

That You May Have Life

John 20:19-23, 30-31
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First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

There's a parable about a wild goose shot down by a local hunter. He was only wounded in one wing, and landed safely in a barnyard. Naturally the local turkeys and chickens were quite startled by this sudden visitor from the sky. As they became more comfortable with this stranger, they asked about what they had seen but never experienced: "Tell us what it's like to fly." "It's wonderful!" said the goose, telling story after story of his flights, saying, "It's beautiful to soar out in the wild blue yonder! ..." All the birds were quite impressed by the stories, ... and it became a weekly event for the goose to entertain all the barnyard birds with his stories. They even provided a little box for him to stand on, so everyone could see him better; did I mention this is a parable?. But the strangest thing happened, or maybe I should say, never happened. While the domestic birds very much enjoyed hearing about the glories of flight, they never tried to fly themselves. And the wild goose, even though his wing had healed, continued to talk about flying but never actually flew again

How easy it is to talk about being a Christian without acting like one. How easy it is to stand in church and say, "Jesus is Lord," without actually turning our lives over to his direction. How easy it is to sit in our comfortable homes and ignore a world in desperate need of our witness. How easy it is for a minister to talk about ministry without actually doing it. It's easy to talk, but you must really flap those wings to fly.

So says Larry Davies, in an online devotional titled "If you're going to fly ... you've got to flap your wings!"¹ Yes, it's easy to talk about being a Christian, but to really fly we must flap our wings – or walk the walk and squawk the squawk, you might say. Or you might not; that was really cheesy; you know, birds squawk.

But seriously, what is it to soar to new heights as a Christian? In today's New Testament lesson, the Risen Lord instructs the disciples –and us – on one of the most important and hardest acts a Christian can ever undertake – forgiveness, forgiveness based on our faith in Jesus and knowledge of his earthly ministry.

The culmination of Jesus' earthly ministry comes after the resurrection, when the Risen Lord gives final instructions to the disciples before ascending to heaven, there to sit on the right side of God the Father.

As John describes it, it's the day after Mary Magdalene tells the disciples that Jesus has risen from the dead. They've closed themselves off in a house "for fear of the Jews, (and)

¹ Larry Davies, "If you're going to fly ... you've got to flap your wings!" Sowing Seeds of Faith Web Site, sowingseedsofffaith.com/Devotions.htm. Retrieved October 21, 2003.

Jesus comes and stands among them and says, “Peace be with you.” They are living in fear and Jesus brings them peace. What does the peace of the Lord provide for us amid our fears, our times of isolation?

To answer that, we have to look at what we fear and why we isolate from others. When it comes to certain parts of our lives, we hide things from others because of fear. The disciples feared being persecuted like Jesus was, and so do we. We fear being misunderstood. The disciples feared being alienated from society, and so do we. We fear that others won’t accept us just the way we are. Those are our fears.

And then there’s the fears of the Jews. The Jewish religious leaders – the Pharisees – felt threatened by Jesus and his followers, because they misunderstood his purpose. Gripped by such fear, they allowed sin to creep into their lives and take over, forgetting that leaders are called to serve the people, not themselves. They just became too attached to their own comfort and power.

It’s no wonder there was a great divide in society between those who followed Jesus and those who feared him and his teachings. And yet, Jesus, instead of destroying his opponents – those who feared and resisted his teachings – Jesus brings peace and hope. Peace and hope amid our fears.

Virginia was 19 years old and pregnant when she went to live with her 15th set of foster parents. Her case file read like a textbook example of neglect, abuse and bureaucratic failure. She sat silently in a chair, hands neatly clasped, staring into her lap. The foster parents were told about Virginia’s history and hoped to give her a safe and peaceful home, even if the placement would be temporary; temporary was the story of Virginia’s life. Looking at Virginia, the foster mother said, “Are you frightened, Virginia?” “Kinda,” she said, not looking up. “I’ve been in lots of homes.” “Well,” said the mother, “Let’s hope this time turns out for the best.” Virginia’s reply is one of those statements that sticks to your soul – it was flat, without change of tone. Without looking up, she said, “Hurts too much to hope.”²

The reason we fail to find a sense of peace and safety is because it hurts too much to hope – to hope that God – and others – will look beyond our troubled past, to hope that those who’ve wronged us are actually worthy of our forgiveness, to hope that God would bring peace amid betrayal, healing amid hurt, faith amid fear, and that something truly wonderful and life-giving could grow, if only ours were a more forgiving world.

Think of that person who’s wronged you, and listen as Jesus says, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” That’s powerful. That’s life changing.

² Source unknown, retrieved April 12, 2023 from <https://www.homileticonline.com/members/installment/93000327>

Now think of the things you've done that you just can't forgive yourself for, not to mention expect those you've wronged to forgive you. And once again listen to Jesus as he says, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." That's powerful; that's life changing.

John tells us that those words of forgiveness – and all the teachings of Jesus – "are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." Forgiveness is that important in life. Jesus, on the cross, stared death in the face, and said to God, "Forgive them; for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:24)

Jesus offers forgiveness as the first step toward peace – and joy-as we forgive ourselves and embrace a sense of peace, and forgive others and create a pathway to peace. But forgiveness doesn't just happen. For the Christian, forgiveness begins with belief in Jesus Christ, believing in Jesus so that, as John says, "you may have life in his name," in his power and blessing.

Those who believe in Jesus Christ and embrace him as their personal Lord and Savior, they hear the teachings of Jesus and feel his blessing, and they respond by treating others with grace and forgiveness, and this brings peace and joy.

Whereas to those who reject the teachings and faith of Jesus, they live in doubt, and this brings bitterness and condemnation, both for themselves and for the people around them. They feel vulnerable, threatened and attacked. They feel the very thing they fear, because they don't trust Jesus or anyone else.

So ask yourself, how do you want to live your life – with faith that forgiveness can bring peace and joy, or with fear and resignation that you're not good enough, that others are out to get you, that there is no forgiveness in life, not for you or for anyone else?

It's a question to ask ourselves whenever we feel vulnerable, threatened or attacked. In such moments – and in all of life – may God bless you with a life of faith and hope and forgiveness, and bless our world with his Spirit of peace and joy. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Holy God, we marvel at the mystery of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection. We are awed by his obedience, astonished by the depth of his love for us, and amazed by the display of your power over the forces of sin and death

You are a God of wonders. You restore that which has been lost, bring new life from that which is old, create beauty from sin and ugliness, and offer healing and hope where there appears to be only sickness and death.

Your miraculous power continues to work in our lives and in our world. Set our hearts aflame and open our eyes that we may recognize your presence in every person, in every situation, in every place.

We pray your Spirit of comfort and peace upon those grieving a loss. We pray your Spirit of strength and healing – body and soul – for those dealing with health issues.

With gratitude that you hear us in our time of need, let us pray together in the name of Jesus, the Promised One, the Christ, our risen Lord who is with us now and forever, and who taught us to say when we pray:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**