

POWER FOR LIVING
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Yes, Adam's one sin brought condemnation upon everyone, but Christ's one act of righteousness makes all people right in God's sight and gives them life. ¹⁹ Because one person disobeyed God, many people became sinners. But because one other person obeyed God, many people will be made right in God's sight. ^{6:4} For we died and were buried with Christ by baptism. And just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father, now we also may live new lives. ⁵ Since we have been united with him in his death, we will also be raised as he was. ⁶ Our old sinful selves were crucified with Christ so that sin might lose its power in our lives. We are no longer slaves to sin. ⁷ For when we died with Christ we were set free from the power of sin. ⁸ And since we died with Christ, we know we will also share his new life. (Romans 5:18-19; 6:4-8 NLT)

Last week we celebrated Easter and with it one of the most powerful aspects of the Christian faith.

If you have been to my office, you have seen the picture I have on my wall of the resurrected Jesus stepping out of the tomb. The Scripture under the picture is Jn 11:25 – The caption has Jesus saying “I am the resurrection and the life.”

Recently, while I was talking with someone in my office we were looking at the picture and talking about Easter. The person said, “So what, we get to go to Heaven when we die...” “Big deal, life will be good someday when I’m, dead, but what about now? Isn’t there any hope for us while we still live here?”

Many people have had similar feelings. The knowledge that we have home in Heaven to go to one day is wonderful, but what about all the days that stretch in between.

For some, Easter is just an annual holiday, it came, it went, the decorations are already put away. But for Christians it's the foundation of our faith, the act of grace by which we are saved, and it is power for living our daily lives.

Easter hope is not a “someday hope!” It's today hope!

Jesus said that he came to give us life and life more abundantly. (Jn 10:10)

But we don't always experience abundant living. Instead of life that is powerful and dynamic, sometimes we find ourselves too long in the valleys and shadows of yesterday.

Many of us can think of a friend, a son, a daughter, a parent, a family member, a neighbor or co-worker, someone we know perhaps even ourselves who are not living the life we envisioned for ourselves.

Nearly everyday, I speak with someone experiencing pain, regret, or disappointment in some area of their life. They say things like “It's not what I thought it would be. Things sure didn't work out the way I planned.”

As children we dream about the lives we will live when we grow up, we dream about our first car, our careers, our future spouse, as parents we have dreams for our children.

When our dreams come true and things work out life seems great and God is good...but when they don't...we wonder where God is.

When things don't go right, we try to figure out what went wrong and who's to blame.

A man in his seventies told me about how his dreams for the future were lost when he was young. He told me how his dreams in life were to sing in or conduct opera. But that didn't happen. Instead, he spent his life working a job that he settled for, that wasn't his real passion. I said, "you've spent your entire life working a job you didn't really want to work, why?"

He traced it back to when he was young, when his dad was sick and dying. His mom was the caregiver but when she had to go to work she left him to watch his dad. When the end came for his dad, sickness warped his thinking. The young boy held his father's hand, while he died. But with his last breaths the dying man told his son he was a disappointment to him, a failure, that he would never amount to anything and that he wished he had never been born!

The boy flunked the fourth grade that year. The years passed and he grew up, but he never really recovered. Somewhere deep inside him laid the belief that he wasn't good enough, that he was a failure and would never amount to anything.

If he wanted to, he could look back, point his finger and say, "it's because of you that I never lived the life I was meant to live."

In her song, "*Because Of You*," Kelly Clarkson sings about the lasting affect one person can have on another. The character sings about life with her parents, saying;

"Because of you I never stray too far from the sidewalk,
Because of you I learned to play on the safe side so I don't get hurt,
Because of you I find it hard to trust not only me, but everyone around me."
Because of you I try my hardest just to forget everything,
Because of you I don't know how to let anyone else in,
Because of you, I'm ashamed of my life because it's empty,
Because of you, I am afraid."

The world is full of people singing a similar song;

Because of you, I'm afraid to try, afraid to risk, afraid of failing. Because of you, I dropped out of school, I didn't go to college, I ran away, I got married too soon. Because of you I'm raising these kids alone; Because of you, I regret the past, hate the present or fear the future. Because of you, I have poor self esteem, I'm plagued with self doubt and shame, I don't know how to trust, I make poor decisions. Because of you, I don't pursue my dreams, Because of you, I am afraid."

The truth is, that we are all affected by the people in our lives and the people around us, sometimes for the good, sometimes for the bad. When the affects are negative it causes failure to thrive.

Failure to thrive is the situation that the Apostle Paul describes in Hebrews 5:11-13. "We have much to say about his, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

These Jewish Christians were immature. Some of them should have been teaching others, but they had not even applied the basics to their own lives. They were reluctant to move beyond their old traditions, their old way of thinking. It's the old ways of thinking that can mess us up.

But, Heb. 9:14 says, "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God."

Our conscience with its thoughts and memories from the past influence what we think and believe about the present and affects our behavior and choices for the future.

The "acts that lead to death" in this passage can be more than physical death. It can be the death of optimism, promise, peace or hope. Plain and simple, it can be the slow death of our faith, causing failure to thrive.

The truth is life can be hard! People can be cruel, critical, judgmental, hurtful, greedy, thoughtless, selfish & abusive. We can grow up learning dysfunction and then pass it on to the next generation. We are vulnerable to the position, poison and passions of those around us. There is no one who moves through this life without difficulties and challenges.

But another truth exists as well. We are children of the resurrection. We have the power that raised Christ from the dead dwelling inside of us.

The word **power** is from the Greek word **Dynamis** from which inventor Alfred Nobel derived the word "**dynamite**" for the name of his new explosive in 1867.

God brought Jesus back to life through the power of the Holy Spirit. God created the world through the power of the Holy Spirit. And this is the same Spirit inside us.

"And if the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through the Spirit who lives in you." (Ro. 8:11)

For this reason the Bible says that we are more than "conquerors," we are "overcomers." (Ro. 8:37)

We are more than our mistakes, more than the things that have happened to us. We are more than our past, more than what people think about us. We are more than labels, more than diagnosis and dysfunction. We are more than our fears. Everyday we are more than we used to be. We are children of the living God. We are born of a new spirit, filled with dynamic, explosive, creative, life giving power from on high.

We have the power to make changes and choices, to take risks, to rise above or move beyond. We have the power to overcome, for the old has passed and the new is come. If we are in Christ then we are a new creation. ("Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" 2 Cor 5:17)

Utilizing the power that is in us begins with believing that we have this power and it will happen as we trust in God's ability and not our own. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and then he will show you what to do and which way to go. (From Prov. 3:5) And do not be afraid, "For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power..." (2 Tim. 1:7a)

This is where I must confess to you that I have had trouble. When it's my turn to preach and I have to get up here in front of you, I fight a huge battle inside myself. You have heard me say before that I am phobically shy. I really struggled with this sermon because as I told Pastor Kevin I kind of felt like a fraud getting up here to talk with you about the power of God, when I'm terrified of getting up here to tell you about it. I believe it, but sometimes I have trouble applying it. His reply was, "Just trust the Holy Spirit."

Well duh! I am a pastor after all, of course I trust the Spirit. But I woke up Friday morning wondering which spirit I was really trusting in. Was I trusting God's spirit or leaning on my own understanding, trusting in my own abilities, that's a scary thought!

In conversation with others talking about my shyness, people will ask me, "If you're so shy then why do you do what you do? Why put yourself through it?"

Beside the fact that I have something to say, and I believe I have a calling to say it. I believe that I am more than my fear and I would rather face the fear than face the feeling of defeat if I didn't do what I believe I'm called to do.

I want to live my life in the power that God promises. But that is not always easy. It's hard to grasp this power intellectually. The power of God is a mystery, and yet it is a reality, a gift that he gives us.

Our lives can exceed more than we hoped or expected. It's as simple as believing and trusting and acting on that belief.

A marathon, for most runners, seems long. But it is always 26.2 miles. Always. Except for the Lakeshore Marathon held in Chicago on Memorial Day weekend, 2005. That day the 529 runners who finished actually ran 27.2 miles, one mile more than they were supposed to, only nobody told them so at the time. The organizers simply miscalculated where the finish line should be. The whole race was a mess, with missing mile markers and confused directions. One woman who had been leading early on got completely turned around. "I was so confused," she said, "I wanted to cry."

The organizer, a man named Mark Cihlar, issued an apology—kind of—on a website. "[Last-minute changes] caused us to miscalculate and we foolishly added an extra mile—how terrible!"

Maybe life has been like that for you this week. It's tough enough to get through a week, and then someone threw you a curve—or added an extra mile. An impossible deadline. Another sick child. An overdue notice on a bill. A letter from the I.R.S.

When you feel like you've been forced to run farther than anybody should have to, it helps to remember that God's strength is sufficient." (from *Julie Deardorff, "Unwitting Marathon Runners Go Extra Mile," Chicago Tribune (6-3-05); submitted by Lee Eclov, Vernon Hills, Illinois*)

The Prophet Isaiah said, "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Is. 4:28-31)

And, "neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, nothing in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God." (from Ro 8:38)

The resurrection is more than the hope of Easter, it is the promise of eternal life, and it is our power for daily living!
