



Because He Lives

TEXT
1 Corinthians 15:50—
16:4

November 17, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

“Tell me about Village,” a visitor asked me. How would you answer that question? Would you talk about worship? About these musicians who inspire us every week?

Would you talk about our signature mission: Thelma’s Kitchen last year and Avenue of Life this year?

Would you talk about the way we practice friendship at Wednesday Family Dinners or Stephen Ministry?

Would you talk about the children, or how our youth spend their spring break on a mission trip?

Would you talk about, in an age when millennials are staying away from church, we have a vibrant and honest ministry with young adults?

Would you talk about our leadership in the PCUSA, and how we now worship on two campuses?

Would you talk about our international mission — as close as our own border and as far away as Kenya?

Or would you say, Village is living toward God’s promised day — a day when everything is right. It’s a day we have never seen, and a day that is almost

impossible to imagine. But it is a day we trust, for it is the result of God’s undying love, and we base our lives on it.

“Tell me about Village,” she asked. What would you say?

Paul writes about resurrection. It is clear that Paul is not speaking just about life beyond the grave. No, the resurrection of Jesus Christ changes life now. And if I understand it, Paul says because Jesus is alive, because his spirit is found in the church, our ministry matters. He says, “Be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

I love that, but I will also admit that I wonder about that sometimes. Sometimes I wonder if we are really growing closer to God’s promised day. I believe, but I need help with my unbelief.

It’s probably my age, but I have learned this: If I only look at the present, I can get discouraged. But when we take the long view, it’s clear that the living Christ is at work in the church. Our labor is not in vain.

In speaking of resurrection, Paul is walking all the way to the end of this theological imagination and inviting us to peer into

the undying love of God. Death did not destroy what God was doing in Jesus; so when you seek to live like Christ, it is never in vain.

But then, without taking a breath, Paul says, “Now concerning the collection for the saints: ... on the first day of the week, put aside your gifts.” Talk about coming down off the mountaintop!

Most readers of 1 Corinthians say Paul finishes his sermon in Chapter 15 and turns to logistics in Chapter 16: housekeeping, offerings and travel plans. It’s just logistics.

But the more I study it, the less convinced I am of that. I think Chapter 16 is still part of the sermon. If our work in the Lord is not in vain, then Paul describes the Christian work of generosity. The reason we give, the reason we invest our money in the ministry of the church is because God raised Jesus from the dead, and the church is bearing witness to that work of resurrection, to God’s promised day.

I have come to see, if we take the long view, it’s obvious that the risen Christ is at work in the church. Seeing what God has done before emboldens us to imagine what we have yet to

know. Resurrection is not just for life beyond the grave. Resurrection is new life now. That's why Paul says, our labor is not in vain.

Jeanette Walls, in her book *The Glass Castle*, tells of imagining resurrection — the capacity to see life as it is and imagine how it could be. It was her 10th birthday. She tells it this way:

“Dad took me outside to the back patio and asked what I wanted most in the world. ‘It’s a special occasion, seeing as how it puts you into double digits,’ he said. ‘You’re growing up fast, Mountain Goat. You’ll be on your own in no time, and if there’s anything I can do for you now, before you’re gone, I want to do it.’”

“There was only one thing I truly wanted, something that I knew would change all our lives, but I was afraid to ask for it. Just thinking about saying the words out loud made me nervous.”

“What is it?” he said. “Ask away.”

“I’m scared.”

“You know if it’s humanly possible, I’ll get it for you.”

“I took a breath and said, ‘Do you think you could maybe stop drinking?’”¹

Paul says our labors are not in vain because tomorrow can be a new day. Our stewardship is not about funding a budget. It’s about asking ourselves, what will God do among us if we trust the big things in our lives to God?

We began this series with that thought. Can we trust the big things in our lives to God?

Can we trust the big things in our world to God? I want to say yes. I do say yes sometimes. I believe; help my unbelief.

Part of saying yes is taking this offering. Paul tells the Corinthians, “Take a collection, not because the church has a budget, but because Jesus is alive, and we need to be part of that resurrecting work.”

I don’t know how you decide what you will give to the church. I hope you give to the church.

Studies of American Christianity reveal that about 20 percent of people who attend Christian churches give nothing away. They give nothing to any church or other charity. Further, while the faith often talks about giving 10 percent, a tithe, the average gift for Presbyterians is less than two percent. I don’t know what it is for us at Village, but the average giving to charity for Presbyterians is 1.8 percent.²

I don’t know how you make decisions about generosity. I don’t know if it is a discipline with you, or a spur-of-the-moment thing. But I do know that there is a relationship between our faith and our generosity.

I remember talking with my friend Russell. He said, “Tom, you talk about the joy of giving, but I’m not sure I’ve found that joy yet. What’s the secret?” He was really asking.

I asked, “Well, Russell, what percentage of your income do you give away?”

“Oh, I’m not sure,” he said.

“Well, look at that. If you don’t feel joy, it’s probably be-

cause you aren’t giving enough. I’ve never known anyone who gave generously and regretted it. You can’t be generous and grumpy at the same time; you just can’t.”

Carol and I tithe. It changes other choices. We start with what we want to give to Village and then build everything else around that. Our faith is supposed to set our priorities, and when you tithe, it sets your priorities. It feels faithful to us; it also feels joyful. The joy comes from knowing that in a very concrete way, we are living toward a new day.

To see the movement toward that new day often requires us to take the long view.

This week, Rev. Melanie Hardison moved to town. She will spend the next few days unpacking boxes and then begin her ministry with us the first week of December.

A few weeks ago, you extended a call to Rev. Sally Wright. It’s an exciting time for us at Village. And to call these two women seemed like the most natural thing in the world. But that wasn’t always the case.

Let me tell you a story of how we got here. It was February 1960. There were 5,000 members of the Village family. In those days, most folks went to church every Sunday, so this room was packed. But on that Sunday in 1960, something astonishing happened: The scripture at each service was read by a woman. That had never happened before at Village Church. There was a woman reading scripture all by herself. It turns

out, women are pretty good at reading scripture.

Well now, the camel's nose is in the tent, as they say. In December of 1963, the nominating committee presented their slate of officers, and among the elders elected was one Phyllis Matchette. Phyllis was the first woman elected as an elder at Village. The elder who chaired the Worship Committee suggested that the best way for Phyllis to participate in Communion would be to come on Saturday and get everything ready for the other elders to serve. That way she wouldn't have to lift those heavy trays during worship. There was a man named Bill Degen; I loved Bill Degen. He said, "Absolutely not. She was elected an elder. If we are serving Communion in this sanctuary, she will serve right along with us." And she did.³

Twenty years later, in 1984, a congregational meeting was held to call a new associate pastor, Rev. Diane Cooke, a secondary classmate of mine, actually. Village had a number of women serving in ministry. Rena Yocum and Sister Catherine Johnson, a Catholic nun, served in ministry of education, but Rev. Cooke was the first woman to serve as a called and installed pastor on the staff here. That was 1984. For my first worship service as your pastor, in 2004, I led worship with Rev. Diane Quaintance. Diane was the third woman to serve as a pastor in this amazing congregation. We have on our staff today as many female pastors as Village had in her first 50 years.

And it just seems natural. The truth is today we can't imagine being the church without the leadership of these women. It's so natural that we might be tempted to forget that there was a day, not too long ago, when the church couldn't imagine what we take for granted today.

Every week I talk with you about God's promised day — a day when the poor will no longer be blamed for their poverty; a day when a person's race is no longer reason for dehumanizing; a day when people will matter more than nations; a day when children will no longer be afraid they might get shot in school; a day Dominicans or Kenyans don't have to wait for the doctor to visit at the end of May. It's a day we have never seen; and the truth is, it's hard to imagine, but we are living toward that day.

I don't know why you give to Village. Maybe it's to make sure these musicians have the music they need. Maybe it's to make sure the children have nice classrooms. Maybe it's to make sure our youth can take trips. Maybe it's to support mission through Front Porch, or the Food Pantry, or around the globe. Maybe it's just to make sure we have worship, a time to be with God, both here at Mission as well as at Antioch.

Whatever reason you might have, know that your gift is doing more than supporting a ministry. Your generosity is resurrection work. It is also empowering us to live toward God's promised day, when all will be well.

We aren't there yet, but because folks like you, through the decades, have been generous and enabled Village to be Village, we are, without a doubt, closer than we once were.

Imagine what God might do through us in the years to come. And when you imagine, make sure your dreams are big enough that they can only be held with the prayer: I believe, help my unbelief.

¹Jeanette Walls, *The Glass Castle* (2005), p. 116

²Christian Smith and Michael Emerson, *Passing the Plate* (2008)

³Phyllis Matchette, *The Village Story* (1996), p. 43. This book chronicles the history of Village Church through the years of Dr. Me-neilly's remarkable ministry, 1947–1994.

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>.