

God's Greater Story – The Resurrecting Christ

4th Sun. after Pent. – 6/28/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 7:1-13 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 4, [Paul says,] **“Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to Him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.”**

Introduction

- ⊗ I'm sure most of you have at least heard of the famous painter from the middle to late 1800s, Vincent Van Gogh. For a year, he spent time in a mental asylum in the southern part of France.
 - ➔ At times, he was allowed outdoors on the grounds, accompanied by an attendant. At other times, he was confined to the building, where he painted scenes that he saw through the window of his room.
 - ➔ You see, Van Gogh was quite disturbed; not only living in the confinement of his room but even more living in the confines of his mind. He regularly suffered seizures and mental distress. Where could Vincent go for relief?
- ⊗ Into his suffering and confinement came a letter; one that was small but powerful. It came from his brother, Theo. With the letter Theo sent Van Gogh a copy of an etching by an earlier artist, Rembrandt.
 - ➔ This letter and etching opened the door for Van Gogh to rediscover both life and hope.
- ⊗ In the bulletin today, I've placed a copy of Rembrandt's etching, the first of two that you'll see there. I know it's small so it's kind of hard to see, but I think it will still help you understand what I'm talking about.
 - ➔ The picture was Rembrandt's fifth etching of “The Raising of Lazarus”. In the picture you see Jesus standing in the middle as a ruling figure; towering and powerful with Lazarus at His feet.
 - ➔ John 11:43 tells us that Jesus “cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out’.” And here in Rembrandt's picture we see Lazarus is coming out of the tomb. No one in the painting is looking at Jesus. All eyes are on Lazarus as he rises up from the grave.
 - ➔ Yet Jesus stands there, as He had only moments earlier identified Himself to be “the Resurrection and the Life” (Jn. 11:28), showing now that He is the Resurrecting Christ. You heard the distinction I made there right? The One who is “the resurrection” is therefore the only one authorized and capable to be the one who is “resurrecting” others from their graves as well.
 - ➔ Yes, from Jesus comes all power; the power over death and the power of life. In His rule as Lord and Savior, He raises Lazarus; opening as well the eyes of all people to see His almighty power; the power of the resurrecting Christ.
- ⊗ When Van Gogh who was laying, if you will, in the “tomb” his mental anguish, received this picture, the power of Rembrandt's etching inspired him.
 - ➔ Though he had heard it described in words, when he actually looked at the picture, Van Gogh saw more than one could ever write. So inspired was Van Gogh as he pondered the etching that he turned around and painted it himself. That is the second painting you will find in the bulletin.
 - ➔ With this painting Van Gogh sent back to his brother a letter, trying to put into words what he saw.

- ✘ You see, there in the suffering and confinement of an asylum, with the help of Rembrandt's etching, Van Gogh experienced the power of the Resurrecting Christ; Christ who brought life and hope and beauty not only to Van Gogh, but into the entire world.

I. The Power of the Resurrecting Christ:

- ✘ Our Epistle Reading this morning comes from another letter; a letter that proclaims the power of the Resurrecting Christ as well.
 - ➔ The apostle Paul first sent this letter to the newly formed Christian church in Rome, but it comes among us today to also bring life and hope and beauty into our lives and world.
- ✘ Consider for example, how Paul opens His letter. He says 1:1&4, "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus ... [who] was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by His resurrection from the dead".
 - ➔ The language Paul uses is very similar to that used by servants of Caesar, except that the powerful ruler that Paul serves is not Caesar. Paul serves Jesus Christ, the ruler of all things; the one declared to be the Son of God in power by His resurrection from the dead.
 - ➔ Then in 1:16 Paul states the main theme of his letter: "For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes".
 - ➔ You see, Paul's letter is all about power; the power of the Gospel to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.
- ✘ Finally, consider how Paul closes the letter. In Romans 16:20 he says, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" also. So from beginning to end and all the way through, Paul's letter is filled with the power of the resurrecting Christ; bringing life and salvation to all people.
 - ➔ And why wouldn't it be? Paul had himself met the resurrected Christ, and you might remember his initial meeting with Jesus on the Damascus road (Acts 9). Paul found out that Jesus was much more than the resurrected Christ. He was also the resurrecting Christ.
 - ➔ The point is that when Jesus appeared after His resurrection, He changed lives – Mary who was mourning outside Lazarus' tomb; Thomas in the room doubting Jesus had even been raised; Peter out on the lake fishing.
- ✘ All of these were individuals, raised from sorrow and fear and discouragement; raised back to life and faith. And last of these, but not least, was the apostle Paul.
 - ➔ Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and raised him from death in the law to life in the resurrecting Christ. Now Paul proclaims this power to all people; to the church at Rome and to us today. Yes, Paul turns your eyes and mine to Jesus in faith, for only Jesus raises us from the death that our sin deserves unto life – today.

II. Freed from the Condemning Power of the Law:

- ✘ Let's admit it though, sometimes Jesus is hard to see. Like the figures in Rembrandt's etching, people today, maybe even you and I are looking everywhere except to Christ.
 - ➔ For the church in Rome, Paul was concerned that they were looking to the law as an actual source of life.
 - ➔ They saw the law; the Ten Commandments and all of what we know as the Old Testament today, as a power for life. They turned wholly to that law, seeking to obey it to perfection and thinking that even the slightest slip up would separate them from God's life in the world and eternity.

- ⊗ Unfortunately, they were so focused upon the law that they lost sight of the promised Christ.
 - Here's a common example of how people still think this way today: consider a family that brings their son to Sunday school not because they want him to grow in relationship with Jesus but simply because they want him to learn the Ten Commandments and get a good moral foundation. Later, they're just fine with the possibility that he might choose to follow God in any religion. But for now, what is important is that he get the basics; the law of God. This family, as so many do today, sees the law as holy and righteous and good. But they have lost sight of the fullness of God.
 - They are like the countless people I converse with, most recently one I spoke with just yesterday, who believes this: "If he/she lives a 'good life' – that is doesn't lie, or cheat, or swear or steal, then he/she deserves eternal life with God".
- ⊗ But Paul writes this letter to be sure that no one does that; that no one sees the law without seeing Jesus. And Paul does this because he knows the terrifying power of the law.
 - Oh, it has power, all right; the power to awaken our sin as Paul says in verse 9. Although the Romans see life in the law, Paul knows that eventually they will see death if the law is all that they see.
 - While God's law is good, the thing is, our lives are not. So holding on to the law without Christ is like holding on to a knife as it cuts you to death. The law's power is to condemn sinners, to show us the death that we actually deserve.
 - Paul says in verse 5 that it arouses "our sinful passions". When you hear what you are not supposed to do, you then end up wanting to do it. Paul didn't know what coveting was until he was told not to covet and then sin awakened and created all kinds of coveting within him.
 - It's like the mother that tells her son before she leaves to be sure not to even touch the cookies in the cookie jar; cookies that he didn't even know were there until she told him. When sin comes alive, we then end up dying; dying while holding on to the good law of God.
- ⊗ For this reason, Paul points us to Christ; the One who dies while holding on to us and our sin. Without Him we are sinners in the hands of an angry God. But Christ saw us in our sin and gave his life for our salvation. He took the condemning power of the law for you so that through His dead body, Jesus could set you free.
 - In verse 4 Paul writes, "Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ". In His death, Christ puts to death; that is crushes and brings to an end the condemning power of the law. By His death, Christ brings you life.
 - Christ sets you free eternally.

III. He Resurrects Us to Live as a People for God:

- ⊗ It seems odd, to be living in America, and listening to Paul tell us about freedom. After all, we Americans pride ourselves on freedom; freedom of speech, freedom of the press, academic freedom ... the list goes on and on. In fact, our infatuation with freedom leads many to believe that they have the freedom to rewrite even the laws of God and thereby create their own different way of living in this world.
 - But God, in Deuteronomy, commanded Israel to remember His commandments, to "tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads" (Deut. 6:8). And that's literally what they did. They tied His word to their bodies with leather straps.
 - Many today reject Christianity and run away from God because they see it only as a bunch of binding rules and regulations. As a result we see today what Paul saw in Rome; people playing

loose with God's Commands and teachings about marriage, human sexuality, the value of human life, what constitutes truth or fiction, what it means to love and serve one another in relation to my own personal "inalienable rights" and so much more.

- ✘ Paul teaches though that God has set His law in place to hold everyone accountable before Him. And because you and I will, and do fall short and break His law, He has claimed us graciously in the death of Christ; to free us from the condemning power of the law; even more to raise us in the life of Christ so that we can now live and bear fruit for Him.

→ That is why Paul turns our attention to the resurrecting Christ; because only He frees us from the power of the law to live as people who love God's law; who love God and the people around us as we seek to follow God's law by the power and forgiveness of Christ.

Conclusion

- ✘ When Van Gogh looked at the etching by Rembrandt, he couldn't put what he saw into words. He had to paint his own version of the Raising of Lazarus.

→ Notice in his version that Van Gogh focused in on the figure of Lazarus rising up from the grave. Martha is pulling the veil from his eyes and Lazarus is only beginning to see the world again.

- ✘ If you look closely at the face of Lazarus, you see that Van Gogh actually painted his own face there in the face of Lazarus. The color version shows a thin pale man with a red beard, rising from the grave; not yet able to see all that Jesus has done for him; just beginning to live, but still tasting of the wonder of the Resurrecting Christ in his flesh.

→ In the same way, Paul's letter invites you and me to live in the power of the Resurrecting Christ today. Though we do not see Him now, we know that He is risen and ruling over all things. We know His law; His commandments are holy and righteous and good.

- ✘ In Jesus, we have died to the curse of the law. In Him, we have been raised to a new life in the Spirit. And now we begin in Christ's power, to experience the first fruits of faith as we serve in His kingdom today and forever. Amen.