

Life in the Resurrection Zone

Colossians 3:1-4

In the movie, *Shawshank Redemption*, the character, Red, is being released from prison after decades behind bars. The actor portraying Red, Morgan Freeman, shows various emotions as he walks out of prison toward the uncertainty of freedom. Although guards haven't been the best characters in this movie, here at the first gate, four guards are clearly glad that Red's getting out and they obviously wish the best for him.

No guarantees when you leave prison, and they all know it. Red, finally free of confinement, must make difficult choices to remain free. However, after thirty years in prison, Red has become, as he says, "an institutional man" within the penal system. He'll find it doubly difficult to begin making reasonable and responsible choices as a free person, let alone as one carrying the social stigma of being an ex-convict.

No guarantees, really, for anyone in the world we live in. We're always faced with how we'll choose, and life challenges us to decide what basis we'll make our choices upon. That goes especially for Christians. Christians know ourselves as living between two worlds. Which do we choose to guide us?

Because we live at the intersection of two worlds, Paul the apostle urges us to choose the heavenly world to take our directions from. Paul is like a trainer, a coach, encouraging us as Christians, "This is how you do it." He reorients our lives because of Jesus. You were making life choices by looking that direction. Now, aim in this direction. "So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (Colossians 3:1). Paul tells us to center our lives around the risen Christ who's now exalted in heaven. Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, nothing remains on earth adequate for us to build our lives upon.

"Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Colossians 3:2). I think of the fish-eyed corner mirrors in the hospital's halls. Have you seen those? I noticed them at the intersection of halls when I was being rolled around the hospital in January, attached to the ceilings is a half-round, multi-dimensional mirrors. Look up and you can see in all directions. It helps to get into the habit of looking up at those mirrors, so you don't step around a corner and get flattened by a gurney. It is amazing what you are thinking about when you are laying on a gurney being wheeled around the hospital. At one hospital I was visiting once I looked up at the sign as I was entering the basement parking lot: "Clearance 7 Feet." as I walked out that entrance, a pickup with a canopy drove in with ladders on top. I was right beside it when the ladders weren't on the top anymore. For many reasons, being in the hospital should get us used to looking above.

Set your minds, Paul says, on the things above. He doesn't mean withdraw from earthly life. The four short verses of our text in Colossians are surrounded by Paul's instructions about how and how not to live. Setting our minds on the things that are above means learning to live on earth in a heavenly manner. Think of the Wright brothers and all their difficulties over years of learning how to sail a self-propelled vehicle upon air. They looked above, committed to rise above the earth. We join in a similar task as we struggle to follow Jesus.

All this is because of the primary Christian conviction that Jesus was dead and is now alive and that changes everything. Jesus is alive. Jesus shows us what's real. He becomes the lens through which we view life. All of existence must now be compared to and measured by Jesus. All of life is relative to Jesus. He is the prime meridian, connecting all poles of life, and all of life is oriented around him.

His resurrection doesn't make our lives simple. Jesus struggled and suffered. We'll struggle and suffer and make mistakes and fail. But in all things, we must devote our attention and dedicate our thinking to our new life in Christ. Paul writes, "Your life is hidden with Christ in God." He says that Christ is our life. We don't know exactly how. We don't get all the explanations we'd like, but we change greatly as we contemplate this fundamental mystery that is revealed to us, that we, starting with our baptism, are within the living Christ.

As we live for Christ we don't understand everything about the Christian life, but we know enough. If you were walking down a street this morning, say just at dawn, and found a hole 100 feet across that gaped thirty feet deep where yesterday half a dozen houses sat, you'd think something huge happened. That's what the emptiness of Jesus' tomb means on this resurrection morning. We don't know precisely how Jesus' resurrection occurred. No one saw the event, but we see the evidence afterward. This giant hole of an empty tomb. It's not empty of life the way at times our lives can be termed "empty." The tomb is empty because it once was full, holding in death's hand the body of Christ.

The empty remains of what used to imprison Christ is where our lives with him start. As surely as Jesus was dead and is now alive, so we, plunged into his death in baptism, have been yanked up into new life in his Spirit. We experience right here Jesus' resurrection — from prison to freedom, from one zone of existence to another. We've been resurrected with Christ. Our final resurrection awaits us at the end of days but already, Paul says, though we look physically the same to everyone else, we've been joined to Jesus, linked by faith, and ripped from the tomb with him.

Resurrection Sunday isn't just about Christ's coming back to life a long time ago in a small country near the southeastern shore of the Mediterranean. If it is, then Christ's resurrection is only an interesting dot in history. Easter Sunday is about our coming to life in him. Jesus was dead and is alive in us. No one saw Jesus' resurrection, but people see us. We've risen from the dead with Christ. We're the place the risen Christ is heard and seen. So, one way to celebrate Easter Sunday is to concentrate upon God's grace in Christ's death and resurrection. That's certainly enough to direct our praise to God and to redirect the rest of our lives. But another way, taking our cue from Paul, is to let God concentrate upon your dying and rising with Christ.

Think of Christ's ordeal in Jerusalem before his death: the trial, the mocking, the cross, the suffering, the friends who watched him die, and the enemies who enjoyed his dying. Christ put himself in our place, dying for us. Now, put yourself there in Christ's place. The crowds yell for your death. Pilate condemns you. You are led outside the walls of old Jerusalem. You carry your crossbeam as far as you can; then soldiers force Simon of Cyrene to help. The soldiers strip you of your clothes and then gamble for them. They nail you through the forearms and ankles, tie you to the cross, and lift you up. A few close friends stand at a distance. Your enemies gleefully mock your suffering. For six hours of humiliation, you hang there, with shorter breaths, and worse pain. The sky turns black. You scream, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Then you die. Friends take you down from the instrument of torture and carry you to a hewn tomb. You're wrapped in linen and placed on the tomb's raised ledge. The massive disk of rock rolls shut with a crash over the tomb's mouth, and its fading echo is the last effect your life will ever make on this earth.

Now, if Christ wasn't raised from the dead, neither are you. The good news of Easter Sunday has been shouted for 2,000 years. It's still true: Christ has risen. Christ has risen indeed. And we've been freed to live in the zone of the risen Christ. We shout, "Christ has risen. Christ has risen indeed." We're preoccupied with Christ's resurrection.

All the while, God in heaven watches you leave death's prison, that tomb from which Christ freed you. Here we are, looking above to Christ, as Paul instructs us to do. Yet, heaven ripples like an earthquake of hurricanes, as God turns to you and shouts across all eternity, "You have risen in Christ!" And angels' voices join like all the thunder that's rumbled since creation, "You have risen indeed!"

Now, since you've been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above. Amen.