New Life

I Peter 1:3, John 11: 38-44

April 4, 2021

[Green Mile: “Dead man walking…”](show 30 second clip)

I have felt a bit like that inmate, John Coffey, this year. I have had some moments when I felt a bit like I was on death row, have you?

* A never-ending death sentence of disappointments?

The past year has been a year of death:

* Actual death of over 500k people in the US to COVID-19. (2.8 worldwide)
* Death of economy.
* Actual death visited on various people groups.
* Death of dreams for so many.
* Death of civility.

[We have had more funerals in a twelve-month period than in any other time in my ministry]

* “Is there such a thing as a season of death?”

**A year ago**, we said from our homes, “He is Risen Indeed!” not knowing the ordeal that lay before us.

**This morning,** we say again with conviction, “He is Risen Indeed!” hopeful for some resolution to the suffering in the world. Hopeful for some return to normalcy in the next few weeks.

**Hope, however, is not enough.**

**Hope** has failed us.

The **Enlightenment** of the 18th century left the world with this abiding conviction: That each generation should get better than the last.

* It worked for a while, but the 20th c. changed all that.
* 2 world wars, pandemic, Great Depression, Cold War
* Yet when Cold War ended, the old Enlightenment idea began to be reborn
* Economies began to thrive,
* Echoes of the New Deal and The Great Society still resounded in the minds of our leaders…
* “Children today will be better off than their parents…” -- Boomed to 50% of those surveyed.
* “We have all we need to bring about a bright future.”
* **By first decade in 21st c.** pessimism about our children’s future is higher than ever.
* **Pessimism** about most everything is higher than ever.
  + - Polarization and fragmentation of society,
    - Tribalism that reveals a culture with a vacated center,
    - Loss of any shared idea of common public good.
    - Lack of social trust in the institutions that hold our society together.

**For all of our advances in science and technology, as great as they are, these things can’t fix what is wrong in the world.**

* We have to ask: Why there is so much profound discontent, depression, drug abuse, despair, addiction, and loneliness in the most advanced societies?
* Actually, science and technology also cause problems.
  + - Pandemics are harder to contain because we are the most mobile society in human history.
    - Polarization is fueled by social media.
    - International terrorism is heightened by scientific advancements.

It seems that the problem is not so much how to control nature “out there,” as it is how to control nature “in here,” in our hearts.

* We hunger for meaning and purpose.
* We are shocked at the things humans are capable of doing.
* What can we do about us?
* Controlling external nature is not the solution to our problems.
* **The various evils that spring from the human heart are the greatest threat to human thriving.**
* **Enumerable daily acts of selfishness pull society downward.**

**Is there any hope for us?**

**There was a little bit of 2020 in about AD 70.**

There is a biblical letter written amidst terrible persecution to suffering believers. I Peter offers a solution to our dilemma.

I Peter 1: 3, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of the Jesus Christ from the dead…”

Not only does the author of I Peter know the hope of Jesus personally, but he writes to a people under intense persecution. “Fiery trials,” “Suffering grief in all kinds of trials.”

**What if I told you that the best hope for emerging from a year of death was the resurrection of Jesus?**

I. We need a God of Mercy

* God has had every chance to walk away from us
* Adam and Eve, Pre-Noah, Tower of Babble, Abraham and a doubting nation, a deafening silence into which God sends his Son Jesus.
* [OT Prophet **Hosea** makes this raw and tangible for us]
* Old Testament Israel is likened to an unfaithful mate in the prophecy of Hosea. In fact, the narrative of Hosea is a salacious biography of the prophet and his whoring wife, Gomer. Their marriage is a mockery due to her unfaithfulness and the legacy of their disfunction is declared in the names of their children translated, “lost, compassionless, and godless,” respectively. Hosea has had enough. He should sing, “we are never, ever, ever, getting back together!” But God instructs him differently. God instructs him that in spite of his wife’s behavior, he must love her and remain faithful to her. Sounds crazy by our modern sentiments, yes?
* Why would God offer this instruction? Because the life of the prophet is one given entirely to God. Hosea’s suffering is his vocation, endured so that the audience of unfaithful Israel can see its own infidelity. As Hosea continues to love Gomer, so God continues to love Israel despite it’s pursuit of other gods.
* Yet, in all of Israel’s unfaithfulness and in all of our unfaithfulness, God shows us mercy, right up to this very moment
* Scripture reminds us that all of us have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory
* **We are “dead women/men walking” in our transgressions and sins**
* We desperately need a God of mercy…and we have one.
* God keeps reaching out to you and me

II. We need the New Birth

* It’s not enough to know that this God exists…
* We need to get to the heart of the problem which is in fact a problem of the heart
* What has always needed fixing in this world and in us has never been fixed from the outside-in
* There must be something internal, since all of the external efforts of history have come up short
* Enter Jesus, Son of God/Son of Man
* Jesus is God to access the glories of God, man to bring those attributes to bear on lowly broken humans like us.
* It is through Jesus that we receive the New Birth
  + - As a baby represents a fresh start, learning from scratch the ways of the world, so the new birth offers believers the chance at a cosmic “do-over.”
* Jesus promised **Nicodemus** in John 3 that if he would be “born again” he could have a new and everlasting life.
  + - Nicodemus was the “external righteousness” expert of his day. A Pharisee trying to practice over 600 laws to try and attain righteousness. A burden too great to bear. No one able to bear it.
* Jesus was saying **forget the outside-in** approach, it will always frustrate. Instead adopt an inside-out approach.
* The New Birth is brought about when we **by faith** accept the offer of God’s grace through his Son Jesus
  + - When we do, God changes not only our status before God from guilty to not guilty, but God actually changes us. Forgiving our sins, giving us a fresh clean new beginning—A New Birth with an exciting life stretching out ahead.
* A change from the inside-out
* We go from **“dead women/men walking”** to newborn babies with renewed hope for the days ahead.
* We have a hope for the future not based on rule keeping or scientific advance or social progress but on God himself. Not just intellectual belief, but instead a living hope. A vital part of the new spiritual life that comes into Christians by the Holy Spirit through the New Birth. Faith in the resurrection implants that hope into the root of our souls. It becomes such a part of who we are that we can face anything.

III. We need the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

* Because he lives, you too can live
* Is it factual? Yes!
  + - Facts here
  + Is it Impactful? Yes!
    - Without the resurrection of Jesus, this New Birth, the inside/out change, is impossible
    - The cross is the most selfless act of love ever recorded but many people have chosen to give their lives for others.
    - What is special about Jesus’ death is the resurrection.
    - That God raised Jesus from the dead signals God forever changed the relationship of humanity to sin
    - No longer is sin and death the inevitable end of our existence, but now eternity gets inserted right into the middle of mortality.
    - The resurrection means that the unfathomable creative power of God invades the hopeless grind of a “dead man walking” existence transforming it from “Life stinks and then you die,” to a brand-new life full of forgiveness, freedom, and renewed purpose.
    - What it means is that we are dead women and men walking until we receive the offer of New Birth/New Life by faith made possible when God inserted resurrection into the equation of history.
    - Death lost its claim on humanity when Jesus walked out of that tomb.
    - Jesus’ resurrection interrupted history and announced that God’s miraculous New Creation was available for anyone who would choose Jesus.
    - It is, in essence, that the glory of eternity begins now
    - Because Jesus is raised, we begin to live forgiven and empowered lives of heaven right now.
* The resurrection enables your (and my) New Birth. New Birth is evidence of God’s ever in-breaking new creation. We are empowered by God to begin living the New Creation even now in the midst of the death all around us.

**Close: So What?**

So why are so many of us still dead men/women walking?

Why are we bound by death when life is available?

There is a story in John’s gospel that helps us understand.

It’s the story of Lazarus, but before we go there, **let’s pray**

**Prayer asking God to help us see the reality of the resurrection (Band takes their places). Band or Nick plays under the final story.**

**[summarize the story]**

Lazarus is Jesus’ friend and very sick.

* Jesus is told before he dies, but elects to stay away,
* 4th day, Lazarus is unquestionably dead and starting to decompose.
* Jesus finally arrives and confronts the grief of the sisters,
* Jesus declares, “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25)
* Jesus walks to the grave and shouts, “Lazarus, come out!”
* “The dead man came out.“
* Jesus says, “Take off the grave clothes and let him go.”

**Song**: Glorious Day (v1, c, v2, c)

**Band remains in place and very still, Nick plays softly,**

**Sam leads in an invitation prayer**

What does Lazarus mean for us?

* Jesus was not only resurrecting his friend whom he loved
* Jesus was demonstrating God’s astounding love for all people
* It’s not just Lazarus who would need resurrecting to a fresh start on life
* It’s all of us
* Jesus’ actions to bring this about weren’t by edict or fiat.
* He didn’t wave a magic wand or say magic words
* Instead, he was our suffering Savior
* Himself dying, buried, descended into hell
* Jesus experienced death so that you could live
* And on the third day, God raised him from the dead

So don’t miss it this morning

* God raised Lazarus [Jesus asked, God said yes]
* God raised Jesus [It’s what we’re all excited about today]
* God can resurrect you
* From the grave clothes of selfishness and sin
* From the grave clothes of a year of death

Here is what’s happening right now:

* Jesus has made his way to your place of death
* Jesus is calling your name
* Be like Lazarus…Come to him
* Take off your grave clothes and go free

**Prayer**: Lead in a prayer of repentance.

“Jesus, by faith I believe that you are our Resurrected Lord. I want to take off my grave clothes and start fresh with you today. I’m tired of living in the place of death. I hear you calling my name. I want to respond by following you…out of this tomb and into new life. I give myself to you, my past, my present, and my future. Thank you, Jesus, for New Life through your resurrection.” -AMEN.

**Song: “**Glorious Day” **bridge to the end…**

**Benediction:**