

When the Chocolate's Gone: Life After Easter

Reconnect – April 19, 2009

Text: Colossians 3:1-15; Romans 8:11-14

Key Thought: Jesus opens His new life to us – and to enter means struggle, wonder and gratitude.

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand in the place of honour and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your real life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory. So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual sin, impurity, lust, and shameful desires. Don't be greedy for the good things of this life, for that is idolatry. God's terrible anger will come upon those who do such things. You used to do them when your life was still part of this world. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behaviour, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old evil nature and all its wicked deeds. In its place you have clothed yourselves with a brand-new nature that is continually being renewed as you learn more and more about Christ, who created this new nature within you. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Greek or a Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us. Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful. (Colossians 3:1-15, NLT)

Intro: My closet

- Easter – when we all dress up on the special occasion – Easter bonnets, new shoes, spring fashions
- And then of course, hot on the heels of Easter and spring is... spring cleaning
- Open up the windows, get out in the yard – and clean out your closet
- The Salvation Army and Goodwill do a booming business this year, from people like – well, like my wife
- Closets are funny things – they say a lot about us
- What does your closet look like? Is it crowded? Cramped? Messy?
- ***[go through the clothes I brought and tell the stories]***
- Are you one of those people, like me, who think that if they get rid of anything, that they'll need it the next day, no matter if it hasn't been used for a decade?
- Or are you ruthless when it comes to your closet? In and out at a moment's notice? Highly organized, with an obscure Swedish word to describe your uber-level of organization?
- Clothes are such a part of our lives – we identify important events with them, we set them aside for some things, we make memories with others – we are in many ways very connected to what we wear
- And so maybe it's no coincidence that when we come to spring cleaning we hit the closet – orderly closet, ordered life? Some measure of control? There's no feeling like having a clean closet...

Paul's closet: lessons for Colosse

- Paul wants to encourage a little church in a little town called Colosse – it's one of a chain of churches that have been started in modern-day north Turkey – he started the first one, but then one of the people that heard his message went to Colosse and started things there
- So he decides to take a good chunk of the letter and talk about one of his favourite topics, the meaning of Easter – and to do that, he uses an extended clothes riff, which we already read this morning

Read Text: Colossians 3:1-15

Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven where Christ is, sitting at God's right hand in the place of honour and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your real life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.

- "set your sights on heaven... let heaven fill your thoughts" – not a call for escapism, not to be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good – that's not what Paul is about – it's more like making sure that you remember that you've got more on the go than just what is obvious and day to day – you've got a second job, a different priority, and that is to live in such a way that heaven comes to earth, that the goodness and love of God spreads all around you
- "your real life is hidden with Christ in God" – it's not always obvious, whether you talk about it at every turn or not – and we make mistakes, and we're not always great ads for the change that Jesus brings – but one day, it will become obvious – hold onto that thought for the end

So put to death the sinful, earthly things lurking within you. Have nothing to do with sexual sin, impurity, lust, and shameful desires. Don't be greedy for the good things of this life, for that is idolatry. God's terrible anger will come upon those who do such things. You used to do them when your life was still part of this world. But now is the time to get rid of anger, rage, malicious behaviour, slander, and dirty language. Don't lie to each other, for you have stripped off your old evil nature and all its wicked deeds.

- One set of sins relating to sex, the other to anger – both are about destructive relationships, but different kinds of destruction – we tend, according to NT Wright, to get one or the other of these right in churches, but rarely both – we generally hit one harder than the other
- Today, sex is put on a pedestal in our society – the most important thing, the object of worship – and yet, it's a worship out of selfishness – what can I get, what can I conquer, what can I obtain and hold onto, rather than thinking of the other person – it's use, abuse and lose
- It's kill or be killed for these – you can't manage them, you can't just ignore them or hope they'll go away, or think that everything can get along together – it will spread and spread
- "God's terrible anger" – his "wrath" – not a word we use a lot today, because it's an idea that's been twisted a few different ways – either God is throwing temper tantrums in heaven and lightning bolts at people on earth, or his wrath is really just something He's learned to let go of, and He's much less angry now than He used to be

- Neither one is right – God’s wrath is more like His judgement, which He has built into our world – it’s God’s response to sin, to what destroys the people and the creation that He made and loves
- The Bible says, “What you sow, you reap” – in other words, just as we teach our kids, there are consequences for your actions, and when people turn away from God, there is that moment in time, different for everyone, where eventually, God gives them what they want, and they are left to their own devices, and ultimately that’s all they wind up with – a life without God
- That’s either hell on earth, or hell after death, or both
- However, before we jump to the conclusion that God must be sending people to hell because of this, think about Easter again, and the great lengths, the horrible lengths to which He went through Jesus, to show the world that He loved us, and the way that He made for us – God does not want anyone to be without Him – He demonstrates that in our lives again and again - but ultimately He will respect our choice, because you can’t force love
- And on anger – our “other” negative response to people – who get in our way, who won’t give us what we want or notice us or make room for us
 - “The danger for Christians is not that they might get angry. If they are humans and not vegetables, they will get angry. The issue is how we handle our anger – in constructive or destructive ways. We face the danger of misusing the anger and engaging in various kinds of warfare: the cold war when we refuse to talk about the issues; guerrilla warfare when we snipe at the other in public; atomic warfare when the anger wells up inside until it explodes like an atomic bomb and everyone around us gets wiped out by the fallout” (Garland, Colossians/Philemon, 230)
- Sometimes it seems like we’re not that different with Jesus in our life
- In one of Anne Lamott’s books, she recalls hearing someone else talk about how God works on us:
 - “...when you ask God into your life, you think he or she is going to come into your psychic house, look around, and see that you just need a little cleaning – and so you go along for the first six months thinking how nice life is now that God is there. Then you look out the window one day and see that there’s a wrecking ball outside. It turns out that God actually thinks your whole foundation is shot and you’re going to have to start over from scratch” (quoted in Garland, Colossians/Philemon, 224-225)
- We think that we can’t change, or that we’re not that much different, or that we don’t need to be that different – but these old ways are NOT who we are, any more than what’s in our closet is a part of us
- We might have some attachment, for sure – memories, bonds, shared history – but at the end of the day, these can be packed up and sent to Goodwill just like anything else can be – because Easter changes everything
- Paul says these can be stripped off – whether your closet junk is stuff you dirtied up, or stuff that someone else dirtied up for you – there is new stuff available – a new Easter line that you have access to, and your credit card is not needed
- We think we can’t change – we think it will never happen, or it’s taking too long, or it’s two steps forward and three steps back
- **But Jesus says, “If I can come back from the dead, then you can change!”**

In its place you have clothed yourselves with a brand-new nature that is continually being renewed as you learn more and more about Christ, who created this new nature within you. In this new life, it doesn't matter if you are a Greek or a Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free. Christ is all that matters, and he lives in all of us.

- “brand-new nature, continually renewed, created by Jesus” – takes us back to creation and Genesis, where our nature went off the rails in the first place as we chose to trust ourselves rather than God
- III. – new software Instead of being prone to wander or fail or falter, we've been reprogrammed – new software, without the bugs – it's a new nature, with automatic updates from God – continually being renewed, adapting to situations in your life – just like your PC – if you're connected, then it happens, and sometimes you notice, and sometimes you don't
- It doesn't matter who you are or where you've been or how you've viewed yourself or others in the past – Paul puts all the categories out there that people of that day used to put labels on people
 - Greek – saw themselves as the only civilized race, spreading their culture across the world
 - Jew – considered themselves God's chosen nation, and then there was “everyone else”
 - Circumcised – went with “Jew” – they considered it the mark of God's choosing, a pride thing – but to everyone else, it was ridiculous
 - Uncircumcised – the Jewish people of the day called everyone else (i.e. Greeks) “foreskins” – the literal word for “the uncircumcised”
 - Barbarian – the Greek term for foreigners who spoke other languages – they said it sounded like “bar-bar-barian” // Scythians – Mongol tribes of north Asia were bought and sold as slaves
 - Goes with slave – those who had no ability to control their own destiny, make their own choices
 - Free – goes with all the rest – those who could make their own choices, the privileged group
- There's no “automatic in” or “automatic out” – we can't be lazy and just use labels, we have to get to know people themselves – talk with them, learn from them, listen to them, let them into our lives

Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony. And let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts. For as members of one body you are all called to live in peace. And always be thankful. (Colossians 3:1-15, NLT)

- “chose you... holy people” – imagery is of the Old Testament, of God's chosen people, the Jews – these are words that he's grown up with, and now he's transferring them to the church, to this new collection of people – it's not about ethnicity anymore, it's not about being part of a biological family any more – the old categories don't fit anymore – III. Today's family categories: like families of today – the old terms, like “half-brother” or “stepfather” are falling away, because what really matters is the love that is demonstrated and the trust that is built and the place to belong that is created
- “binds us all together” - one more example of clothes talk – it's what holds the clothes together, like a belt or a zipper or buttons – love is what holds everything else together and keeps it working properly

- Not only does it hold all the virtues together, but it holds the diverse community together, too – with nothing else in common but Jesus and being human, and yet, that’s enough with love

Eminem vs. Paul: cleaning out their closets:

- The difference – Eminem versus Paul – both are cleaning out their own closets, but how and why they’re doing it are very different
 - Eminem – rage, revenge, grief, doubt, longing, questioning
 - Paul – love, joy, peace, patience, humility and the like
- And the consequences are different too – even as Eminem decries what ruined his childhood, he is perpetuating acts like revenge, jealousy, rage, that all lead to sorrow
- Paul’s consequences are much different – and the greatest argument for making good choices is to see their consequences – hence showing the video this morning
- The life we are free to live is a very different one than the dark prison of Eminem’s life and choices: it is given to us as an opportunity for gratitude and joy

Key Thought:

Jesus opens His new life to us – and to enter means struggle, wonder and gratitude.

“The Spirit of God, who raised Jesus from the dead, lives in you. And just as He raised Christ from the dead, he will give life to your mortal bodies by this same Spirit living within you. Therefore, dear friends, you have no obligation whatsoever to do what your sinful nature urges you to do. For if you keep on following it, you will perish. But if through the power of the Spirit you put it to death, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” (Romans 8:11-14, NLT)

What about YOUR closet?

- What have you been holding on to? Having trouble getting rid of? Because if you just try to keep everything, your closet will be full and you’ll be miserable
- You were made for more than this – you can change, you can find your wings and learn to fly
- The world doesn’t see you – your real life is hidden with Christ in God – but He is working on it, and one day you will be an unlikely masterpiece

Conclusion/Response – Susan Boyle – Britain’s Got Talent – 47, unemployed, never been married, never been kissed – and yet, she has a dream **[play 5 min. video]** – we are called to shine for God – to shine, and to let Him take away the “outside”, the faults, the imperfections, the failings – because as God works in us, there is so much of Him, so much goodness and joy waiting to explode on all those around us – we are his masterpiece, his creation, his greatest triumph - **For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God. And when Christ, who is your real life, is revealed to the whole world, you will share in all his glory.**