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A Sermon for Easter Day Colossians 2:20-3:4 & St. John 20:1-10 The Rev'd William Klock

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Sometimes there's a way that seems right, you try to follow it, and you just get yourself into trouble. I parked at the Big Qualicum fish hatchery and went for a ride on my gravel bike on the Horne Lake-Cook Creek Forest Service Road loop. It's a beautiful ride, but it's not the easiest. There's a hill at one point that's so steep the logging trucks actually have to be towed to the top by one of those giant trucks with eight-foot tall wheels. It's too steep to ride and even walking it while pushing your bike is hard, because your shoes just slip out from under you in the dry sand and gravel. I saw that 20% grade in my mapping app and thought I'd be smart. There's another logging road on the map that bypasses that big hill. It would also cut the loop down from 90km to about 75km.

So off I went down the mountain on that other logging road. I should have known better. My mapping app shows how heavily travelled various routes are. I could see that *everyone* took the main road and went up the giant hill. I could see that *no one* went the way I was going. I thought I was smart and had found a secret no one knew about. And then that shortcut suddenly ended at ravine. There was a cliff on both sides and Nile Creek babbling away sixty feet below. The logging company had decommissioned the road and removed the bridge. I climbed about thirty feet down the cliff with my bike over my shoulder, sure I'd find a way. I didn't. And I had to climb back up and then ride back up the mountain, back to the main road with scraped knees and elbows to show for my folly. I got to climb *two* big hills that day.

We're always looking for the easy way, no one wants to take the hard and difficult way even if it's the right way to go. Jesus' words were looping in my head as I rode back up that hill to the main road: **The gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.** I was picturing myself barreling down that road, happy I found the easy way, not paying attention, and riding right off that cliff.

This is what St. Paul's getting at in our Epistle today from Colossians when he writes, **Think about the things that are above, not the things of earth.**

Here's what was happening in Colossae—or, at any rate, what Paul feared would happen if the church there didn't get on the right track. Just as in Galatia, the Christians were being tempted to fall back into a form of Judaism—to start finding their identity in things like circumcision, sabbath-keeping, and diet. They were facing the same sort of persecution the Galatians were and it was very tempting to avoid it by backing away from their identity in Jesus and to instead identify themselves as Jews. Jews were exempt from all the requirements of Roman religion. But that wasn't the only thing that made Judaism tempting. Even before Jesus came on the scene, there had been gentiles who were attracted to Judaism for its ethics and morality. The ancient pagan world was grossly immoral and barbaric in ways that we—living in a world shaped for two thousand years by the gospel—it was filthy in ways we struggle to imagine. And some of the pagans got sick of it. Yes, the *torah* made heavy demands, but it also offered a way of life along very clearly delineated lines of holiness and purity. That was attractive to some people. This is what Paul is getting at, at the end of Colossians 2—which I think really needs to be part of today's Epistle if we're going to get a sense of the context. Staring in Colossians 2:20 Paul writes:

If you died with the Messiah, coming out from the rule of the worldly elements, what's the point of laying down laws as though your life was still merely worldly? "Don't handle!

Don't taste! Don't touch!" Rules like that all have to do with things that disappear as you use them. They are the sort of regulations and teaching that mere humans invent. They may give an appearance of wisdom, since they promote a do-it-yourself religion, a kind of humility, and severe treatment of the body. But they are of no use when it comes to dealing with the indulgence of the flesh.

Paul had in mind these gentiles who were thinking that the laws and regulations of the *torah* would give them a sense of wisdom and religion and humility, but it's not hard to see our own culture in his warning. Everyone it seems is looking for some way to feel better about themselves. Sometimes it's just a sort of generic do-gooderism. Some people get this way with life-style and fitness routines, disciplining themselves in ways that become a sort of religion. Some people pursue conservation and environmentalism with the fervency of religion. Things like recycling or cutting down Scotch broom or driving an EV become almost sacramental. These things atone—or at least begin to atone—for our sins and the sins of our ancestors. And then there's the full-on Post-moderns who have bought into various critical theories and the whole dichotomy of oppressor and oppressed. In that system, if you find yourself in the oppressor category—usually because you're white or male or heterosexual or—God forbid—all three—there is no atonement, there is no forgiveness. You must simply spend the rest of your life genuflecting at the woke altar and confessing your sins and those of your ancestors. There is no forgiveness, but at least you can feel better for constantly signaling your virtue and for being an "ally". You can even feel holier-than-thou and look down your nose—a Post-modern Pharisee—when you see your fellow oppressors who aren't kowtowing at the woke altar. These are all just modern expressions of Paul's "do-it-yourself religion". They may make us feel better or feel like we're doing something or even that we're working to heal creation and make the world a better place, but to put it in his words, **They are of no use when it comes to dealing with the indulgence**

of the flesh. None of these things address our real problem. None of these things will make us genuinely holy. In the end, they turn out to be indulgences of the flesh themselves.

They're shortcuts. Instead, we need to take that hard and narrow way. We need to take the road that climbs that giant hill, even though it means pushing the bike while your feet slip out from under you in the sand and gravel. Because the hard way is the only way that will get us to the end goal. Every other way will eventually turn into a dead end—with the emphasis on *dead*. There is only one way that leads to life. Brothers and Sisters, we have to die and be raised back to life. That's the only way to get out of this worldly sphere and to escape the "worldly elements"—the powers and gods of the present evil age, the powers and gods that keep us perpetuating our sins and our rebellion against God. Because no matter what we do, no matter how many good works we think we've done, as long as we're enslaved to those false gods and systems, we're just feeding, we're just perpetuating the fallenness of the world and this present evil age.

Something has to change. We have to leave behind the present age—it's days are numbered anyway and as Christians we should know that—and we need to take our place in the age to come, in God's new creation. We all know that the world is not as it should be. God didn't create us for pain and tears and it's good that we instinctively want to fix that. But we can't. Not on our own. Our sin and rebellion have broken God's creation and there's no fixing it with the broken tools it offers. To get back to where we should be—to get back to that place of fellowship with God, of living in his presence, of being the stewards of his world—means leaving behind the old and joining in the new.

This is what drew people to Jesus during his ministry. He was preaching good news, yes, but he was also wiping away the tears and giving people a taste of new creation. He healed the blind and the deaf and the lame. He cast out demons. He even overturned death on a

few occasions. In Jesus, God's new world, God's new age was breaking in. And then there's that first Easter morning that we read about in John's Gospel.

We see Mary standing at the tomb and weeping. Sin and death, all the powers of this evil age had risen up at once and killed Jesus. If there was a time for tears, that was it. The most evil of evil things evil has ever done. Mary represents us all as we cry in the midst of this broken and fallen world full of evil. She was so overcome with the sadness of it all that she doesn't seem to have been moved even by the presence of the two angels. "Why are you crying?" they asked. And she just kept sobbing. "They've taken away my lord and I don't know where they've put him!" And then *Jesus* walks up and asks her again, "Why are you crying?" And she turns around and asks him, "Sir, if you've carried him off somewhere, tell me where you've put him." John says she thought he was the gardener. We pass over that little detail without much thought. At least I did for years and years. But then I started noticing how so many artists in history depict Jesus that Easter morning with a shovel or a hoe in his hands. There's something to that bit of detail. John mentions it for a reason. Mary mistook him for the gardener because he must have been doing gardener things. So there was Mary crying at the tomb and talking to angels, while Jesus knelt nearby pulling up weeds or tending to a fallen plant. The second Adam was alive. God had raised him from the dead and rolled away the great, heavy stone from the tomb. That was the greatest event on the greatest day in the history of the world. When Jesus burst forth from the tomb, I like to say that he sent a shockwave of life through a dead world. Nothing would ever be the same. And yet what does he do? He walks out of the tomb and starts tending to the garden. My first thought is something like, "Doesn't he have bigger and better things to do?" But it shouldn't really be surprising. This is the same Jesus, God incarnate, who humbly took on our flesh and who humbly went to the cross for the sake of his enemies. Why shouldn't

he act the part of a humble gardener first thing after his resurrection? But, too, it shouldn't be surprising, because this is what he came to do: to set his creation, broken by our sin and rebellion, he came to set it to rights. Why not start with those weeds just outside the tomb and then that rosebush starting to fall over. Mary keeps weeping uncontrollably. And then he says her name and suddenly she knew, suddenly she recognised him. "Rabbi!" she said. And the tears stopped—or maybe they turned into tears of joy. John doesn't say. But the weeds, the rosebush, Mary's tears—Jesus didn't just burst out of the tomb to be some highfalutin and abstract doctrine of resurrection to be studied and discussed by theologians in ivory towers. No, he came out of the tomb, resurrected indeed, but immediately working out that resurrection for his beloved creation and for his beloved people. First the garden and then Mary, and pretty soon everyone.

One by one Jesus has come to each of us as we've been confronted with the good news of the gospel. He's spoken *our* names. He's wiped away our tears. We've believed. We've been baptised. And coming out of those baptismal waters, we've been filled with God's own Spirit and made new. We still wait for the day when we will be resurrected as Jesus was, but the Spirit is a down-payment, an earnest on that day. In our baptism we have died and been raised up with Jesus to a new life. Like Israel delivered from Egypt at the Red Sea, we've been delivered from our slavery to sin and death as we've passed through the waters of baptism and now Jesus sends *us* out. Now we're the gardeners, sent out into the world to proclaim and to live the good news. To tend to the weeds and the falling rosebushes and the tears. To do the things we knew all along needed to be done, the things maybe we tried to do, but that we could never really accomplish on our own or with the world's broken tools. But now they get done, because the power of the Lord goes with us in the gospel and the Spirit.

We are—again—like Israel. Consider. Israel passed through the Red Sea and

then the Lord sent her to conquer Canaan. And yet it wasn't Israel who won the victory, but the Lord. Yes, Israel had to march and Israel had to fight, but it was always the Lord who won the battle. And just so with us. Jesus has brought us through the waters of baptism and now he sends us out into the world to reclaim what rightly belongs to him. And it won't happen if we don't go, but at the same time, it is not we, but he who wins the victory. The kingdom of God fills the earth because of the power of the gospel and the Spirit. But, again, Paul's warning to the Colossians: We are so prone to forgetting all of this and we fall back into do-it-yourself religion. And so he says in verse 1 of Chapter 3:

So if you were raised to life with the Messiah, search for the things that are above, where the Messiah is seated at God's right hand. Think about the things that are above, not the things of earth. Don't you see: you died, and your life has been hidden with the Messiah, in God! When the Messiah is revealed (and he is your life, remember), then you too will be revealed with him in glory.

Here's the good news. Throw away all the do-it-yourself religion. Get off those dead-end trails and get back on the main road. Because if you belong to the Messiah, you're also already part of his new creation. This is one of the greatest themes all through Paul's epistles. Paul wants us to understand that what is true of Jesus is already true of us because we are "in him"—or as he puts it "en Christos", "in the Messiah". It may not always feel like it, but this is one of the fundamental things about the life of faith that Paul wanted these new believers to understand. It's often hard, but we need to learn to believe that this is true even if it doesn't always feel that way. Because it's in those time when we're not feeling it—feeling like our prayers are bouncing off the ceiling, feeling like we're far from God, feeling like there's no escape from sin, feeling like the world will never change—it's in those times that we're most prone to falling back into do-it-yourself religion.

And there are two true things that Paul wants us to understand above everything else. If we can remember these two things, everything else is going to fall into place. Jesus has died and he's been raised from death. And that means that if we are "in the Messiah", then we have died with him. *You* have died with him. *You* are no longer a part of the old evil age. *You* are no longer a slave to sin and death. *You* don't need any do-it-yourself religion to get close to God or to make the world a better place. *You* just need Jesus. *You* have been raised with Messiah. Even though we wait for the resurrection of the dead at the end of time, through the indwelling of God's Spirit, we have in part—here and now—the life of the age to come. Jesus has made us part of his new creation.

Our hope—and the hope of the world—lies with him as he sits at God's right hand. In his incarnation, in his ministry, in his death, and in his resurrection, Jesus began the process of uniting heaven and earth, of bringing God and man back together. One day that task will be finished, heaven and earth will be rejoined and we will be resurrected and—as Adam and Eve once did—we'll live in the full presence of God. But in the meantime, we—his church—have been given the task of proclaiming the good news about Jesus and by our life together, giving a dark world a taste of God's light, of his new creation—of giving the world a taste of heaven.

Brothers and Sisters, that's how the kingdom spread. That's how Christendom came to be. As Jesus' people set their minds on God's new creation and, as the church, lived it out in the midst of the darkness. And just as the God of Israel who gave his son for their sake was unlike any god they'd ever known as pagans. This church, this community of people who identified with the Messiah and who gave their lives humbly for the sake of the world, who lived as one people regardless of whether they were rich or poor, slave or free, Jew or gentile, this people who taught the world what love and mercy and grace and justice are, this people showed the world the holiness it had been looking for, it showed the people

how this broken world really can be set to rights—when we set aside our do-it-yourself ways and let the Messiah wash us clean and let his Spirit make us new.

Brothers and Sisters, keep your eyes fixed on the things that are above. Keep praying with Jesus: Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, one earth as it is heaven. One day heaven and earth will be fully rejoined, but only because the church, in the power of the Spirit, has proclaimed the gospel to the whole world. In his book *Surprised by Hope*, Tom Wright wrote this, "People who believe in the resurrection, in God making a whole new world in which everything will be set right at last, are unstoppably motivated to work for that new world in the present." May that be true of us. While we wait for God's new world to come in all its fullness, let us never tire of being that new world here and now: as we, empowered by the Spirit, proclaim the good news that Jesus has died, that Jesus has risen, and that Jesus is Lord, as we pull the weeds, and as we wipe away the tears.

Let's pray: Almighty God, who through your only-begotten Son Jesus Christ overcame death and opened to us the gate of everlasting life: Grant us by your grace to set our minds on things above; that by your continual help our lives may be transformed; through the same, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*