



WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Dying and Rising

Dr. Jim Gilchrist

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So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory (Colossians 3:1-4).

In this Easter season especially we tend to focus on the resurrection of Jesus as a reason to believe in, and hope for, life after death. We want to believe that when this body dies, that won't be the end of us; and we want to believe that when the people we love pass away, it won't be the end of them either. Even if we have no idea what a resurrection body will be like, what it might want for lunch or how fast it could run, we think of dying and rising in mostly physical terms. We'll see each other again. Death will not be the last word.

I certainly believe that. It's a basic affirmation of our faith. The last words of the Apostles' Creed say we believe in "the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." But when we limit our notion of dying and rising to purely physical things we miss the larger point. The larger point, the deeper meaning, of the gospel is that dying and rising are things that can happen to us right here and now, and the sooner they do, the better off we are.

I was on a panel at Pittsburgh Seminary last Friday on social media, robotics, and the church. That sounds like an odd combination of topics, but it was the theme for the annual meeting of a small ecumenical roundtable on science, technology, and religion. After the panel, a woman

in her eighties came up to me and introduced herself as having a background in science and a PhD in the history of science. She said, “Eternal life isn’t something I look forward to receiving after I die. I have eternal life right now.” She smiled, because she thought I would agree. I said I agree completely, and as a matter of fact, I’m planning to talk about that very thing on Sunday.

What the retired professor had in mind was something Jesus says, and Paul says, and the whole New Testament points to.

When Jesus shows up in Bethany, having heard that his dear friend Lazarus has died, he has a conversation with Lazarus’s sister Martha, who is also Jesus’ friend. Before he does a spectacular thing and brings Lazarus back from the dead, Jesus makes an amazing claim. He says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.”

Notice two things about what Jesus says. First, he doesn’t say, “I *bring* the resurrection or I *cause* the resurrection.” He says, “I *am* the resurrection and the life.” The gospel says that Jesus is the very Word of God through whom all things are made, including you and me. The cosmic Christ is himself the one in whom we live and move and have our being.

Then he says, “Those who believe in me will live even though they die, and those who believe in me will never die.” At one level he’s clearly talking about physical death and resurrection, because the very next thing he does is call Lazarus out of the tomb, just as he himself will come out of a tomb soon enough. But at another level Jesus is talking

about a different kind of dying and rising. When he says that whoever believes in him will never die, he must not mean physical death because, of course, everyone dies physically. But in a deeper sense, dying to self and rising to Christ spiritually is the very thing that makes eternal life possible.

Dying to self and rising to Christ involves a transformation from living mainly for myself to living mainly for Christ, from being egocentric to becoming Christocentric. Jesus says, those would save their life must lose it, and this is what he means. Jesus is the source of life and the purpose of life, the Alpha and the Omega, and we only find our deepest purpose and our truest self when we live in and for him.

Dying to self and rising to Christ is a matter of orientation. Instead of being oriented toward whatever I happen to want at the moment—what pleases me, what scares me, what makes me mad—my whole life becomes oriented toward Jesus and what he wants. And it turns out that what Jesus wants are the things that satisfy the deepest longings of my soul. I'm still myself, but without all the selfishness. I still have all the unique gifts God has given me, but I use them for God's purposes now, and in the process I find out who I was really meant to be.

Jesus tells the Pharisee Nicodemus that he must be born again, because no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above. Just as we're born once into the physical world, we have to be born a second time into the spiritual things of God. That's true for everyone, even though some of us mainline Christians resist the language of being born again because we know people who use that language as a kind of religious club. If anyone asks whether we've been born again, the correct answer is yes, if we've

truly given our lives to Jesus. We should never lose the understanding that we've been born into a new life in Christ, just because some people use those words in a rather harsh and exclusive way.

Birth is about the beginning of a life, and life is one long process of growing and developing. Babies are alive and doing things for a long time before they have any concept of having been born, and spiritually speaking, we may be alive for a long time before we realize that the Holy Spirit has been moving in us, preparing us for a whole new life of faith.

Martin Luther, the great reformer, described baptism as the drowning of the old, sinful self, but he said the old self is a "mighty good swimmer." It dies hard. Being born spiritually is the beginning of a long process, with all the daily disciplines of growing stronger and falling short and relying on the grace of God to pick us up and set us on our feet again. We learn to walk before we can run, and it takes a while before we fix our hearts and minds firmly on Christ and orient our whole lives in the direction of him. When we've fully committed ourselves to Christ we can sing at last, in the words of the old hymn, "I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back. No turning back."

Now, truth be told, most of us only learn to rely on God when we have nothing else to rely on. We only ask Jesus to guide us when we discover that we're lost in the woods and don't know which way to turn.

That's why people who are good at worldly things are often not very good at spiritual things. Smart, successful people often think they can manage all by themselves. They rely on their gifts of intelligence and energy, and as long as

that seems to be working for them, they see no reason to rely on anyone else—not even God. They may believe in God, in some remote and abstract way, but they don't really rely on God, and they don't have a personal relationship with God. They don't see any need for that.

Often, it's not until things get out of control that we look around to see whether anyone else might be able to help. Once we start doing that, we discover that God is bigger and stronger and wiser than we are, and God is faithful. God can do things in us and through us and for us that we can't do by ourselves. In fact, we finally realize that even the things we thought we were accomplishing all by ourselves were really being done by the grace of God.

When that begins to happen consistently enough, and we find ourselves relying on God and wanting to live for Jesus, then we realize that the old egocentric self is dying and a new self is being born. We start to mature in the faith and grow in Christ. We don't get so hung up any longer on the superficial signs of religiosity, but focus more and more on what Jesus says are the main things: loving God and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

We start to let go of the litmus tests that some religious folk set up as boundary markers for who's in and who's out. We don't try to boil faithfulness down to a specific checklist of do's and don'ts, as if we could justify ourselves by checking off the list. Instead, we realize that every aspect of our lives belongs to God, and we're always falling short, but that's okay because we're justified by the grace of God, and so we're free to make mistakes and keep on growing. We learn to work out our own salvation in fear and trembling, as Paul says, knowing that God is at work within us, enabling us to will and to do his good pleasure.

And while all of that is going on, we learn to look beyond the differences that divide people and see those differences as opportunities for learning to love and grow in ever-wider circles. Rachel Held Evans, an insightful thirty-something writer on Christianity and the church, says, “The good news is you are a beloved child of God; the bad news is you don’t get to choose your siblings.”¹

But that’s a good thing after all. As Paul says again, there is no longer Greek and Jew, or any other simple set of oppositions among people, but “Christ is all and in all.” Then instead of focusing on who’s in and who’s out, who’s like us and who’s not like us; instead of conjuring up enmity and hostility and fear against others, we clothe ourselves with love and do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

When our spirits have been transformed in that way, we’ve died to the old self and risen again in Christ. And then what the wise woman told me other day becomes more obvious to all of us. Eternal life is not something we wait for when we die. It’s something we already have, and a quality that makes life worth living forever and ever.

¹ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday* (Nashville: Nelson, 2015), p. 15.



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