

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Displaying the Life of Jesus

2 Corinthians 4:1-15

Three weeks ago, on the same Sunday that we were here rejoicing in the news that Christ is risen, a suicide bomber killed more than 70 people, and wounded hundreds more, as Christians were celebrating Easter at a park in Pakistan. Though many of the dead were Christians, it's also important to note that a large number of the victims were identified as Muslims. According to reports, at least 29 of the deaths were children on an Easter weekend outing. The attack was just one of many events in the ongoing plight of Pakistani Christians. It was also a sad reminder of how the reality of the resurrection and the reality of death exist simultaneously in a world that waits and longs for the full arrival of God's reign. On the one hand, here we were singing our songs of how God has overcome death. And yet, on the other hand, here were religious extremists inflicting more death and destruction on a gathering of believers.

So which is it? Is death defeated and done for, or is it still operating in the world and in our lives? The answer is yes. Yes, hatred and violence and killing have themselves been killed through the death and resurrection of Jesus. That's why brothers and sisters in Christ, in Lahore, Pakistan and Bryans Road, Maryland, assemble on Easter Sunday, and every Sunday. But yes, when we Christians gather, anytime, anywhere, we do so in a world that's not yet fully redeemed, a world where our sinfulness, and the consequences of it, are still on daily display. Life and death, side by side, and both manifesting themselves in a multitude of ways, on both a global and a personal level.

In his own ministry, Paul saw both life and death happening. He saw some who recognized the light of God in Christ and were on their way to salvation. But he also saw some who were blinded to God's reconciling presence in Christ and were perishing. Paul saw the effectiveness of the preached gospel and the power of the Spirit taking shape in the congregations he founded and formed. But he also saw the threats to the gospel, the abuses of the Spirit's gifts, and the deadly discord that worked their way into these same communities of believers.

Paul also saw this juxtaposition of life and death in his own body. He talks about this a lot in the letter called 2 Corinthians, from which we get this morning's text. At this point in his letter, Paul is busy defending his ministry. He reminds the Corinthians that the mercy of God, not his own skill or knowledge, is the reason he's in this work in the first place. And even if some accuse him of acting deceptively, or of "adjusting" God's word for his own convenience, Paul knows the truth, that he's actually being faithful to the gospel. He even has to spend some time refuting those who think that his preaching is too concerned with himself. "No," says Paul, "we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (v. 5).

From there, Paul introduces one of the most memorable images in the entire letter: "But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (v. 7). "This treasure" is Paul's way of describing the ministry he has just been talking about, as well as the glory of God that it represents. What a magnificent, precious thing it is. But this message of the glory of God in Christ, this ministry that proclaims it,

comes in such unimpressive, unspectacular form. This treasure is contained in "jars of clay" or "earthenware vessels." In that day and time, precious objects and treasures were often kept in cheap clay pots. What a contrast between the frail, fragile container and the value of its contents. So it is, says Paul, with him and those involved in his ministry. He may not look like much, and his preaching may not be impressive, but that doesn't negate the power or value of his message.

Don Carson tells about how his son Nicholas, as a teenager, had a great interest in musical instruments. At one point, he picked up an Irish penny whistle. From there, he bought a book, taught himself, and became a pretty respectable player. One day Nicholas told his dad, who had an interest in woodwork, that it might be nice if he would make him a wooden box for his penny whistle. Carson reminded his son that the penny whistle was a seven dollar instrument, while the box would be worth ten times that, or perhaps even more. If you lose the instrument or it gets rusty, said Carson, just go out and buy another one. They're cheap. But Nicholas persisted. He told his dad it would be cool if he made such a box.

So Carson took a piece of walnut wood, shaped it, hollowed out the inside, and put in some velvet lining. He used some inlaid magnets, and put a piano hinge on the back. On the front he put a brass plaque with his son's name on it: Nicholas J. Carson. He even put a nice sheen on it. It was a really nice box. When Carson gave it to Nicholas, he told him it was his anti-gospel box. His son wanted to know what that meant. Carson told him that according to 2 Corinthians 4, with respect to the gospel all the treasure is on the inside. The outside is just a cheap clay pot. This penny whistle box is the reverse. All the treasure is on the outside.

Why, according to Paul, are things set up in such a way that on the outside the ministry of the gospel doesn't look very attractive and impressive? Why is the good news housed in such weak and vulnerable vessels? "To show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us," says Paul. In other words, so that no one makes the mistake of thinking that the power that enables this whole salvation enterprise is somehow coming from us, and our own ingenuity or technique or strength. No, it was God who raised Jesus from the dead, and it is God whose life-giving power operates to bring about the deliverance and transformation that God intends for his people and for the world.

But remember that if we want to share in and participate in Christ's life, we also have to share in and participate in his death. That's what Paul saw happening in all the suffering, danger, and sacrifice that he himself went through for the sake of the gospel. Especially here in 2 Corinthians, Paul is very up front about what he and his coworkers have been through. Imprisonment, beatings, shipwreck, hunger, thirst, sleeplessness, and on the list goes. You name it; Paul has seen it all. And in this morning's text: "We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed, perplexed but not in despair, persecuted but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body" (vv. 8-10).

I think of all those people who were wounded or killed in that bombing in Pakistan, especially the Christians who were celebrating Easter. They had joined their lives to the crucified and risen Christ, and were targeted because of it. The death of Jesus became visible in them, and we mourn with their families and friends. But the cross they took up to follow Jesus is inseparable from the risen life he guarantees. In fact, that resurrecting, life-giving power of God was already at work in them. And nothing, not even hatred in the form of explosives, can stop the power of God that keeps them and gives them life. They held to the same confidence that Paul speaks of in today's text: ". . . we know that the one who

raised Jesus from the dead will also raise us with him and present us with you in his presence" (v. 14).

We may not suffer on the scale of Paul and the earliest apostles, or the believers in Pakistan, but we, no less than they, are supposed to be clay pots—weak, frail, and fragile vessels—for the treasure of the gospel, the glory of God in Christ. In order for the life of Jesus to be displayed in our lives, individually and together, the death of Jesus will also need to be displayed in our lives, individually and together. It all begins with the fact that God himself has come to us in Jesus, who emptied himself and entered into our humanity, sharing in who we are so that we might share in who he is. That journey took him all the way into the fullness of human suffering and death. He went to the cross for our sins, and was raised for our restoration into his likeness. And to build on what Paul says, only as we ourselves are given over to death for Jesus' sake is his life revealed in us, through our own mortality, weakness, vulnerability, and limitations.

At first glance, weaknesses and limitations may seem like strange topics to focus on in light of what happened at Easter. After all, isn't Easter all about God's strength, not weakness? Isn't the resurrection about Jesus breaking the boundaries of death, not just surviving within it limitations? Isn't the good news that Jesus is alive a message about divine power and what's possible because of it?

In one respect, the answer to all these questions is yes. But that would only be part of the truth. The fullness of what God has done in Christ includes not only the resurrection but the crucifixion as well. We might think that the glory of the resurrection would obliterate all the horror and memory of the cross. But it didn't. From the earliest days of the Christian testimony in this world, the cross was still there. It became the central symbol of the church, the focal image in Christian work, worship, and witness. That's because the events of Easter don't wipe out the events of Good Friday. They go together. We still see them side by side in our own lives. Cross and resurrection. Death and life. In fact, more specifically, life through death. Dying with Christ, so that we may truly live. Dying to ourselves, so that Christ may live in us and be visible through us.

That's why, strange as it sounds, we need to embrace our limitations and follow the way of weakness. When we confess our inadequacy and deal honestly with God as the clay pots that we are, we're in a much better position to rely on the true source of our power. Remember that God is able to show his power in our weakness, not in spite of our weakness, which means that one of the best resources we have for Christian living and ministry is our own vulnerability and inadequacy.

What forms does this inadequacy take? What does this weakness look like? It can look like asking others to pray for you. It can look like accepting help when others offer it to you. It can look like seeking out counsel and support when you need it. It can look like confessing your sins to God and to others. It can look like making sacrifices for one another. It can look like living in community with other Christians rather than isolating yourself from the fellowship. It can look like using the gifts you have in the body of Christ, and letting others use theirs. It can look like partnering with other congregations to do what no church can do alone. It can look like simply bringing your empty, broken, vulnerable self to God and calling out for help and deliverance.

Three Sundays after Easter, we remember how we're supposed to have the life of Jesus present within us. But that life isn't meant to be shut up within. It's meant to be on display to others and to the world. This all-surpassing power, which is from God and not from us, operates in and through our weakness, so that the life of the Savior can be seen, and others can come to give God thanks and praise.