

Arisen
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Colossians 3:1-4

¹ So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ²Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, ³for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ⁴When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

John 20:1-18

¹ Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. ²So she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’ ³Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. ⁴The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. ⁵He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, ⁷and the cloth that had been on Jesus’ head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. ⁸Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; ⁹for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. ¹⁰Then the disciples returned to their homes.

¹¹ But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; ¹²and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. ¹³They said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping?’ She said to them, ‘They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.’ ¹⁴When she had said this, she turned round and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. ¹⁵Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?’ Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, ‘Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.’ ¹⁶Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’ She turned and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Rabbouni!’ (which means ‘Teacher’). ¹⁷Jesus said to her, ‘Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, “I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.”’ ¹⁸Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, ‘I have seen the Lord’; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

When I was five years old, my parents, with the best of intentions, enrolled me in beginner swimming lessons through the Chicago Park District. I remember distinctly my

bright reddish-orange, one-piece suit. And I remember clearly the last lesson I had. For those of you who know how to swim “properly,” you’ve found the rhythm of inhaling while you turn your head to the side and exhaling while you are underwater. This makes a great deal of sense. I, being a child with little rhythm when more than one thing is going on, who has grown into an adult with little rhythm when more than one thing is going on - I can either sing along to a song or I can clap along but I cannot do both - I could not get a grasp on the cadence of “turn left and breathe, turn down and exhale, turn left and breathe, turn down and exhale.” The instructor, who, as I look back on it, couldn’t have been older than 17, in hopes of helping me figure it out, held and turned my head while giving me instructions. Little did she know that this would not be an effective teaching method for me. What she ended up with was a panicked kindergartner who truly believed she was going to die every time her head was held under water. My parents promptly understood there would be no way to convince me to go back; my desire for self-preservation was heretofore unknowingly far greater than my desire for approval. I never went back. To this day, I can only swim an ungraced backstroke, enough to save my own life but no one else’s.

This story comes to my mind this Easter because our reading from the letter to the Colossians points to the baptisms of the members of the church there. Historically, from early church days, the season of Lent was a time of preparation for those desiring to join in membership, for catechumens, which culminated in baptism on Easter Sunday. As a “sprinkling” church, the connection between the physicality of baptism and dying and rising in Christ is not so clear. Imagine, though, a baptism of immersion. Being immersed was likened to going down to the pit, to dying, and being lifted from the water, the closing of the human part of the baptismal act, was being raised as Christ was in resurrection on that first Easter Sunday. This is why Paul wrote as he did to the church in Rome: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.”¹

¹ Romans 6:3-4.

With my face underwater, death seemed so immediate. When the instructor had finally stopped and I knew that I wasn't going to die, I could breathe calmly again. Through baptism we have faced the terrible underwater and come out on the other side, alive again and even better.

Unlike my temporary reprieve from death those many years ago, with the raising of baptism our reprieve is permanent, eternal. Professor Martha Moore-Keish explains:

The point is not that we are located at a particular altitude, but that our identities are no longer defined by the world in which things and people die. We who rest our faith in Christ's resurrection know that death does not have the last word. We place our faith beyond this realm, and so we in a real sense draw our lives, our identities, from Christ on the other side of death.²

Pastor Peter Marty adds, "Baptism into Christ means being empowered to live a life that is informed by the resurrection."³ At the start of Lent we planted small, dead-looking seeds in soil we prepared as we remembered on Ash Wednesday that we will return to the earth from which we have come. These seeds, as you can see, have sprouted into plants inches high in just these short weeks. Life from what appeared dead. The seeds were pushed down into the darkness and were drawn up by the light into something new.

The thing is, they're still rooted to the soil from which they came. In fact, that soil is a critical part of their survival, their identity. We read in Colossians the instruction "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is." Some have mistaken this instruction to be also implying to look down on the physical, tangible, soft and vulnerable bodies of ours in favor of more godly, ethereal things. But just as the plants need their tangible, soft, vulnerable roots, we need these bodies just as much as we need that which is above. Moore-Keish continues: "'Seek[ing] the things that are above,' then does not mean world-denying asceticism, but freedom to live in the world without fear of death or ultimate regard for things that perish."⁴

The seeds we planted are perennials - but not eternal - so they will one day die. Now, while they live, you are invited to come up after worship and take as many as you like to add

² *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 366.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 2*, p. 368.

to your own home, whether directly into a sunny spot in the ground or into a container in the sun. They are meant to be your reminder that life springs from even that which we might think is dead, and that light can transform what seems insignificant into something beautiful, even the random blade of grass which made it into our little greenhouse! Without Christ's defeat of death we would have been like the Gaillardia, Dianthus, Coreopsis, Painted Daisies, and even the grass, perennial with many years in us, but not forever. Assured of life beyond this one through God's almighty acts in Christ, we are free "to live in the world without fear of death or ultimate regard for things that perish." How do we know this with certainty? Rather than simply be raised, disappear from the tomb, Jesus appeared to the people who knew with certainty, painful, sob-wracked certainty, that he had died in order to show what God had done. And, because Mary Magdalene did as Christ asked, shared the good news for the first time, we have come to know this story and believe that death is no match for God through all the generations who have continued to share the good news.

We read the story again today as reminder; we are free to live in the world without fear of death or ultimate regard for things that perish. That means we have been freed to live as if our stuff didn't matter, to live without fear of death, to live generously and boldly and abundantly, to be rooted in this world and embrace it with Jesus-like love. So today we say thanks be to God for the good news that Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

Let us pray: We give you thanks, O God, that your son, Jesus, died so we might live free and freely. Amen.