

Great Vigil 2014
Mother Betsy

The Apostle Paul provides us with the theology of Christ's death and resurrection. He gives the meaning of Christ Jesus' death to us in this largely secular culture in which many of us find ourselves, as I imagine he must have given meaning of it to many of Jesus' followers. But, Paul's contribution to Christianity was not only explaining it, but spreading its message to a world that believed in other gods like power, marketplaces, slave-labor, war, all things foreign to the concept of Jesus having died on a cross to save us from the impact of this worldliness on our lives, especially that which prevents us from not loving one another. This past Thursday in this Holy Week, those of you who attended Maundy Thursday service here or at another church, heard Jesus' gospel mandate to us: 'to love one another and I have loved you'. And, we measure Jesus' love for us by his giving his life for us that we may know God better through that love. Paul says in knowing the love that Jesus has for us we must die and be resurrected with him. We must be willing to let die the impact of worldliness on our lives that separates us from God. The salvation is there, yes, but as Paul says in another part of Romans, we are not allowed to sin freely because we have been given salvation. We must love God, ourselves and each other to realize the grace of salvation that God has given us. Paul says in our reading tonight that we must 'consider ourselves dead to sin', that which we allow to come between us and God; and, we must consider ourselves 'alive in Christ'. We are getting good at the dying to sin part of his edict. We focus a lot on the realization of what a sinful people we are, and we should. We have much yet to atone for. Not that it isn't important to do so, because I believe we as a Church historically overreacted to 'fire and brimstone' theology and gave ourselves a 'time-out' from sin. But, I believe the Easter story can focus more on our realization of salvation that comes through 'being alive in Christ Jesus'. Christ is alive through God's resurrection of him. He is lives not only in our remembrance of him, but in our lives as his followers. For it is by Jesus' resurrection that we are Christians, that we believe we have been given a new life in him. We would do this gift of new life injustice if we just basked in it, and did not live into it.

So what does it mean to be alive in God?

I gleaned three ways from Paul's text of being alive in Christ: believing we will live with Jesus, alive to God in him; be united with Christ in resurrection; and walking in the newness of life.

In our Gospel reading, Mary Magdalene provides us with a model of believing composed of love and devotion. She went to the tomb of her dear friend and Master, not knowing what to expect, but because she believed in him and was devoted to him. Mishrash, a helpful interpretation tool of early rabbis, allows us to assume that Mary Magdalene's belief in the new life offered to her by Jesus took her and the other Mary to the tomb. He told her and the other followers he would rise after three days, and she probably went to see whether this would be so. Belief allowed her to get past the fear of the supernatural appearance of a very large angel who came to give her the message from God, that indeed, her visit of belief had born itself out. Indeed, Jesus was not there. He truly had risen. And, despite their fear and awe, they left the tomb as instructed to tell the men that their belief, too, would be born out, for indeed Jesus had been raised from the dead. And, the belief of these women, their love and devotion for Jesus was immediately manifested in his appearance to them, a sudden encounter, an instant divine response to their being alive in their belief in him. As we heard in the salvation story in Ezekiel which was part of their lives, their 'hearts were made of flesh', open and receptive to God's spirit. They were willing to put their belief in action, and tell the others. Are we willing and ready this day of resurrection to put our belief in action? Are we willing to show our love for others by proclaiming our belief as the Marys did? This belief reminds me of a bumper-sticker I see everyday in the parking lot: 'I love the whole world, no exceptions'. This is an expression of belief in the love that Christ Jesus offers us, and which we can be alive in through our love and devotion to him and to each other.

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The second way I believe Paul teaches us to 'be alive in God in Christ Jesus' is to be united in Christ in resurrection. Even though they were afraid of their encounter with the angel, the Marys were ready to share the good news given to them with the other disciples. They had embraced the meaning of God's love for us, and were willing to share it even if it sounded crazy especially by today's standards. Can you imagine trying to convince someone that Jesus is risen because this huge angel told you so? You really are taking a big leap with your credibility by even stepping out there with a story like that, but these women did not care because they were united with Christ in his resurrection. Think of all the crazy resurrection stories you might tell someone else that would convey how you or someone you know is alive in God through being united with Christ. Someone was dying, and is now alive and thriving. I know a young woman on drugs most of her adult life who has been clean for five years; and she's sending her once-orphaned child to college this year. Your heart filled with despair from the loss of a loved one is now filled with new love. These are crazy stories of belief in the love of God for us. And, belief united these women with Christ almost instantly of their taking the risk of sounding crazy for his sake. Because meeting with the risen Christ they, united with him. Upon meeting him in his risen form they worshiped him. They didn't have to take a crazy story to their brothers, they could tell them they worshiped him at his feet, just as our stories of resurrection testify to our realization of being alive in God united in Christ. To be united with Christ in resurrection is not just in his resurrection, but in our own. We put so much emphasis on Christ's resurrection that we often write ourselves out of the picture, continually giving Christ our burden to carry. Isn't it enough that he carried it yesterday? Rejoice! He says to women. Rejoice that we, too, are resurrected with him, and we like they did need to show him some love. Use being resurrected with Christ as a vehicle to rejoice in your resurrection. By acting in love and devotion to him and for him, Christ can rejoice with you as you act in love and devotion not just for him, but united with him in resurrection.

The third point I think Paul makes for our being alive in God in Christ Jesus is 'to walk in the newness of life'. When we act from our belief and with love, there is a new spring in our step. Don't be afraid of it, as the risen Jesus told the Mary's, but go with it and proclaim the good news. Fear is the unknown, and even the newness of the concept of the Resurrection struck fear in the hearts of the women who met the risen Jesus, but they met in him the newness of life. The new Community Meal Ministry is the newness of life at St. Andrew's. We stepped out into the unknown on April 7, checking our fears at the door: is it going to work, will we have enough teams, will the people come, will we have enough food? But this new ministry is a resurrection of a renovation of a kitchen, an action taken to serve others, and not just ourselves. The renovation was the heart of flesh of this congregation to be receptive to God's spirit. And, stepping into the newness of life opens doors of opportunity for new encounters with Christ Jesus. One can only imagine the new encounters with Christ that will come from opening our hearts more to our neighbors. And, isn't this what we want in a resurrected life? More ways to encounter God? To give God the opportunity to continue to make us in God's image, and to be co-creators with God of newness in this world?

We can be alive in God through our love and devotion to Christ and to each other. By acting in love and devotion to him and for him, Christ can rejoice with us as we are united with him in resurrection. Being alive in God, being resurrected with Christ, and we can be co-creators with God in the newness of life. And, then, we can step out with our crazy resurrection stories, and tell those who don't know what it means to be resurrected, not to be afraid of being alive in God. Because being alive in God in Christ Jesus is worth rejoicing.