

CAP EASTER SERVICE 2020

Speaker: Rev. Dr. Cecil Clements

Date: 12-04-2020

Scripture: Isaiah 53:4-5

As we look at the Word of God, I want to pick up from where we left off on Good Friday. We heard the Passion that Jesus went through, then we saw Him on the cross, being laid in a tomb after He had given up His spirit.

I was captured by the words of the prophet Isaiah 53:4-5 Surely He took up our pain, and bore our suffering. Yet we considered Him punished by God, stricken by Him and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on Him and by His wounds we are healed.

Everything that we are experiencing as a gift from Him came from Him. What He went through, what He took upon Himself are all things that we now enjoy. I hope that as Good Friday went by, that you were able to turn to Him and say, Lord Jesus, will you take this pain that I've been carrying for so long because it says that You took up our pain. Would You take my suffering? Because it says that You bore my suffering. And then, would You take my iniquities, my sins because You paid the penalty for my sins by Your death, and by Your wounds we are healed. So, my prayer is that each one of us has somehow been able to give to Him and enjoy the sense of freedom that comes because Jesus took these things upon Himself on the cross.

But today, church, we celebrate the fact that He is alive. We celebrate the fact that the grave couldn't hold Him. Death couldn't hold Him. He burst through and He's alive and well, seated at the right hand of God the Father, in heaven.

What has that mean for us? It means that those of us who know Him as Savior and Lord, that He in His aliveness (if I could use that word) in His risen power, is in our hearts. He lives within us. As Paul says that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith. He dwells within us, in that risen power of His.

I love this song by Alfred Ackley:

I serve a risen Savior, He's in the world today.
I know that He is living, whatever men may say.
I see His hand of mercy, I hear His voice of cheer
And just the time I need Him, He's always near.

He lives, He lives, Christ Jesus lives today
He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way
He lives, He lives, salvation to impart
You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.

He lives within your heart. I walk with Him, I talk with Him, and you can do the same if you are not already doing it – walking with Him and talking with Him, experiencing the salvation that He has brought to our lives.

So, what does the risen Christ bring into our lives? We know that He has brought us salvation. But risen, living within us – how does it change my life, my everyday life, my circumstances? What does Jesus bring that can change the equation of my own life as I live it in the moment, every moment?

Jesus brings His own experiences as He walked upon the face of this earth into my life. All that He went through as a human being – remember, fully human, fully divine! So His experiences are the same as I am going through, as you are going through. Therefore, He is able to understand and empathize with every situation and circumstance that confronts us.

What did He go through? Let me outline for you a few things that may let a wonderful sense of joy rise within your spirits.

- He defeated death – that final place that needs to be conquered, that eludes everybody. He conquered death. I wonder today whether there are some things in your life that you have not been able to conquer, that the all-powerful Jesus who is in your life is saying, “Let Me do it for you. Let Me help you nail this particular thing down and give you victory.”
- He suffered pain. We saw that on Good Friday – the amount of pain He went through. And He is able to look at you and the pain that you may be going through, and say, “I understand. I know what you are going through. I know how you hurt. I know the scars that you carry. Allow me to bring the balm of Gilead and touch your soul, your spirit, and bring healing to you.”
- He faced injustice. We saw that in the trials, the injustice of it all. Maybe today, you need somebody who understands injustice, who understands unfairness, to be looking at your life. Maybe this has not been a good time for you. Maybe things haven’t gone well with the situations. Maybe in terms of an increment, maybe you haven’t got a good evaluation or had an unfair appraisal, and you feel that it is not fair, not right or just. But the one who went through all that injustice is in you, and saying, “I understand, and I will assuage your feelings. I’ll take care of you through this time. I can even make this work together for good.”
- He was betrayed. Maybe you’ve faced a betrayal from somebody, a close confidant has let you down in some way, and you’re hurting. Jesus is saying, “Will you allow Me to put My arms around you and draw you close to Me and help you navigate this time of being let down by somebody you trust in.” Because you can trust in Him.
- He faced denial. Maybe you have faced denial too, in school, in college. Maybe you are surrounded by some people who ignore you, who don’t take any notice of you, who act like you don’t exist and who deny your very existence. Maybe, Jesus is saying, “I don’t do that. I will give you value. I will give you worth. It doesn’t have to be other people.” That’s what Jesus brings into the equation.

The risen Christ brings every experience that was His as He walked on the earth. And He says, “After conquering death, I bring those experiences into your life because I know exactly what you are going through; not as God, but as man I felt it. And now as God, I live within you and I can empathize. I can hold your hand, walk with you, talk with you and take you

through this difficult time.” That’s what the risen Christ brings into your life and mine on this Easter morning.

I want to end by telling a story. It’s a beautiful story and it brings home the point that we’ve been talking about.

I saw a strange sight. I stumbled upon a story most strange, like nothing in my life, my street sense, my sly tongue had ever prepared me for. Let me tell it to you.

Even before the dawn on Friday morning, I noticed a young man, handsome and strong, walking the alleys of our city. He was pulling an old cart filled with clothes, both bright and new, and he was calling in a clear tenor voice:

“Rags!” The air was foul and the first light filthy, to be crossed by such sweet music. “Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags. Rags!” he said.

Not this is a wonder, I thought to myself, for the man stood six feet four, and his arms were like tree limbs, hard and muscular, and his eyes flashed intelligence. Could he find no better job than this, to be a ragman in the inner city? I followed him. My curiosity drove me. And I wasn’t disappointed.

Soon the ragman came to a woman sitting on her back porch. She was sobbing into a handkerchief, sighing and shedding a thousand tears. Her knees and elbows made a sad X. Her shoulders shook. Her heart was breaking. The ragman stopped his cart. Quietly, he walked to the woman, stepping round tin cans, dead toys, and pampers, and he said, “Give me your rag,” he said so gently, “and I will give you another.”

He slipped the handkerchief from her eyes. She looked up, and he laid across her palm, a linen cloth so clean and new, it shone. She blinked from the gift to the giver. Then, as he began to pull the cart again, the ragman did a strange thing. He put her stained handkerchief to his own face, and then he began to weep, to sob as grievously as she had done, his shoulders shaking. Yet, she was left without a tear.

This is a wonder, I breathed to myself, and I followed the sobbing ragman like a child who cannot turn away from mystery.

“Rags! Rags! New rags for old,” he shouted. I a little while, when the sky showed grey behind the rooftops and I could see the shredded curtains hanging out black windows, the ragman came upon a girl whose head was wrapped in a bandage, whose eyes were empty. Blood soaked her bandage; a single line of blood ran down her cheek.

Now the tall ragman looked upon this child with pity and he drew a lovely yellow bonnet from his cart. “Give me your rag,” he said, tracing his own line on her cheek, “and I will give you mine.” The child could only gaze at him while he loosened her bandage, removed it and tied it to his own head. The bonnet, he set on hers. And I gasped at what I saw, for with the bandage went the wound. Against his brow it ran a darker, more substantial blood; his own.

“Rags! Rags! I take old rags,” cried the sobbing, bleeding, strong, intelligent ragman. The sun hurt both the sky now, and my eyes. The ragman seemed more and more to hurry. “Are you going to work?” he asked a man who leaned against a telephone pole. The man shook his

head. The ragman pressed him, “Do you have a job?” “Are you crazy?” sneered the other. He pulled away from the pole, revealing the right sleeve of his jacket, flat, the cuff stuffed in his pocket. He had no arm.

“So,” said the ragman, “Give me your jacket, and I’ll give you mine.” Such authority in his voice! The one-armed man took off his jacket. So did the ragman. And I trembled at what I saw, for the ragman’s arm stayed in his sleeve. And when the other put it on he had two good arms, thick as tree limbs; but the ragman had only one. “Go to work,” he said.

After that, he found a drunk, lying unconscious beneath an army blanket – an old man, hunched, wizened, and sick. He took that blanket and wrapped it around himself; but for the drunk, he left new clothes.

And now I had to run to keep up with the ragman. Though he was weeping uncontrollably, and bleeding freely from the forehead, pulling his cart with one arm, stumbling for drunkenness, falling again and again, exhausted, old and sick. Yet, he went with terrible speed. On spider’s legs, he skittered through the alleys of the city, this mile and then next, until he came to its limits; and then he rushed beyond.

I wept to see the change in this man. I hurt to see his sorrow. And yet, I needed to see where he was going in such a haste, perhaps to know what drove him so. The little old ragman! He came to a landfill. He came to the garbage pits. I wanted to help him in what he did, but I hung back, hiding. He climbed a hill. With tormented labor, he cleared a little space on that hill. Then he sighed, he lay down. He pillowed his head on a handkerchief and a jacket. He covered his bones with an army blanket. And he died.

Oh, how I cried to witness that death! I slumped in a junked car and wailed and mourned as one who has no hope, because I had come to love the ragman. Every other face had faded in the wonder of this man, and I cherished him. But he died. I sobbed myself to sleep. I did not know – how could I know – that I slept through Friday night and Saturday, and Saturday night as well.

But then, on Sunday morning, I was wakened by a violence. Light, pure, hard, demanding light, slammed against my sour face. And I blinked, I looked and I saw the last and the first wonder of all. There was the ragman, folding the blanket most carefully, a scar on his forehead, but alive. And besides that, healthy. There was no sign of sorrow, nor of age, and all the rags that he had gathered shined for cleanliness.

I lowered my head and trembling for all that I had seen, I myself walked up to the ragman. I told him my name, and with shame, I stood before him a sorry figure. Then I took off all my clothes in that place, and I said to him with dear yearning in my voice: “Dress me!”

He dressed me. My Lord. He put new rags on me, and I am a wonder beside him. The ragman. The Christ!

Beloved, what rags do you want to give Him today? What rags does He need to take from you? In the midst of all this celebration, do you have a breaking heart? Is there something that is making you sob, something heavy upon your heart? Maybe there’s a wound that refuses to heal. Maybe it is that you are inadequate for something. Or maybe it is an addiction that has taken the joy out of your life.

Whatever it is, Jesus is able to bring and make a difference in your life. As we stand in the glorious light of this Easter morning and look at Him in awe, beloved, let us invite Him to dress us in clothes of righteousness. Let's fall on our knees and worship Him, the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; the fairest of ten thousand, the bright and morning star, the lily of the valley, the risen Christ. Our Savior and our Lord. Amen.