

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
EASTER SUNDAY
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
“THE LIGHT OF GOD’S TRUTH”
April 24, 2011
Colossians 3:1-4
ALL SERVICES**

None of us actually saw the empty tomb of Jesus. Yet we have come to believe, with those first disciples, that Christ has been raised from the dead and that we have been raised with him.

Paul admonished the Colossians to set their hearts on the thing above. The risen Christ had been elevated to the eternal realm and was seated at the right of God.

Jesus’ empty tomb was first reported by Mary Magdalene. Peter and John then ran to the burial place to see what might have happened. John arrived first, but feared to go into the tomb. Peter arrived and entered the tomb. The folded grave clothes gave evidence that Jesus was not dead, but alive.

Easter is largely misunderstood. Our commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus is widely seen, both in the church and in the world, as a celebration of life after death or the immortality of the soul. But the New Testament claim is that we have already been raised with Christ. In Christ, we are free to live above the powers of sin and death.

We should give thanks that our Scriptures are not documents to be read and understood only literally. Literal language, in its proper place, is indispensable. If someone shouts, **“Your house is on fire!”** we do not pause to consider whether this might be a metaphorical statement! Some of the most exquisitely beautiful and meaningful language in the Bible makes no sense taken literally. For example, *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above.”*

Christ: cosmic, yet personal.

Colossians seems in many ways to be a letter for our time. Our understanding of the universe is so much more expansive than it was a generation ago and infinitely more than in biblical times. The epistle to the church in the city of Colossae sounds almost contemporary. Christ is presented in a cosmic context, as the one **“through whom the universe came to be, upon whom its coherence depends, for whom it was created, and in whom alone it will be restored to its primeval harmony.”** (R E.O. White) The letter is a response to the early attempts to relegate Christ to a subordinate role. It reaffirms the divine fullness of Christ and his oneness with God. Christ is **“the image of the invisible God,”** making the invisible God visible in human form. **“All things were created through him and for him.”** **“In him all things hold together.”** In him **“the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things.”** What a very contemporary-sounding view of Christ!

The letter also expresses pastoral and personal concerns for the Colossian congregation. They were threatened by divisiveness, caused primarily by false teachings. The letter emphasizes the reality of Christ’s spiritual presence. The people are reminded that, because they have received Christ, they are to live **“in him.”** They are to be **“rooted and built up in him.” (2:6-7)** The point is that Christ is both cosmic and personal. This highly spiritual, even mystical, understanding is given an intensely practical application. Those who are **“in Christ”** are to live as Christ lived.

The witness of baptism.

Baptism has a long history. It was an important ritual in ancient Judaism, especially for gentile converts. The baptism practiced by John the Baptist was an act and a sign of repentance. Jesus’ own baptism was both his identification with a sinful world and an act of consecration to his mission and ministry. Whether Jesus’ baptism was a pre-figuring of his coming death, burial, and resurrection is debatable. Throughout the rest of the New Testament, however, baptism is a witness to the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ. It also represents the baptized person’s participation in Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. We are buried with Christ by baptism into death, and we are raised to walk in newness of life. (cf. Ro 6:4; Col. 2:12)

This letter to the Colossians is very clear about the responsibility of those who have been **“raised with Christ.”** They are to live in such a way as to honor Christ and to bear witness to him. It is unthinkable that anyone who has been raised with Christ would remain entangled with the things of this world. Those who have truly

been raised with Christ will set their minds on things above and live accordingly. Baptism represents a dying with Christ and a being raised with Christ. In so doing we become new creations, and this will be evident in our manner of life.

“Preacher pulled the boy up from the water / Alleluias rose from the banks / There was a new suit of clothes from his Father / And a prayer of thanks / The boy walked barefooted all the way home for dinner / And when they laughed at his muddy feet / He said I’ve been through the water and I’ve come out clean / Got new clothes to cover me / And you don’t wear your old shoes on your brand new feet / When you’ve been through the water.” (Kyle Matthews)

The elevated life.

At Easter the great danger is that we will see Christ’s resurrection only as the promise of life after death for us. Colossians affirms, however, that we have already been raised with Christ. We are raised from the deadly power of sin and death. We no longer live in darkness and fear. Being raised with Christ should result in an elevated life. **“Setting our minds on things that are above”** does not mean we become other-worldly, always dreaming about heaven, and of no earthly good! It means we are living on a higher plane than when we lived only for ourselves. It means we have discovered how much better it is to give than to receive. It means we have found in following Christ the higher joys of loving God by serving the neediest of humanity. Being raised with Christ means we don’t have to worry about ourselves. Therefore, we can focus on the things that make for abundant life.

William Barclay told a story about a little girl who was with her mother in a church that had stained-glass windows, just like ours. The girl whispered to her mother, **“Who are the people in the windows?”** Her mother whispered back, **“They are saints.”** That very same week the girl accompanied her mother to visit an old woman in their village. She was very poor, but at one time or another she had helped almost everyone in the village. As they left, the mother said to the daughter, **“Well, that is a real saint that you’ve been to see today.”** The girl began to think about what her mother said. How were the people in the windows and the elderly woman in the village alike? Finally she said, **“Mother, I know what a saint is. A saint is someone who lets the light shine through.”**

O how true it is! Those who are raised with Christ are not simply do-gooders, who do no evil. Life in Christ is more about who we become than what we do or

don't do. The more we become like Christ, the more elevated are our lives, and the more his light shines through us.

Knowing that God is a God of the living rather than a God of the dead helps us see resurrection all about us. We see life conquering death in the cycles of nature, in the birth of children, in the recovery of health, and in the renewal of hope. Easter is not limited to one event in history or to one day in the year. We have been raised with Christ, and this is true every single day.

I invite you on this Easter Sunday morning to become the light of God's truth and let your life reflect the goodness and love of God. Such a life will conquer death and reveal God's ongoing drama of redemption. If you would like to live as Jesus lived by "***going about doing good***", I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.