



On Living, Dying and Rising

TEXT
Isaiah 11:1–9
Acts 2:22–24

April 17, 2016 — Sermon by Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Listen for the word of God as it comes to us from the Acts of the Apostles, Chapter 2, verses 22, 23 and 24. This is the day of the coming of the Holy Spirit. It is the birthday of the church. It is Pentecost — one of the great celebrations of the Hebrew people. It celebrates the giving of the Torah to the Hebrew people and the wheat harvest for the nation. It is one of the three “pilgrimage” festivals of the year meaning if you were able, Jews from all over the world were encouraged to come to Jerusalem for the celebration. The disciples are gathered in Jerusalem waiting as Jesus told them.

You may remember the story. Jesus has risen and appeared to the disciples, but instead of staying with them, he leaves, is taken up into heaven, and he tells them to remain in Jerusalem where the power of the Holy Spirit will come upon them. Then the Holy Spirit comes to the disciples, and the people seek an explanation. Peter steps up and is preaching. He quotes from the prophet Joel, and then he tells the good news of the gospel in three verses.

“You that are Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you

by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know — this man, handed over to you according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power.” (Acts 2:22–24)

In three short verses, Peter summarizes the story of the gospel — the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth lived among us with power and showed wonders and signs that everyone saw. He died, was killed by the Roman authorities. But that is not the end because God raised Jesus from the dead, freeing him from death because even death has no power over Jesus Christ.

The late theologian Maria Harris, a professor of religious education for many years at Fordham University, wrote in her book *Reshaping the Religious Imagination* that these amazing three verses tell the whole of the good news and can be summarized in three words: living, dying and rising.

Jesus lived among us, God in human form. Jesus died, was cru-

cified, suffered a horrible death even though he was innocent of any wrongdoing, dying for us. And Jesus rose from the dead because even death could not hold him. That’s it. That’s the gospel. Someone asks you about what it means to be a Christian. You say three words: Living, Dying and Rising.

That’s it. It is the story of our Lord. Jesus lived. Jesus died. Jesus rose again. And because it is story of the Lord, it is our story. As believers in Jesus Christ, we live, we die, and we rise.

It is the resurrection story we live today and every day. It is why we are gathered today. Sixty-seven years ago, Village Presbyterian Church came into being. And for 67 years, faithful children and young people and young adults and women and men have joined together as the body of Christ. Through those years, persons have lived and persons have died. And for 67 years, there has been living and dying and rising.

We are still being called to living, dying and rising.

Living: On the campus of Columbia Theological Seminary where I just left to join you, one of my colleagues is a gentleman named Golden, a handsome African American gentleman.

He works with our buildings and grounds. Golden has been around a long time. When I see him, I ask how he is doing. And he tells me, "Fine, Professor. Just fine." "Really?" I ask him. And he says, "Well, you know, Professor. I'm just keepin' on, keepin' on."

I remember asking Golden once, "Golden, what do you mean when you say that?" And he smiled and looked at me and said, "Oh, you know, Professor ... keepin' on, keepin' on." I have come to now realize that living is keepin' on, keepin' on. It is faithfulness. It is persevering. It may not be glamorous, but is essential to our life. Living means we do the things that keep us alive.

Dying: The great challenge for us is this. There are some things we are doing, some ways of being church, which we need to stop doing; we need to let die. It is the nature of the gospel — and indeed of the whole creation. We see this every fall as the season turns to winter. It seems as if the whole of creation dies. Yet even though we see this and know this, the problem is, we in the church often get so set in our ways, we do not stop doing the things that have long since served their purpose. We do not let them die.

A number of years ago, I was privileged to preach at one of our churches in Houston. And after preaching, there was a moment in the service for the affirmation of faith, when in response to the word being preached, the congregation stands together and says what they believe. On this day, the congregation was invited to say the Apostles' Creed, one

of the most ancient of belief statements that unites nearly all Christians. So the congregation rose to say the Apostles' Creed, and in one of the strangest liturgical moves I have ever experienced, they all together turned and faced the large blank wall at the back of the sanctuary.

Now I will tell you that I have witnessed many congregations recite the Apostles' Creed. Some of these congregations have turned to face one another. Some of these congregations have faced the cross. But until that moment, I had never seen a congregation turn and face a blank wall.

Later that day, on the way to the airport, the pastor and his spouse and the associate pastor and her husband took me to lunch. During lunch, I asked them about this action just out of curiosity. The pastor explained that when the sanctuary was first constructed, one of the congregation's members, a magnificent textile artist, had created a huge wall hanging, hand-stitched, priceless, of the Apostles' Creed. It was easily 40 feet wide and 12 feet high. It hung on the back wall of the sanctuary.

After being there for years, it was decided that the stunning mural should be cleaned, so the congregation contracted with a company to come and take it down and clean it and then rehang it. Tragically, in the cleaning process, the mural was destroyed. "What a terrible event!" I said to the pastor.

"Oh yes," he said. "And at that point, the artist could not recreate it."

I asked the pastor, "When did this happen?"

He turned to me and said, "Oh, this happened years before I arrived."

"How long have you served here?" I asked.

"Well, I've been here for 12 years. So this must have happened at least 25 years ago," he said.

I looked at him quizzically. "So for at least 25 years now, whenever you have recited the Apostles' Creed," I exclaimed, "you have stood up and turned around to face the blank wall of the sanctuary?"

"Yes," he said. "It's very sad."

Now I do not know, but somehow I have to believe that every time this lovely congregation does this, perhaps even this day, God in heaven says to the choirs of angels and to the saints, those who have gone before us, "Wait. Just wait. Now, everyone, look there. They are going to do it again. This is the silliest thing I have ever seen! I just love these Presbyterians!"

Following living, and dying, comes what? Yes ... rising. Dying has to happen. Without Jesus dying, there would be no rising. Rising means the new things, the new adventures and the new ways of being church to which the Holy Spirit is calling us. It is what the prophet Isaiah speaks about when he tells the Hebrew people about the new life, the shoot that will come from the stump of Jesse — a seemingly dead stump from which there could not possibly be any life. But Peter proclaims that God

raised Jesus up from the dead because it was impossible for Jesus to be held by death's power.

These are the days of living. These are the days of dying. And these are the days of rising. We cannot simply keep on keepin' on. We cannot keep doing church the same way. The new life from the stump of Jesse calls us to new acts of faithfulness. We cannot be content to sit here and wait for people to come to us. We cannot act as if this is the only place where God is at work.

I am so grateful that we have called the Reverend Hallie Hottle to join us and, by the grace of the Holy Spirit, to guide our ministries with young adults. I recently completed a research project in which I interviewed over 300 young adults, many of whom we baptized and confirmed and most of whom are no longer in churches. They do not dislike us. In fact, in record numbers, they say they had a wonderful church experience as a child and adolescent. But now, most seem to say we just do not matter. They are the "spiritual, but not religious." They are the "religiously unaffiliated." Oh, they still love Jesus, but they just see no need to be part of us.

I was holding a focus group in Des Moines and was surprised when I met a couple who were actually in a Presbyterian church. I called them "the aberrations in my research." So I asked them to linger to find out what was wrong with them; why were they actually in a Presbyterian church. They told me this story.

They both grew up in New Jersey in Presbyterian churches.

They met in their junior year — both were students at Rutgers University. They fell in love and married just after they graduated. Then they were both recruited by different firms to come work in Des Moines. Neither of them knew anyone in Des Moines. They had never even been to Iowa. But they were both young and thought, "Well, why not?" So they moved.

Their family and friends thought they were strange to do so. But they were able to buy a house they never could have afforded in northern New Jersey, and they actually found themselves enjoying life in Des Moines. They visited a few Presbyterian churches. They went to one church twice, but they did not sign the friendship folder. (They are not stupid.)

Then, after living there for three years, the young woman was doing her monthly self-breast-exam and felt a lump for the first time. She called her mom right away, and her mom told her the good news was they had no history of breast cancer in their family, and likely it was a cyst, and it was probably about time for her to develop one, but she should get it checked.

So the young woman called her physician's office and remembers asking for an appointment. When she explained why, the person said just to come in and the doctor would see her. She went to her doctor's office during lunch, and the doctor told her she did not want to alarm her, but that this was worthy of a referral — so she referred the young woman to a specialist.

He saw her the next week and said he did not want to alarm her either, but to be safe, this was worth a biopsy. She called her mom and dad and talked with them, her in-laws, her sister and brother-in-law. Everyone agreed it was good to err on the side of caution, but again, assured her it was likely nothing.

The doctor's office called a little over a week later and asked to see her and her husband and said it was urgent. When they both met with him, he told them the news. He said he had checked it twice. She had a stage 4 cancer. He was afraid of this. He had seen this type of cancer before. It was very aggressive. He was worried it had likely already metastasized.

They had some very hard decisions to make. She called her family and friends, and they immediately flew out from New Jersey and surrounded them. When they got to the hospital for surgery, the admitting clerk asked about her religious affiliation, and she said, "Presbyterian." Then the clerk asked which Presbyterian church, and the couple said they didn't really have a church there. They did visit one church twice, but they did not remember the pastor's name. The clerk assured them the chaplain could find that out for them.

The chaplain called the church and talked to the pastor. This was a smaller church of mostly older adults. The pastor remembered the young couple visiting. "They didn't sign the friendship folder each time," he said. He came directly to the hos-

pital and prayed with her before surgery. He stayed the whole day, praying with her husband and her family. She said he was marvelous and an amazing source of comfort.

When she was released from the hospital to go home, it was just her and her husband. All of the family and friends needed to return to New Jersey. Together, they were working on a schedule to return during her rigorous and difficult upcoming chemotherapy and radiation therapy, but on that day, it was just the two of them.

The husband apologized and said he had to return to his office just for a couple of hours. She told him to go and assured him she would be fine. She was just going to go upstairs and lie down for a while. He left, and while she was lying down, she thought she heard a knock on the door. She did not expect anyone, so she ignored it — but the knock was persistent.

Annoyed, she got up and went downstairs and opened the door, and there stood a lovely older adult woman holding a paper bag sideways. She asked the young woman who she was, and when she told the woman her name, the woman said, “Oh, good. I have the right house.” She introduced herself and said she was from “the church.”

The young woman asked, “What church?” and the woman named the church where the pastor served. Then she told her she had made a casserole and some fresh baked rolls and some vegetables she canned over the winter. All this food was for her and her husband. And the woman

said she was so sorry to hear what had happened and told her the whole church had been praying for them.

The young woman told the older woman that she hadn’t ordered the food, and the older woman smiled and said she knew that, but it was for her anyway. Then the young woman asked how much it cost, and the older woman said it was free. Then she asked if she could come in and put the food away. The young woman said, “Of course” and showed her in. Then the older woman asked if she felt like some company, and the young woman said, “Actually, I would love some company right now.”

So they sat together in the living room and introduced themselves and prayed together and laughed and cried. Then as the young woman was getting tired, she apologized and said she probably needed to go upstairs and lie down. The older woman said, “Of course, dear. And I do not mean to be rude, but I am looking around your place and, sweetheart, you need to dust.”

The young woman said, “Yes. Well, I have not been home in a while, and my family that has been staying here hasn’t really had the time.”

The older woman exclaimed, “Oh, of course. But if you don’t mind, while you go upstairs, I would be happy to clean here. I love to clean.”

“Well, how much would you charge me?” asked the young woman.

The older woman laughed and said, “Oh, sweetheart, it’s free. We’re the church. I love to

clean. You just go upstairs, and I will be quiet.”

Later, the young husband came home and, noticing the difference downstairs, asked his spouse, “Baby, did you clean downstairs?” And then the young woman explained that no, a woman came from church.

“What church?” he asked.

“The pastor’s church,” she explained. And then she told him about the dinner that awaited them.

The next afternoon, there was a different knock on the door. The young woman opened it, and there was a rather uncomfortable looking older gentleman there. “May I help you?” she asked.

“Uh, yes, are you ... ?” and the older man said her name.

She said, “Yes” and he said, “Good” — and thrust a bag at her and told her it was a chicken dinner his wife had prepared. It was not yet done because she wanted it to be hot when they ate it, and she had to follow the directions or he was going to get yelled at by his wife — and he does not like getting yelled at by his wife.

She assured him she would follow the directions. And he told her there was a pie there, too, and that the church was so sorry to hear about her illness, and they were all praying for them both.

She thanked him and then asked if he wanted to come in for a visit, and he sighed and said, “Well, not really.” But then he said that he noticed that the screen door was not working that well, and he knew what was wrong, and if it was okay with her, he would be glad to fix it.

She told him that her husband had been meaning to get to it.

And he said, “Yes, well, young guys, they’re not that great at this, but I know what’s wrong. I have my tools in my car. It won’t take but 10 minutes.” So she thanked him and put the food away. When her husband got home, he asked, “Baby, did you fix the screen door?”

“No,” she said, “a man came from the church.”

“What church?”

“The same church. The pastor’s church. And he brought a chicken dinner, and it’s not yet done because his wife wants it to be hot when we eat it, and we can’t mess it up or he gets yelled at, and he does not like getting yelled at.”

I have visited this congregation. I wanted to meet them — 114 members, all in their 60s, 70s and 80s and older. This congregation provided a meal for this couple every single day for six months. She said she was terrified and felt so alone. Her husband turned to me and told me, “We have never eaten so good in our whole lives. We have frozen casseroles until Christ comes again.”

Then she looked at me, with tears on her cheeks, and said, “I have already told my family and friends in New Jersey, whether I live for six more months, or six more years, or 60 more years, I am never leaving OUR church. I am going to die here in our church.”

You think to yourself, they were just casseroles. Then you are not paying attention. They were terrified and convinced

they were alone. And the church enveloped them and said, “You may be lonely, but you are never alone!”

Living. Dying. Rising. These are the days of living. These are the days of dying. And friends, these are the days of rising!

We are people who live. And we are a people who die. And, by the grace of God in the risen Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit, we are a people who rise. We rise. May it be so, oh church.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.