

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Christ in You

Colossians 1:24-2:5

Jesus is alive. That's the heart of our message and the theme that we've woven into our worship, in various ways, over the course of the past month. We didn't just make an Easter Sunday visit to the empty tomb and then carry on with business as usual. Instead, we've spent extended time reflecting on what it means to preach and practice the resurrection.

A. W. Tozer wrote, "I cannot give in to the devil's principal, deceitful tactic which makes so many Christians satisfied with an 'Easter celebration' instead of experiencing the power of Christ's resurrection. It is the devil's business to keep Christians mourning and weeping with pity beside the cross instead of demonstrating that Jesus Christ is risen, indeed."¹

This doesn't mean that we just ignore the cross, as if the resurrection somehow cancels out the crucifixion. In today's Scripture passage, Paul himself reminds the Colossians that the cross still shapes who he is and what he does. He speaks about his own sufferings on their behalf, saying, "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions" (1:24). Paul doesn't mean that he's a risk-taker who loves to live dangerously. He also doesn't mean that what Christ suffered for our redemption was insufficient and needs to be supplemented by the sufferings of the church. Nor does Paul mean that he's just following Christ's example of sorrow and suffering. Actually, I think Paul means that his sufferings and afflictions are simply part and parcel of his missionary work that participates in bringing God's reconciling, saving purpose to consummation.

Helen Roseveare was a British doctor who worked as a medical missionary for many years in Zaire. During the revolution of the 1960s, she often faced brutal beatings and other forms of physical torture. Once, when she was about to be executed, she feared God had forsaken her, but in that moment sensed the Holy Spirit saying to her: *Twenty years ago you asked me for the privilege of being identified with me. This is it. Don't you want it? This is what it means. These are not your sufferings; they are my sufferings. All I ask of you is the loan of your body.*

Roseveare says she was overwhelmed by the privilege of serving Christ through her sufferings. After she was delivered, she wrote about her experience with God: "He didn't stop the sufferings. He didn't stop the wickedness, the cruelties, the humiliation or anything. It was all there. The pain was just as bad. The fear was just as bad. But it was altogether different. It was in Jesus, for him, with him."²

I think Paul is telling the Colossians that his sufferings are in Jesus, for Jesus, with Jesus. And for Jesus' body the church, including the believers in Colossae. They themselves, in their life together, are an embodiment of the gospel that was preached to them. The heart of this gospel is God's saving activity, fulfilled in Christ, revealing God's plan for humankind and for the cosmos. As Paul has already told the Colossians, "For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (1:19-20).

A ministry that doesn't include the cross isn't a ministry of Christ. But neither is a ministry that doesn't include the resurrection. Jesus is alive. And alive includes ascended. In other words, not just risen, but also reigning. Jesus is present and active, working to implement the kingdom that has already been accomplished through his death and resurrection. As others have stressed, "Jesus does not now sit in heaven with his arms folded waiting for us to do something religious that he can affirm."³ No, Jesus is carrying out his continuing ministry in the world. This means that instead of trying to figure out how we can fit Jesus into our ministry, we're supposed to be discerning how we can participate in his ministry.

Getting the emphasis in the right place makes all the difference. No wonder Paul says, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, . ." (1:18). Right before that, Paul says that the gospel is basically this: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (1:27). Christ in you. Notice that Christ is the subject, not us. The stress is on what Christ is doing. In this case, we're joined to what Christ is doing by a preposition. Prepositions usually aren't very big words, but they're really important words. They're words that connect other words to one another to form phrases. Prepositions create relationships. "Christ in you." So this is a relationship where Christ is the subject and source of the action, and we're simply called to get in on what he's doing.

Too often, we think and act as if we, not Christ, are the subject. We approach the work of the gospel as if it's our work, our project, our ministry. We end up magnifying ourselves rather than magnifying Christ. I once heard a sermon by a retired pastor who told about a time when he was asked to fill the pulpit in a nearby church while its pastor was away. When the pastor returned, folks in the congregation couldn't stop talking about how much they had enjoyed the guest preacher's sermon. They just went on and on about what a great message it was, how it was such a powerful experience of the Word, and how it spoke to their lives. It was a sermon that they would absolutely never forget. So the pastor asked one woman in particular, "Wow, that's great. Who was the preacher?" She said, "I can't remember. I don't recall his name. I just remember it was a great message."

Christ himself is the message. We're simply the messengers. He must increase. We must decrease. It's Christ's ministry, not ours. We're simply graced to be summoned into participation in his work. Once, when Mother Teresa was passing through a crowd in Detroit, a woman remarked, "Her secret is that she is free to be nothing. Therefore God can use her for anything."⁴

If you want to be used by Christ in his ongoing ministry in the world, you must want him to be at the center of things. Not yourself. Not your own projects. Not your own plans. Not your own agenda. Not your own works. At the center must be Christ's continuing work, and the place he has for you in it. When we keep him foremost, and allow him to unite us to himself and to his ministry, that's when we, individually and together, are most useful to his reconciling, healing purposes.

I'm not trying to minimize the importance of the ministry that we do. We indeed have a significant ministry to carry out. But our ministry derives from, and is dependent on, the continuing ministry of Jesus. It's not as if we're just trying to do the best we can in our own day and time, based on the example he has given us from his time here on earth. We're actually bonded to him, in his aliveness and sovereignty, here and now, so that his life takes shape in us and through us.

Part of what this means is that you enter into each day alert to the ways that Christ is present and working in the world, and that you're ready to join in. You look for the ways that you can participate in the ministry of Christ, in the contexts where you spend your time. And you do so with the kind of humility appropriate to someone who knows that Christ is already there. I like the way that one person has put it when he says, "It is not

our ministries that make Christ present; it is the present, living Christ who makes our ministries possible.”⁵ In other words, we don’t, by our own efforts, bring Christ into the various situations and circumstances of daily life. Rather, we enter those situations with discerning hearts and minds, trying to recognize how Jesus is already there and what he’s up to.

Eugene Peterson says that a verse from Mark’s story of the resurrection can guide us. The heavenly messenger tells the women to get word to Jesus’ disciples: “He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you” (16:7). So Peterson says, “In every visit, every meeting I attend, every appointment I keep, I have been anticipated. The risen Christ got there ahead of me. The risen Christ is in that room already. What is he doing? What is he saying? What is going on?”⁶ Peterson even goes so far as to quote the verse before every visit or meeting. In your case, if you’re making a visit, you might say something like, “He is risen. He is going before you to Civista Hospital; there you will see him, as he told you.” Or, “He is risen. He is going before you to (Insert the address of your workplace).” Or, “He is risen. He is going before you to (Insert the name of your school).” Or, “He is risen. He is going before you to (Insert the location of your meeting).” In this way, you focus less on, “What should I say? What should I do?” and more on, “What is Jesus saying and doing, and how should I be involved?”

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul says that the goal of his mission is to bring believers to completion in their relationship with Christ. He pours himself into that objective. It requires enormous effort, and takes an immense toll. “To this end I labor,” says Paul. But then notice how he completes that sentence. He shifts the focus from his work to the work of Christ. “To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me” (1:29). The term translated as “energy” has to do with the power of God that raised Christ from the dead. So yes, Paul has a ministry, but it’s ultimately the ministry of Christ, the very life of Christ, operating in him and through him for the benefit of the believers.

Tim Keller tells a story about the power of Christ's resurrection. He says:

A minister was in Italy, and there he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had inscriptions put all over the slab saying, “I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don't believe in it.” Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave. So a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the grave and split that slab. It was now a tall towering oak tree. The minister looked at it and asked, “If an acorn, which has the power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that magnitude, what can the acorn of God's resurrection power do in a person's life?”⁷

Paul knew from his own experience what God’s resurrection power could do. What it had done, and was doing, in his life and the life of the Colossians. What it has done, and is doing in your life and the life of our congregation. In the end, it’s all about “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”

¹ A. W. Tozer, *Renewed Day by Day* (Vol. 2). *Christianity Today* (Vol. 38, no. 4).

² Philip Ryken, *The Message of Salvation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001) n.p.

³ Andrew Purves, *The Resurrection of Ministry: Serving in the Hope of the Risen Lord* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010) 44. Purves attributes this image to Karl Barth.

⁴ Michael Glazier, Inc., catalog advertising *Free to be Nothing*, by Edward Farrell. *Christianity Today* (Vol. 33, no. 10).

⁵ Andrew Purves, *The Crucifixion of Ministry: Surrendering Our Ambitions to the Service of Christ* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2007) 53.

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) n.p.

⁷ Tim Keller, “Knowing the Power of His Resurrection.” In *Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross: Experiencing the Passion and Power of Easter*, ed. Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009) 136.