

This, of course, is the backdrop of our Scripture reading for today from Colossians. But in this reading, the apostle Paul focuses not so much on Jesus' leaving the tomb behind as on believers who, in a spiritual sense, are "raised" with him.

Actually, much of Colossians reads like a religious instruction manual regarding baptism, a rite in which a person is literally "raised" from a watery "grave" to new life in Christ. It instructs new Christians in the kind of living that's appropriate for those who, through faith and baptism, have "been raised with Christ." Our passage includes imagery drawn from baptism: "for you have died" - that is, you've been immersed in the waters of baptism - and being "raised with Christ" is symbolized by being lifted out of those waters.

It's clear here in Colossians, however, that Paul is not intending "raised with Christ" only as baptism talk. Paul is more specific, saying: "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth." The Colossians are to live now, on earth, as if they're already in heaven, because they are "raised with Christ," who is in heaven. Paul is telling his readers that, having been baptized, they have a new beyond-the-grave sightline, one that sees the things of earth differently.

Look at it this way: young or middle-aged adults are living in the full blossoming of their powers. The future is short-term for many of them, and they have this incredible belief in their ability to impact and alter the course of things. They can change the world! Alter the course of history! Handle anything life throws at them! People later in life may face their future with less confidence. In life's stages, the passage of time often means the giving up of certain activities - permanently.

In her autobiography, the mystery writer Agatha Christie, at age 75, wrote, "I am enjoying myself. Though with every year that passes, *something* has to be crossed off the list of pleasures. Long walks are off, and, alas, bathing in the sea; fillet steaks and apples and raw blackberries (teeth problems) and reading fine print."

She went on to talk about her enjoyment of what was left, but we get the point that as the end of our lives draws nearer, there may be a certain narrowing of what's within our capabilities.

Our perspective changes as we approach life's end zone. In calling his readers to have a *heavenly* orientation, Paul is saying much the same thing, not in terms of what we must give up, but what we gain. The resurrection of Jesus, and our figurative resurrection with him, means that the end is not THE END, but rather eternity with Jesus!

This perspective gives us the motivation to be good and decent people. Christ's resurrection enables us to view life against the background of eternity and thus no longer live as though this world is all that matters. At the same time, however, because this, too, is God's world, how we live here and now is important.

Having a "heavenly" perspective is not a call for escapism or withdrawing from the world. There's the old saying about some Christians being "so heavenly minded that they're no earthly good." That's not what Paul is talking about. In fact, if we read further in Colossians (vv. 5-17), it's clear that Paul wants our new perspective to be expressed *now* in real behavior driven by Godly motivations.

The fact is, trying to be a good Christian requires us to seek help from the highest and best resources available. Whether we're dealing with fear, temptation, laziness, weariness in well-doing, or anything else that drags us down, we always have the option of seeking help from a lower source: what are others doing? What do my friends advise? What do cultural values push me toward? Some of those sources may be, in some cases, acceptable lines of help.

But here, Paul tells newly baptized believers who are figuratively risen with Christ that the best help comes from above, from the realm of God. This "empty grave" approach, this resurrection perspective, is one that: Asks what God would want us to do; Prays for God's guidance; Looks to Jesus as an example for living; Turns to the church for support; Seeks to worship with other believers; Offers oneself in service; and Seeks the benefit of others' welfare before our own.

This kind of living would be moot if the tomb in Jerusalem still had a body in it. Or, as Paul puts it: *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied* (1 Cor. 15:19). *But in fact*, says Paul, *Christ has been raised from the dead* (1 Cor.

15:20). Not a lot of tombs available in Jerusalem then or now. The cemeteries on the Mount of Olives and the City of David seem pretty full. But, there's at least one empty tomb. And it's because of that empty tomb that the apostle Paul can urge us to adopt the perspective of the empty tomb.

The empty tomb challenges us to adopt higher thinking and a resurrection perspective. The resurrection gives spiritual wholeness for all aspects of life: body, mind, conscience, emotions, reason, will, and so forth. This life is now committed to God and the things of God. And this commitment becomes the "manager" of the other dimensions of life and helps to keep them in the proper perspective, a perspective focused toward God.

If there's one thing our reading from Colossians underscores, it is that Christ's resurrection is not meant to be revered as some extraordinary event frozen in time, but one that launches a new way of thinking and living in which we look to the highest source for help.

So, as it was in London and in Jerusalem, life hits us today with some grave problems. But today, on Easter morning, we have come to celebrate the solution. We celebrate the "empty grave solution." The power of the resurrection is ours.

Resurrecting God, We thank you that Easter is not about a people, but all people; that your love and your Salvation are for all who confess with voices, hearts and lives that the tomb is empty because Jesus is risen; that we might know forgiveness; that lives might be reborn and your name glorified now and for eternity. We call upon Your Spirit to infuse us with new life that we might proclaim Christ crucified and risen, and so that we might live lives filled with Easter hope and promise. We pray all this in the name of our Risen Lord, Jesus the Christ. Amen.

Sources:

- Carrington, Damian. "Re-using graves means UK cemetery will never run out of space." *The Guardian*, May 6, 2016, theguardian.com. Retrieved September 7, 2016.
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A Grave Solution

Easter Sunday, April 16, 2017

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Colossians 3:1-4

In Great Britain, there is a nationwide shortage of grave space. Yes, grave space. As in, places to bury dead people. So, people who are concerned about this are exploring creative ideas to solve this problem. Not surprisingly, they've come up with a few ideas that offer a glimmer of hope.

But first, some context. The City of London, a city inhabited for more than 2,000 years, has a current population of nearly 8.7 million, with many more millions lying in repose underground. About 75% of those dying these days have specified that they should be cremated, but that still leaves a lot of folks who will ultimately need grave space, and cemeteries all over the country are full or will be soon full.

The City of London Cemetery, however, doesn't plan to run out of space. The Cemetery recently instituted the practice of *grave sharing*: taking graves that are at least 75 years old, digging up the occupant and then reburying the casket deeper in the same hole. A coffin containing a recently deceased individual is then placed on top, and the hole is refilled. The original headstone is turned around, preserving the old inscription, and a new inscription is engraved on the back, memorializing the newcomer in the grave.

Not everyone likes the grave sharing scheme. Some feel that an Englishman's tomb, like his home, is his castle; or, an Englishwoman's grave, like her garden, should be a place to find some privacy. And so, concessions are made. When someone objects to the reusing of a grave, it is left undisturbed. Meanwhile, the bodies are stacking up in London and elsewhere throughout the kingdom.

It's possible that finding a grave wasn't that easy in Jesus' time either, but, as we know from the gospel accounts of Easter, a tomb suddenly and quite unexpectedly became available! No grave sharing necessary! The occupant of this particular tomb, Jesus of Nazareth, had checked out and, he was not going to need it again!