

THE SEED OF LIFE IN THE SOIL OF DEATH
Luke 24:1-12

Last Monday I put an entry on my Facebook, "Talkin' to Jesus about Easter Sunday." I don't put many entries on Facebook, but I was just praying and asking the Lord what could I say that might help people understand the importance of His resurrection and the immense difference that He could make in their lives today. Whenever I pray, I try to listen and whenever an unexpected thought enters my mind related to what I just asked about in prayer, I believe that is the Lord answering. He said to tell His story and to tell my story.

Many of us have heard Jesus' story so often, that we forget the power of it. The drama of His life started before He was born, when His mother, Mary, became pregnant, while still a virgin. He grew up with stories of being born in Bethlehem, and laid in a manger. How angels appeared to shepherds announcing His birth. Wise men searched for Him, found Him, and brought Him gifts. Herod's soldiers came to kill Him, and killed all the other male babies of Bethlehem, while He and his family escaped to Egypt. He heard of how they returned to Nazareth, where He grew up and His adoptive father, Joseph, taught Him to be a carpenter, and where He also learned the Scriptures.

For most of Jesus' life, He worked hard as a carpenter, providing for His mother and His younger siblings. When He turned 29 or 30, He left home, and traveled south to see His cousin, John the Baptist. When John baptized Jesus, the Spirit of God descended on Him like a dove and the voice of God said, "This is my beloved Son with whom I am well pleased." Then Jesus went out into the wilderness where He fasted and was tempted by the Devil for 40 days. When Jesus returned He began preaching about the Kingdom of God, teaching and performing miracles. Even those closest to Him recognized Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Yet after only 3 years of ministry, one of His closest friends betrayed Him to His enemies. He was arrested under trumped up charges, severely beaten and whipped within an inch of His life, and sentenced to be nailed to a cross and hang there until He was dead – one of the cruelest means of execution ever devised by man. Jesus died a terrible, torturous death on a Roman cross. The Roman soldier in charge made sure He was dead by sticking a spear into His heart. A rich man named, Joseph of Arimathea, who had some influence, claimed the body for burial. They brought Jesus' dead body to the rich man's unused, personal tomb carved out of rock. They laid His body down on a stone shelf, carved out for that purpose inside that tomb. They sealed the mouth of the tomb with a huge stone.

Without question everyone thought, "I guess that's it. When you bury someone, they stay buried." But on the third day, something happened. Through the power of God, Jesus just didn't wake up, His mortal body was still full of the injuries of His beatings and the torture of the cross, His heart pierced through by the Roman spear. Jesus was resurrected, transformed – his mortal body was changed to an immortal body. He rose from the dead, and He is alive today. He was and is the Christ, the Son of the Living God,

who saved us from our sins by His death on the Cross, bringing eternal life to those who turn their life over to Him and put their absolute faith and trust in Him.

During the season of Lent, the 40 days before Easter (not including Sundays), we have been talking about “The Seeds of Easter in the Soil of Lent.” Jesus said in John 12:23-24:

²³Jesus replied, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. ²⁴I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

It reminds me of the sunflower. The sunflower starts with this tiny striped black & white seed, smaller than a fingernail. It is buried in the ground as if dead. Then through the miraculous way God has designed nature, the seed germinates, and transforms into something totally different and unexpected. It continues to grow into a huge stalk over 6 feet high. Then a large, yellow blossom comes out at the top, and a sunflower appears. But in the cycle of life of a sunflower, that flower does what it was made to do. It bows its head toward the ground and dies. And in dying it produces hundreds of sunflower seeds that fall to the ground, to be buried and rise again. Jesus died, was buried and on the third day rose again to bring us life.

So, if Jesus really is the actual Son of the Living God; if He really did die on the Cross for our sins; if He really did rise from the dead to live forever, to be with us now, to forgive us from our sins, to give us abundant life now, and eternal life forever – then what difference has He made in your life? Take a look at your own life and how you are living today. Does Jesus Christ make any difference in your life? If so, then what has changed in you? How are you living for Him? You have to die to this life, and be born again. To surrender it all, bury it in the ground and let God raise you up – new and alive.

I remember before I gave my life to Christ, I was afraid of what I would have to change, what I would have to give up to become a Christian – I mean the real thing, not this act of pretending I believe in Heaven and then living like someone going to Hell.

Recently I just finished re-reading one of my all time favorite writings of C.S. Lewis, called, The Great Divorce. It is a fantasy novel about the divorce or separation between Heaven and Hell. The narrator takes a bus ride from Hell to visit the outskirts of Heaven. In the Preface, Lewis says, “If we insist on keeping Hell (or even earth) we shall not see Heaven: if we accept Heaven we shall not be able to retain even the smallest and most intimate souvenirs of Hell. I believe, to be sure, that any man who reaches Heaven will find that what he abandoned (even in plucking out his right eye) was precisely nothing: that the kernel of what he was really seeking even in his most depraved wishes will be there, beyond expectation, waiting for him in ‘the High Countries.’” I remember my own unwillingness to let go of the “souvenirs of Hell.”

Now here’s my story. I was raised at Munholland United Methodist Church in Metairie. My mom made sure that my sister and I were there every Sunday for Sunday School and Church. I believed Jesus was the Son of God, that He died on the cross, and that He rose

again – but it really didn't make any difference in my life. I still did whatever I felt like doing.

Then, I'm not sure when it first started happening, I think when I was about 18 years old. I started to feel the need to take God more seriously. So I tried to stop committing some of the habitual sins that were a part of my life. But it didn't work. I tried by my own will to stop, but my sin had such a grip on me, I would give in within a day or two. I remember being angry with myself, and frustrated, thinking, "This is impossible." I just quit trying.

About a year later, I felt like my life hit bottom. Everything important to a 19 year old was going wrong. My girlfriend of 3 years broke up with me, my grades in Pre-Med were dropping, my parents were on my back about it. I was at a bad place and something had to give. I had been going back and getting involved with the church, playing guitar with the youth choir. One day a visiting choir came to sing at our church. I saw something in them that I didn't have. They openly told me about Jesus as their Savior. That night after their concert, they gave an invitation for people to come to the altar and pray. I went and kneeled at the altar by myself to surrender and ask Jesus to take the life that I had messed up so badly, to forgive me and to come into my heart and life. I remember getting up from the altar rail and going back to my seat thinking, "Well, I guess that's it." I let go of my "souvenirs of Hell" and just surrendered it all, if that was what it would take. When you die and are buried, you let it all go. Most of my bad behavior changed immediately. Suddenly I didn't want to do those things – they repulsed me. What I couldn't do on my own, God did in me. Some things I still struggled with until the Lord helped me bury them, to where He resurrected them into something wonderful.

It makes me think of Galatians 5, when the apostle Paul talks about the battle between our fleshly desires and the Spirit of God – sort like a tug of war. Galatians 5:19-23 says:

¹⁹The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; ²⁰idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions ²¹and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. ²²But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

We crucify the desires of the flesh on the cross, let them die, and bury them. Even your own goodness must die. Then God does something wonderful. He transforms those desires into something new - the Fruit of the Spirit. Then Galatians 5:24-25 says:

²⁴Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ²⁵Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. ²⁶Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other.

What dead things do you need to bury in your life? What souvenirs of Hell are you trying to bring into Heaven with you? You can't negotiate with God (believe me I tried) – it's all or nothing. The Apostle Paul understood it when he said in Galatians 2, "I am crucified with Christ, therefore I no longer live. Jesus Christ now lives in me."

Jesus suffered and died on the Cross for you to be made right with God. You just have to receive that gift by faith. But you can't receive anything, as long as your hands continue to grip the things in your life that need to be buried. Let it all go. And God, Who raised Christ from the dead, will raise you up out of the soil of death. You will have abundant life and eternal life. All because Jesus rose on this day. That's what Easter is all about.