. He told the widow not to cry. Then he turned to her dead son and said, "Get up!" And he did (Luke 7:11-15). But Easter is not about the widow's son. Because Easter is not about a dead person coming back to life.

No; Easter is about resurrection. And resurrection is not the same thing as a dead person coming back to life. All those dead people who came back to life—Lazarus, the little girl, the widow's son—they all came back to their old lives. They all picked up where they left off. They continued to live their old lives in this old creation. And then

they all had to die again. Because this old creation has become a death trap. No one gets out alive.

But on Good Friday, Jesus laid down his old life. On Good Friday, he set aside the life he had received within this old creation. Then, on Easter, Jesus began a new life, a new life that is not part of this old creation! Because Jesus, in his new life, is the first installment of God's new creation.

That is what resurrection is about. Resurrection is the beginning of the new heaven and earth. That's why Jesus Christ is called "the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead" (Colossians 1:18).

And this has everything to do with us. It has everything to do with the kind of people we are. It has everything to do with the kind of lives we live, the kind of lives we live right here, right now in this old creation.

When Jesus is raised, the new creation begins. But not just for him. The new creation also begins for us. That's what Paul the Apostle says in 2 Corinthians 5:17. He says, "If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"

Now, we still have our old bodies, and we still live in this old creation. But we have been changed. We have already begun to live the life of God's new creation. It's a new life, and we're living it in Christ. It's a new life, and we're living it by the Spirit and we're living it through faith.

"The old has gone, the new is here!" That's what the Apostle says. Here's another way to put it. We are crucified with Christ, and we are raised with Christ. And the dying and the rising cannot be separated. That's what the Apostle says in Galatians 2:20. He says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God."

So, to be Christian is to be crucified with Christ. To be Christian is to be raised with Christ. And the sign of our dying and rising is Baptism. That's what the Apostle says in Romans 6:4. He says, "We were buried with Christ through baptism into death in order that we, too, may live a new life."

Our brother Frey was baptized just a few minutes ago. He was baptized into the Death and Resurrection of Christ. Baptism is a sign that Frey has left behind the old life. And it's a sign that he has begun to live the new life we have in Christ.

Baptism is also a seal of the promises of God. God promises to be faithful. And there's no better place to see the faithfulness of God than in Christ himself. There's no better place to see the faithfulness of God than in the Death and Resurrection of Jesus.

Christ was put to death to do away with death, to do away with death in order to make room for life. By his death, Christ has sprung the death trap. Now death has no ultimate power over the children of God.

More than that, by his resurrection Christ has launched God's new creation. Now we live a life that's only possible through Jesus. This is true for our brother Frey today. And it's true for all of us who belong to Jesus. Thanks be to God!

So, what does our new life look like? Well, let me say from the start that our new life is a process. We are not all the way there, not by a long shot. For us, the struggle against sin continues. So for us, new life is a hope as much as it is a reality.

But in hope, in godly hope, we are living every day toward that reality. We are living every day toward the reality of new life that begins with the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So, what does our new life look like? To begin with, it's a life shaped by our prayers. When we say the Lord's Prayer, we ask that God's name be honored here on earth, we ask that God's Kingdom be present here on earth, and we ask that God's will be done here on earth. In our new life, we do what we pray for.

For one thing, we honor the name of God. We glorify the Father in our worship. We give thanks to the Son in our prayers. And we welcome the Spirit to shape our wills.

For another thing, we seek God's Kingdom above everything else. We acknowledge Jesus as our only Master. We pledge all our allegiance to him.

For one more thing, we embrace God's plans to heal and restore the world, and we become agents of God's peace: in our lock-up, in our circle of friends, in our politics. We do the hard work of making the world a better place, starting with our own corner.

What does our new life look like? It looks like the fruit of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). It looks like all those virtues taking root in us.

New life looks like all those virtues pushing aside the old weeds of hostility, bitterness, meanness, evil, selfishness, pushiness, rage. You know what I'm talking about. You've been there. That's why you're here. But instead of all that, our new life looks a lot like the life that Jesus lived.

What does our new life look like? It looks like a never-ending journey. We're on our way, putting distance between who we used to be and who we are now. We're on our way, bridging the distance between who we are now and who God wants us to be.

It's an every day thing: dying and rising with Christ. Putting to death our old selves. And welcoming the new life created in us by the Holy Spirit through the Word and through faith.

And this, of course, is what baptism is about. And I know there are all kinds of ways to be baptized: a little sprinkling, a complete dunking, and everything in between. Lots of disagreements on that.

But there is this. Maybe you haven't heard about it, but a large group of Christian traditions have agreed on this much about baptism. When someone is baptized, it's not enough for him just to get damp. No; baptism takes more water than that! How much water? Enough water so that it flows.

Flowing water, that makes me think of a river. And that's a good thing. Because if you let it, a river will take you somewhere. That's what Baptism does. It sets us afloat on the river of God's grace, and it takes us somewhere. It takes us away from who we have been, and it takes us toward who God is calling us to be.

Baptism takes us away from our old life, and it takes us toward a brand new life. Because we are baptized into Christ. And in Christ, there is a new creation. In Christ, it's Easter every day.

✠

Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

✠