

May 21st: Alive

Good morning again, friends! This morning we continue our year-long sermon series—we've been reading through the whole Bible from the beginning to the end and seeing how these ancient texts can be relevant to our modern lives. Along the way, we've read about nomadic people, people under empire, and now we turn to a new stage of our text which is focused on the birth of a new group of people: the very first Christians.

Because we've already had a chance to hear from Towan this morning and we've learned so much about the history of our congregation, I'm going to keep my thoughts pretty short today, but before we begin, would you pray with me?

Life-giving God,

We thank you for your faithful presence, we have witnessed your love and companionship in every generation and every stage of our lives. Today we gather to honor the past, but also to dream about the future—trusting that your continued grace and mercy will empower us and lead us into new visions and new opportunities for growth. We are leaning on your wisdom and guidance as we move into uncharted territory, so we come to you now in search of peace of mind and clarity of purpose. Fill us anew, refresh our perspectives, enliven us for your glory and our neighbor's good. Amen.

Two weeks ago, we introduced the Epistle to the Romans, which is a letter written by Paul to the newly established church in Rome. It's the first century CE, and only a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, so it's a strange time for the first Christians. You might remember that we read Paul's introduction to this congregation and his initial greetings to them during this time of tension and growth—and Paul is deeply concerned with building strength and harmony within this body of new believers. So he tells them that a priority for them should be to encourage each other in their mutual ministry, and that they should focus on reconciliation.

Today we return to this letter to the Roman church, and we see that Paul is still fixated on this idea of bringing peace and restoration to people, places, and institutions that are in need of repair. As we heard just a few minutes ago, we're taking a closer look at chapter 6, when Paul is focusing on this idea of being "alive in Christ."

First we hear that Paul sees death and life as both opposite states of being, but they are somehow connected in the person of Jesus. Somehow they are related, so Paul tries to explain his logic.

Verses 3 and 4 includes this question and response: "don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." Paul reiterates this claim and expands upon it in verse 5 and verse 11, saying, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like him... In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus."

Now, if you're scratching your heads and wondering what Paul means, you're not alone. Paul often uses this very abstract and theological language to communicate simple points, so in this case, Paul seems to be saying that when we enter into the life of faith, we somehow endure the same kind of death that Jesus did, because we die to the power of sin and brokenness. And because we have died like Christ, and because sin and brokenness no longer has any power over us, we are also resurrected into new life like Christ.

I think Paul does mean that this new life is a physical reality, but I think he's also focused on what this means for Christians spiritually. Paul knows that human beings cannot be both physically dead and physically alive at the same time, but I think he's trying to address a situation where human beings might be physically alive, while at the same time being spiritually dead. And I don't think this kind of part-alive, part-dead condition is limited to the first century—I think Christians in every century since have needed a reminder that

God does not just call us into a bodily resurrection, but a continual spiritual resurrection as well.

Have you ever experienced a condition like this? Perhaps your body was going through all the motions of daily life, but you felt lifeless inside. Perhaps you went through a period of time where you were doing all your normal activities, but internally you were feeling stuck and barren. I don't think this is an abnormal experience, because human life is often messy and difficult, but it's clearly not the condition that Paul desires for this early church. It's not the ideal situation for the mission that Paul is calling this early church into.

And in this case, Paul is not just talking about the bodily and spiritual resurrection of individuals, although that is an essential piece of God's plan for creation. He's talking about the new life that is given to the whole community of believers—the new energy and vitality that is given to an entire people group, God's whole family. So Paul's teaching about being “alive in Christ” applies to each of us, but it most importantly applies to all of us.

Today we celebrate a significant milestone in the life of this congregation. We honor the bravery and vision of our physical and spiritual ancestors, and we point to our collective history as evidence that God has continued to be faithful to us over the decades since this moment. Understanding and appreciating our past is important, as these stories and these memories remind us who we are and where we have come from. And all of those who have gone before us now surround us like a great cloud of witnesses, guiding us towards our new life.

So I think that through this passage Paul is also asking us to hold our history in tension with our future. I think Paul understands that if we hold too tightly to our past, we risk being physically alive but spiritually dead. If we are unable to let go of what used to be in order to become who we are called to be now, we risk becoming stuck and lifeless, unable to accomplish the vitality that Jesus has for us in our current time and current place.

And I think that Paul would give us this advice: our calling as God's family isn't just for our own sake, but for the sake of the whole world. Our resurrection is just the first step towards wholeness and new life for every part of creation.

I think Paul would say that we are not just alive in Christ, but also alive with Christ.

Alive with possibility.

Alive with hope.

Alive with new ideas.

Alive with innovation.

Alive with promise.

Alive with service.

Alive with growth.

Alive with strength.

Alive with courage.

Alive with renewal.

Alive with purpose.

So my friends, on this Heritage Sunday, let us celebrate what God has done for us. Let us remember that God has been with us in our past, and will be with us every day in our future. And let us enter into that new and exciting future with vitality of body and spirit.

Amen.