

“New Life Each Day”

Romans 6:5-12

July 23, 2006

Two windows are the focus of today with the sermon focusing on the second window known as the “Resurrection Window”. This window is a companion to the Nativity window. The window has been patterned after windows in European cathedrals. This window was given by the Roberts family in memory of Walter E. Roberts. The artist was Robert R. Brownlee and the window was dedicated on January 13, 1980.

Robert Brownlee has written about the window in a companion book. He comments that the bottom panel “*is intended to invoke a spring feeling of the renewal of life with tulips and two stylized lilies.*” The medallion in the third panel depicts Jesus and the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. In the fourth panel we see the walled city of Jerusalem on Easter morning. If you look closely there are

the buildings of other religions present in the panel. At the very top is a participating angel—“this one beating a Chochiti drum!”

There is a lot to ponder in this beautiful window!

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The text I have chosen comes from Paul’s letter to the churches in Rome, 6th chapter, verses 5-12:

That’s what baptism into the life of Jesus means. When we are lowered into the water, it is like the burial of Jesus; when we are raised up out of the water, it is like the resurrection of Jesus. Each of us is raised into a light-filled world by our Father so that we can see where we’re going in our new grace-sovereign country.

*Could it be any clearer? Our old way of life was nailed to the Cross with Christ, a decisive end to that sin-miserable life---no longer at sin's every beck and call! What we believe is this---If we get included in Christ's sin-conquering death, we also get included in his life-saving resurrection. We know that when Jesus was raised from the dead it was a signal of the end of death-as-the-end. Never again will death have the last word. When Jesus died, he took sin down with him, but alive he brings God down to us."*¹

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¹ Peterson, Eugene, The Message, p.2041.

For the Apostle Paul the image of resurrection was important for resurrection is what happens in the life of a believer. He believed that following the Christ, being “in” Jesus Christ resulted in a change in the status between people and God. Sin was a barrier to a dynamic relationship with God. Once removed the believer now could build a wonderful relation with God and experience life as it was intended to be experienced---with joy, peace, wonderment, and faith.

The act of removing sin, for Paul, should encourage the believer to leave behind old ways and begin living out new ways. In other letters Paul would consistently condemn what he considered the “old ways” of jealousy, divisiveness, self centeredness, hatred, war making, pettiness, and so forth that continued to divide the Christian community. He would affirm the new ways of love, peace, forgiveness, sacrificial living, and a sense of the other in our lives. This new opportunity to embrace life as it was intended was, for Paul,

demonstrated in the resurrection of Jesus and symbolized in our baptism.

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Life is in fact filled with deaths and our sin drives us away from God. Life is filled with death including physical, emotional, structural, and religious deaths. Each stage of life is occasioned by the death of what was before. In the midst of life itself we all experience death and the consequences of a life lived apart from God.

I had trouble moving away from home. I remember the moment well. I packed up my car and left for Seattle, Washington, having graduated from college. I remember stopping along the way and feeling very sorry for myself. Why was I feeling so low? I was on my way to a new adventure. I had a college degree and was off to experience my first year of serving Christ. Why was I so depressed and why did I feel so alone? I felt that way because I knew I was

leaving behind a life I had enjoyed and treasured. I knew that although I was welcomed at home my home was no longer in Springfield, Oregon. This fact was affirmed when I came home on vacation and saw that my younger sister had joyfully taken over my former room. I knew when I stopped and ate my lunch that day on my way to Seattle, Washington—that I was experiencing a death of sorts.

Since that point of time there have been many “deaths”. Dreams have died on the realities of life and friends have physically died---more each year. As I have aged I have noted how my body no longer can do what I once asked of it--and certain things like playing softball have gone to the wayside. Relationships have died and in the future there will be more death. It is enough to make us depressed and even hopeless.

Death is all around us---every day. A career ends, a dream ends, a life ends, possibilities diminish---it is all around us every day. This week---as in every week---people

are dying some by accidents, some because of disease, and too many because of war. People have been downsized out of a job, forced to resign because they just lived out their faith---death is all around us.

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In response to this is God's word of love and redemption. The word from God is that death can be overcome---that death does not hold the final answer to life. The word from God is that new life can emerge from the old--love can conquer hate---hope can conquer despair. The Resurrection of Jesus shouts that to us. God brings life out of death and hope out of despair.

On Easter Sunday a new spirit washed across the broken and saddened disciples and broke into life. They experienced the risen Christ and the dream was alive! Resurrection reminds us that God is a creative and re-creative force in life. Resurrection reminds us that out of

death life will emerge. That is the good news we proclaim and live out.

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I went on that day---though I considered turning back---I went on that day to Seattle, Washington. I began a new life. I began a ministry. I saw how God brought something new out of the death of a former life. Years later I would be asked to put this into practice----big time! I have seen and experienced resurrection many times.

As I have related before, in 1979 Wichita Falls was hit by a devastating “F-5” tornado. In a matter of minutes the lives of many persons were changed by the death and destruction of the tornado. I remember volunteering to work for Civil Defense the next day. Two of us were assigned to go to a familiar intersection of Southwest Parkway and direct traffic---for power was still out. We knew exactly where the location was for on one corner was Faith Baptist Church and

on the other corner was a popular shopping area. Yet, we could not find the intersection because no identifiable landmarks existed. It was all rubble and destruction.

One local pastor proclaimed that the tornado was God's punishment of Wichita Falls for its sinfulness. That did not seem right to me. Was Wichita Falls any more sinful than Olney, Texas or Dallas, Texas or Los Alamos? If the tornado was directed by God then why was God singling out a community that demonstrated in many ways faithful living--a community that had at the time some of the largest churches in the nation?

For many persons everything they treasured---including loved ones was whisked away in a moment. Livelihoods ended like one of our members who lost his jewelry repair business to the tornado; another who lost their home; another who lost a friend.

Little by little something else began to work within the community. Pastors and lay leaders met to talk about a

response to the situation. A task force was formed to explore options. I had the privilege of serving on that task force. Churches that had barely talked with one another because they existed in a different theological, social, or physical sphere now began to work together. Help poured in from the outside and Church World Service offered through the Church of the Brethren to help us form an Interfaith Relief organization—should we desire to do so.

Soon the organization called Interfaith Disaster Services was up and running. Over the next few years hundreds of thousands of dollars contributed by Christians and thousands of hours of volunteer work from all over the world were funneled through IDS to those who needed help. Volunteer teams were assigned work projects. Ultimately FEMA asked IDS to be the conduit through which it would funnel millions of dollars in rebuilding loans and grants.

After many years the community had rebuilt the devastated areas and the ministry of IDS was coming to an

end. Some of us formed a new task force. We celebrated the spirit of cooperation that churches had experienced and the good that had resulted from working together. Was this to come to an end? Many of the churches---rather than retreating back into our own divided and isolated worlds----decided to ban together to fight another ongoing disaster---poverty. So Interfaith Ministries evolved out of the death of IDS and to this day, almost 30 years later, continues its ministry.

God was able to bring hope, new life, and even some surprises to the faithful people of Wichita Falls, Texas because we were a Resurrection people.

A final illustration: the tornado hit during Holy Week and for a while we considered cancelling our plans to decorate the church on Easter morning with hundreds of paper butterflies created by an area group home. Wisely we decided to go ahead with our celebration of color and beauty right in the middle of the destruction. We wondered if some

would think that we were ignoring or covering over the destruction by spending that Saturday not going through the rubble but working on worship. How wrong we were!

People as they entered the sanctuary on Easter morning broke down and wept. Hundreds of butterflies dotted the sanctuary---the centered cocoon that had been in the chancel was broken open and the message was "Christ has Risen Indeed". Years later people would say that that Sunday gave them hope---that Sunday reminded them that God would bring a miracle as on Easter morning. That Sunday with its contrast to the destruction around us---convinced many that they would live again.

Whenever we look at this beautiful window---no matter what rages out beyond---we are reminded that God brings life out of death and hope out of despair. That is the good news we celebrate!