

Eternal Life in the Short-Term
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Colorado Springs, CO
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John 20:19-23

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

1 John 1:1-4

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life--this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us--we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

I preached on Good Friday. I preached a sermon about despair and life, about how we live even in the midst of a Good Friday world in which our teacher, our lord, has been murdered on a cross. A Good Friday world in which tragedies like Newtown and Aurora and Columbine can happen, when people don't receive the help and support they need; a Good Friday world that fosters broken relationships, and mistrust, and violence.

But of course, those things aren't just in a "Good Friday" world. Now it's after Easter – we've had the good news that our teacher, our lord, is not dead but is *alive*...but those things are still here. It's not a "Good Friday" occasion today, it's an *Easter* world – but loss, devastation, disaster, misunderstandings are still real.

How do we feel *after many Easters come and go, when, as Paul Tillich says, "year after year, the longed-for perfection of life does not appear, when the compulsions reign within us as they have for decades, when despair destroys all joy and courage?"*¹

¹ Paul Tillich, *You Are Accepted, in The Shaking of the Foundations*

In our John scripture for this morning, we see the disciples in a locked room. Jesus has already appeared to Mary and she has told the disciples, and after this event, another *week* goes by, and still Jesus finds the disciples in the room with a closed door. They, too, are living in an Easter world, but still not quite feeling the power of the Resurrection. Each of these last times he says to them, “Peace be with you.”

Preaching Cameron Murchison calls this an “Unexpected peace. Or at least it is not a peace given according to the expectations of the world.... As John continues, it becomes evident that the peace Jesus announces is not one that can allow the disciples to remain behind locked doors. For as soon as the disciples have rejoiced in the presence of the Lord, Jesus tells them that they have a new status and role. They are no longer merely disciples. Now they are apostles as well, sent into the world, just as God has sent Jesus himself. ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you’ (John 20:21). And in a not-so-veiled allusion to the creative activity of God in the second chapter of Genesis, Jesus breathes the Holy Spirit into them, recreating them not only as those who follow (disciples), but now as those who are sent (apostles).”²

Another minister points out that “The lesson from John shows us that it is not easy to live into the reality of Easter. After all, everything in our pre-Easter experience makes it difficult for us to embrace fully this good news. ...disciples huddled behind closed doors, afraid of those who have power over them.Easter miracle - Jesus comes again and again to these scared and confused disciples. ...This is the good news for the Second Sunday of Easter, but it will not be surprising if by the Third Sunday of Easter, the congregation is back behind closed doors.”³ Because it’s still hard to feel the power of the Resurrection oftentimes, isn’t it? As Easters come and go, are we the disciples in the room with closed doors, or are we the disciples whom Jesus has sent out?

² Feasting on the Word commentary

³ Gail R. O’Day, Feasting on the Word commentary

Are we disciples who are simply waiting for the reality of eternal life to sweep over us, or are we disciples who meet eternal life out in the commission for action and love that we have been given?

With the resurrection comes the promise of Eternal Life. So what does that actually mean? Is it like a Treasury Bond that we have in our safe, looking forward to its rewards when it comes time to cash it? Staying locked away, with only the hope of it one day to come? Is “eternal life” only useful at our deaths, when we presumably have the most need of it? A “Get out of jail free” card, that we pull out when it looks like death *might* win, but No! We have eternal life in God – ha ha! We win!

Does it have any meaning *before* that point? Does it change how we go about *this* side of eternal life? Of course, I’m going to say yes. Absolutely yes.

To be honest, I don’t really know how it changes after our earthly death. That part’s gotta be up to God. I don’t *know* if we’ll have any choices to make at that point.

But here, on earth, eternal-life-in-the-short-term, we *do* have choices to make.

Two kinds of eternal life:

1. A gift that is given in the fact of its existence
2. Life through actions that have to be performed in order to make it real. Not “eternal” until it happens again, and again, and again, and again, eternally.

I’ve made a commitment to doing Centering Prayer – which is done through sitting with God for twenty minutes twice a day. I’d like to make a commitment to do that for the rest of my life. But, in order to do that, I have to choose to do it each day until then. Only at the end of my earthly life can I say that it truly was “life-long”.

Or, anything else that we make a commitment to. Marriage. Baptism. Things that are committed to in a moment, but that take a decision each day, and plenty of moments within that day, in order to truly make real, make “forever.”

God has promised us eternal life. It is God's commitment to us, *and* our commitment to God. God's promise will not be changed. Ever.

How do we contribute to eternal life *now*? "Eternal" doesn't *start after* death. It starts *now*. It started 20 years ago. Or last week, whenever you made the commitment to affirm your faith in God and start on that journey. And you have the choice to keep making the commitment again and again and again, just like Jesus comes to us again and again and again, however many times it takes, until we are truly *with God*.

But it can be hard to know how to keep fulfilling that commitment. Life is a constant stream of choices between life and death. Not "death" in terms of ending earthly life...but choices between actions that will bring life and vitality and joy to the world, in other words *love*, or choices that bring the stifling of life, fear, and violence to the world. And sometimes, *most* of the time, actually, it can be hard to tell the difference.

Preacher Martin Copenhaver wrote a devotional about that very choice. It's based on a verse in Deuteronomy: "*I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live.*" - Deuteronomy 30:19 Copenhaver starts by telling about a comedy routine – happens to be one of *my* favorites, too: Copenhaver writes:

"Comedian Eddie Izzard has a classic routine in which he imagines how the Inquisition would have been conducted if the Church of England had been in charge. He imagines the Anglican priests being far too genteel to torture their victims. They are too fond of tea and cakes for anything as gruesome as that. So, instead, they offer prisoners a choice: 'Cake or death?' It all seems to go on swimmingly until every single person being interrogated chooses the cake. 'Well, we've run out of cake,' says the exasperated priest. The prisoner responds, 'So what is my choice? "Or death?" Well I'll have the chicken please!'

"When we read this passage from Deuteronomy in a superficial way, [Copenhaver says] it can sound a lot like that routine. Given the choice between life and death, wouldn't we always choose life? After all, with life comes cake, as well as many other delights.

"But sometimes the choice is not nearly as clear. For instance, when I was a young boy, our neighbors dug a hole in their backyard for a swimming pool. The whole neighborhood was crackling with anticipation.

"Then came the Cuban missile crisis. The neighbors began to rethink their plans. Should

they build a bomb shelter instead of a swimming pool? Should they trade in their dream of frolicking in the sun for the assurance of safety underground? And which conclusion would be choosing life?

“Eventually they decided to use the hole in their backyard to build a bomb shelter. They thought that, in making this decision, they were choosing life. In retrospect it seems clear that they gave death the upper hand. Fear can do that.”⁴

That choice, that commitment to living out eternal life in the short-term, can make all the difference in the world.

Fr. Thomas Keating believes in the power of a relationship with God. On speaking on centering prayer and contemplative active life – life lived in full relationship with God, he says “The more people that do this, the more we have a chance of transforming society. Because only utmost love can overcome and transform utmost violence.”⁵

When Jesus was asked by the people: “When will you establish the realm of God in our midst?”, one can almost see the bewilderment and the disappointment in the faces of those who heard Jesus respond: “The realm of God is within you.” ... Mahatma Gandhi challenges each of us to “Be the change that we wish to see in the world.”⁶

God’s promise of eternal life starts *now*. In the short-term. Transformative possibilities, when something good *can* come out of every tragedy. When forgiveness is *possible*. When peace is offered through the challenge of a closed and locked door.

We live it out, every time we make a decision that continues life, that continues vibrancy, trust, relationship, joy. *That’s* what eternal life in the short-term is. And that choice, the reign of God – resurrection and eternal life – are here, in you, now. Will you choose eternal life in the short-term? Cake or death?

Amen.

⁴ *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* 5/23/14 Martin Copenhaver

⁵ From a video viewed during Centering Prayer class

⁶ *Stillspeaking Daily Devotional* 4/9/15 Kenneth Samuel