

Alive Together
Ephesians 2: 1-10

**First Presbyterian Church
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I had such fun watching our church children hunt eggs on Palm Sunday. It made me long for the days when my own children were little, flying around with their baskets in hand. The joy of discovery fuels the excitement. Look! An egg! For me! Filled with candy! For the little ones, the eggs don't even have to be cleverly hidden. We just set them out in the grass. The lawn is filled with little packages. The children run to pick them up. Wondrously, here right before me is something to pick up, open, and then carry in my basket.

Today's passage is about the joy of discovering what God has laid out for us to do. He hasn't hidden it so we can't find it. He has placed his will in plain view. But that doesn't mean there is no discovery. We can experience a great sense of adventure as we move to pick up the little packages God has set out for us. Each day, we can participate in the plan of God for his whole cosmos, laid out in packages prepared just for us before the world was made.

Paul wrote, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them." God has been working in us, in order that we might be at work for his further purposes in the world. There are things for us to do which suit us. They suit our capabilities, our stage of life, our talents, our passions. They are put before us and we are called simply to walk about in them. To pick up the packages of opportunities as they arise. We open the packages as we participate in living out the gospel in all our interactions.

This is such a simple and profound idea. God has good works prepared for you to do. Walk into them and pick them up like eggs in an egg hunt. Discover the opportunities to love and serve that are before you every day.

But does that mean that Christianity is really just an ethic of doing good works? Are we really just about living the virtues, doing good things as best we can and sort of vaguely following Jesus? Is life just trying my best with a little help from God as I try to be a good person? Certainly living kindly is better than being a jerk; thinking of others is a much better way to live than perpetrating crime. But

if that's all we've got to say, that would be a thin gruel to live on. Not satisfying, and, in fact, not even possible.

Because there's something the matter with the world. To do good and loving things means swimming against the tide of "normal" life all the time. In fact, there's something the matter with my heart. I know that I am not good, even if I try to do good things. Just behaving well does not satisfy my loneliness for God. It doesn't fill in the emptiness in relationships. It doesn't take away the stickiness of guilt or the sting of loss. I need a deeper story to make possible this call to action.

And that's what Scripture gives us. Paul's simple, lovely sentence about our walking about in good works is only possible because of a previous, stronger work of God that undergirds our lives. Our lives are so much deeper and higher than a simple story of trying to do good. Our potential destiny so much more horrifying or glorifying than that. There's some heart work that has to be done before we can enter the simplicity of life lived picking up the packages of good works God has for us to do.

So Paul has begun our chapter with a rather bracing assessment of our life without Christ. We were dead, trapped, enslaved, disobedient and under wrath. Mercy! Specifically, Paul says that we were "dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked." That almost seems like a contradiction. How can you be both dead in sin and walking about in sin? You'd have to be, well, a zombie. Walking dead. That's about the size of it. Though lived and breathed in a body, you were spiritually dead: cut off from a living relationship with God. Under sentence of condemnation for sins you did and felt. You thought you were free, but actually you were being pressed and conformed to the culture of a world that is hostile to God and his purposes. You were part of the herd. Trying to work out life as best you can, but it wasn't best. It was futile and it was failing. As Paul says later in the chapter, once you were without hope, without God in the world. That's a lonely, dead end place to be.

There is a brutal honesty in Scripture about our condition without God. As my mother used to say when she was angry at me for some impertinence, "You are neither funny nor cute young man." That meant I was being ridiculous and saucy. She might well have said, "You are neither holy nor loving, young man." That means you are curved in on yourself and only interested in yourself. She might just as well have said, "You are neither brave nor original young man." You're simply following the passions which have enslaved you, doing just what everyone else is doing and calling it self-expression. Our status before God in our natural

state is that of a dead man walking, under sentence of death. And worst of all, until it's pointed out, we don't even realize it. We think poisonous death is just the way life is.

This realistic, dark evaluation of the world without God sets up the greatest story of hope ever told. One commentary I read said that Ephesians chapter two, verse four contains the greatest two word sermon in history: But God. You were dead in sin. But God. You were a slave to the power of evil. But God. You were no better than a child of wrath. But God. The whole river of human history flows with a mighty current toward a cascade of death. But God. God inserted himself into the current of the world like a mighty rock against which the river breaks. But God. Paul will then tell us that according to his eternal character, God acted in human history. But God, being rich in mercy, according to the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ.

God saved us in Christ. Not because he saw something in us that warranted such favor. We weren't funny, cute, virtuous or good. He does not love us for the value of what we can produce for him. He loves us because he loves us. His love precedes our lives. His love is his sole motivation. The God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit exists in an everlasting relationship of love. He opens that love out toward us. He loves us because he loves us and we can never get behind that love to find some worth or reason or platform for ourselves. It's just his grace. Just his mercy. Just his love.

When we were dead in our sins, he made us alive together with Christ. He raised us up with Christ. He seated us with Christ Jesus on the throne of glory. God reached into our lives and joined us to the story of Jesus. He included us in what happened to Jesus so that we could be brought out of ourselves and back into God. He got us in on what Jesus has done so that we could pass from death in ourselves to life in him.

So what has Jesus done? That's the essential question. What matters here is Jesus. It is his journey to save us that saves us. God sent his Son as our champion. He came to be what human beings were meant to be but could never be because of our sin. He came to live out a life of perfect love and faith. He came to take on the powers of evil by receiving all their venom and poison into himself. He came to bear the wrath due our sin. He took both the force of evil and the price of sin upon himself on the cross. He underwent the hell of God-forsakenness. He felt the agony of separation from his Father. He died the death we all die.

The Biblical understanding is that at death, we do not cease to be. Our bodies cease and begin to decay. But there is another part of us that continues. That is the soul, or the spirit of a person. Generally soul and spirit are interchangeable words. Scripture teaches that, before Jesus, the souls of those who died went to the place of the dead, known as Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek. Hades is the shadowy realm of the dead. Beyond interaction. Beyond joy. Without body. Without light and life. Ghostly. Thin. A kind of prison. Awaiting longingly something more without expectation that it will ever come. Hades is the place from which no one returns so there is very little that could be definitely known or said about it. Another name for it is the pit. The place of discard and forgetfulness. Not happy.

When Jesus died, his body was laid in the tomb provided by Joseph of Arimathea. His spirit, just like any person's spirit, went to Hades, the place of departed spirits. He joined the dead. This was the fullest extent of his humiliation. The farthest reaches of his journey.

Now all our information here is sketchy. When he died, the soul of Jesus passed beneath the horizon of our sight lines. We could not see where he went. We do not know exactly what happened in that time out of time, in that place that is no place. What we do know is that at some point between 3PM Good Friday and dawn on Easter morning, his death stopped. His descent ended. His humiliation was over. Exaltation began. God the Father recalled his Son's spirit from death. He returned him to his body. Only now that body was more than it had been. It was still Jesus. But more so. A resurrection body is not a resuscitated body. Jesus was outfitted for eternal life in heaven. He was raised never to die again. He was then fully the new Adam, the first man of a new humanity. Man restored to more than he had been before.

As I said, all our information is sketchy about what happened below the sight lines in the realm of the dead. We can't know the exact events that occurred "down" there. But we know at least that Jesus dug underneath the effects of the primal sin. He went below the deepest wrath due our sin in order to bring us into the freedom of a just forgiveness. He went further away from our Father than we can go in order to bring us back to our Father. And Jesus went back before the sin of the first man. He went back as far as our first parents in order that all who awaited our Savior, who longed for a redeemer, could be gathered back to God. As my favorite Christmas carol, "Joy to the World," declares, "He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found, far as, far as, the curse is found." Jesus in his descent to death dug beneath not only the effects of sin, but beneath the heart

bent on sin, in order to create a new humanity with a heart made open and obedient to God.

We get remade when we get joined to Jesus, the new Adam, and his entire journey to save us. That's the mystic part of our faith. Jesus alone could live in faithfulness. Jesus alone could take sin upon himself in dying. Jesus alone could rise from the dead in new life. But God is willing to relocate us into the story of Jesus when we trust in him. God puts the very Spirit of Jesus into us to remake our hearts. We become part of the new humanity of which Jesus is the first. Based on what he did, going all the way down in order to come up in new resurrection life, we participate in his life as we are joined to him by his Spirit through our faith, that is, our trust and full reliance on him.

The events of Jesus' life, death and resurrection have a three stage effect in our lives. First, we get reborn from spiritual death to spiritual life. Right here in the same bodies we've always lived in, our eternal life begins. In stage 2, these bodies will still die, but our souls will not be condemned. In fact, we won't have to go to the old holding tank of Hades. That place has been blown apart by Jesus' resurrection. Our spirits can now go straight to our Father. Then, third, on the Last Day, we will get our new resurrection bodies. Thus, we will who are in Christ will live eternally joined to him in heavenly bodies. Stage one, our spirits are reborn. stage 2, we go to the Father and then stage 3, we get our resurrection bodies. All because of the events of Jesus' journey to save us. Without him, we remain in spiritual death and anticipate only further death and condemnation. With him, in him, we get these wonderful effects of his saving journey.

That's what undergirds the simplicity of a life lived walking about in the good works which God has prepared beforehand for us to do. We are, first of all, God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus. Through the work of Jesus, we get forged into new people. People with new hearts, filled with Christ's Spirit. That gives our good works purpose. Not to save us or earn favor. But to participate in God's gospel work of reaching the world with his love and salvation in Christ. I'm not creating my life. God has recreated me in Christ and continues to recreate me. The joy of life is living now *from* the journey of Jesus and walking in this story. Picking up the packages he sends me, and discovering the ways he allows me to tell this story to others, or to show the love of this story by how I love them.

Jesus descended on the cross to the hell of God-forsakenness so you and I don't have to. Jesus descended to the place of death so that we don't have to go their alone. There is no prison of death for the souls of those who are in Christ.

Jesus has burst apart the gates of death and opened the way to immediate access, in him, to his Father's presence. This is why he said to the disciples, "I go to prepare a place for you. I will come again and will take you to myself. That where I am, you may be also. Because I live, you also will live." We get taken into his story. And that gives us the script for living a different story than the story of death, bitterness, violence and chaos in our world. We walk about in the story of Jesus, discovering the packages of participation in his mission that he lays before us. We join him in showing the world the path to life.