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**Sermon for the Second Sunday of Easter**  
April 16, 2023

## Two Realities

### John 20:19–31

*<sup>19</sup> On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being locked where the disciples were for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, “Peace be with you.” <sup>20</sup> When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. <sup>21</sup> Jesus said to them again, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you.” <sup>22</sup> And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, “Receive the Holy Spirit. <sup>23</sup> If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.”*

*<sup>24</sup> Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. <sup>25</sup> So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord.” But he said to them, “Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.”*

*<sup>26</sup> Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you.” <sup>27</sup> Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.” <sup>28</sup> Thomas answered him, “My Lord and my God!” <sup>29</sup> Jesus said to him, “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”*

*<sup>30</sup> Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; <sup>31</sup> but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.*

Life and death are the two realities you and I live in as the baptized children of God – those who bear the sign of the crucified and risen Lord – who are marked with His cross and resurrection. Having been buried and raised with Jesus by baptism<sup>1</sup>, this reality of life in the face of death – though the very essence of Christianity – remains hidden in this world. And, since Christianity is a matter of life and death, Christians who hope for a life of ease are deceiving themselves, for, as Christ made abundantly clear, those who belong to Him will live the life of a soldier in combat. Though Jesus won the victory over sin, death, and the devil, for now it’s hidden. Now we live by faith, not by sight<sup>2</sup> – and in this world, our lives bear the sign of His cross.

How easily we overlook the cross of Christ as God’s life-giving instrument. And how often we forget that there was no way for Him to grant life except through His death. And though His life is, by definition, the way of the cross, it doesn’t seem natural to us at all,



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does it. Left to ourselves, we would choose the path of glory. We'd rather have strength, power, and prestige than weakness, suffering, and affliction. Yet the fact remains that the way of the cross is the only road to life in this dying world – and we keep missing that road because we keep making the wrong turns. To us, the problem is with everybody else. If the boss would just get off our back, we'd be a lot happier. If our spouse would lighten up, life would be worth living. If only circumstances would change, things would be so much better. We even use this logic with God. We're convinced that we can actually straighten ourselves out by eliminating temptation. And if we could just clean up the moral cesspool we live in, we could live God-pleasing lives.

But nothing could be further from the truth, for the Bible everywhere makes it clear that our predicament isn't what we live in, but what lives in us. Our circumstances aren't the problem – our sinful heart is the problem. Our Lord makes it clear that if we want to identify the real enemy, we need look no further than the nearest mirror. According to Christ, the heart is the source of evil thinking, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, and slander<sup>3</sup>. And, while collectively, these make up a very ugly package, since we typically see only one or two of the tamer evils at any given time, the situation doesn't usually alarm us. Pride, jealousy, greed, and hatred are only natural, or so we think. After all, it's only "human nature" – but God calls it sin. And it's as old as the Garden where Adam and Eve first joined in rebellion against the Creator.

"In Adam all die," says St. Paul<sup>4</sup>. Every child of Adam and Eve inherits a fatal flaw. We're all born to human parents and come into this world with sin engraved deeply in our hearts – and there are no exceptions to this. Like everyone else, we too were by nature objects of wrath. So our problem isn't just the sins we commit, but the sinners that we are. Sin has penetrated our very heart. Yet, in baptism, Christ has given us a new identity, and if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come<sup>5</sup>. And this isn't simply a new way of life – as if Christianity were nothing more than a cosmetic adjustment to bring our lifestyle into line with God's expectations (this isn't that) – it's life *itself*.

You see – contrary to the opinion of some – sin cannot simply be reformed or remodeled. The only way to get rid of it is to kill it – and that's precisely what God did. God's Son, Jesus Christ, bore our sin in His own body, and it killed Him – but in His dying, He destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light<sup>6</sup>. In rising from the grave He shattered its power, and in His resurrection He broke the stranglehold of sin. In Jesus, one of Adam's sons escaped the fate of Adam's children – so that all of us who belong to Him through Baptism could escape as well. Baptism is both a doorway and a hinge. It's the doorway to a whole new life – but it's also the hinge upon which that life depends. The new life and the new way of life are one reality: the life that Jesus lives in His people.

In some churches baptism is viewed as something adults and older children do to affirm their faith, and so infant baptism is rejected. In other churches infant baptism is regarded as a quaint family custom. Both views are not only inadequate, they're



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completely wrong! Baptism is never a human activity; it's always God's work, done in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. There's nothing customary or quaint about it. Baptism is nothing less than the death of the Old Adam and the resurrection of the new man. Every baptized child of God is baptized with the sign and seal of the cross of Jesus Christ. We've been marked as soldiers serving under the crucified and risen Christ – and we need to know that the enemy we're fighting means business. His unswerving goal is to devastate God's people and destroy God's kingdom.

So, beloved, our lives are lived on the battleground. The battle rages daily between our Old Adam and the new man – between our sinful nature and the new nature we've been given by baptism into Christ. The new man is controlled by Christ and seeks to serve God, but the Old Adam is driven by selfish pride intent on feeding its own sinful desires. Our predicament is just as one comic strip character put it: "We have met the enemy and he is us."<sup>7</sup> We like to think that the key to solving our plight is to lead a holy life through sheer force of our own will. We think we can pull it off by getting a grip on ourselves and trying harder. But, what we really need is our baptism, because it's the basis upon which living a holy life depends. It's important to bear in mind that baptism is not simply an event of the past – it's a present reality.

Baptism is our consignment into the death and resurrection of Jesus – which joins the sinner – sins and all – to Christ and His death, burying them in His grave. In baptism a death occurs – the death of our Old Adam – so that out of this watery grave a new man can emerge.

This all sounds pretty abstract, doesn't it? But, there's nothing more practical and vividly real than the new life Christ bestows on those who are baptized into His name. And *that* is the key to living a holy life – not simply remembering baptism by thinking about what happened long ago, but living the hidden reality first worked in us by this washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit<sup>8</sup>.

People are always looking for the key to a "dynamic" Christian life, searching for some magic formula they hope will bring pizzazz to what sometimes feels like a dull, half-hearted commitment. Sadly, most of these formulas are nothing more than home-brewed do-it-yourself projects – and a DIY approach to the Christian life is doomed from the start. Reform a sinner and what do you get? A reformed sinner. Educate a sinner and you get an educated sinner. Discipline a sinner and you get a disciplined sinner. In every case you still have the same old sinner you started out with. The Old Adam will not be tamed, or reformed, or disciplined – he can only be killed. And this is exactly what God has done in Holy Baptism. And this is where God's formula for true and proper Christian living has to be found – in a life lived by Jesus Christ as He lives in us.

Now, this no mere mind game. God hasn't just given you a new attitude – He's given you a whole new life. He's not only drowned the old Adam, but He's created you anew in Jesus Christ – and not just once, but over and over again through the Word of forgiveness given you in His Gospel. Every time those words are spoken, God is dealing



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a death blow to the Old Adam and raising you to newness of life in Christ. “Unfortunately, the Old Adam swims quite well,” Luther is said to have quipped – and every honest Christian has to agree – for just when we think we’ve drowned one sin, another surfaces in its place. And most devastating of all is when we find ourselves falling right back into the very sins we detest the most, like a dog returning to its vomit<sup>9</sup>, Scripture says. Thank God, there’s still a Rescuer from the guilt and bondage of sin: our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who rescues us through His called servants whom He sends to speak the Word of forgiveness, otherwise known as Holy Absolution.

This Holy Absolution is not some medieval ritual taking place in dark confessional booths with trite penitential formulas. It’s nothing more and nothing less than the pronouncement of forgiveness – whether publicly or privately – spoken by those called to act as overseers of Christ’s flock – the pastors of the local congregation.

Though these men themselves are sinful and in need of Christ’s forgiveness, God has called them to be His representatives. And in the stead and by the command of Christ they are to carry out the work of extending God’s forgiveness to penitent sinners.

When Jesus greeted His disciples on the day of His resurrection, He told them that the forgiveness they would offer in His name would be a real forgiveness – and that receiving His called representatives would be the same as receiving Him. Luther is therefore correct when he points out in the *Small Catechism* that the pastor’s words of absolution and forgiveness are to be taken to heart and cherished as though God Himself had spoken them – for, in fact, it’s precisely through the mouths of His servants that God has chosen to speak in His Church today.

This, then is how you and I live our lives as baptized children of God. God has placed us here in this church – in the company of these brothers and sisters. He has united us with one another under His Son’s cross – that we might daily die, and daily rise, in the confession of our sins – and that freely receiving His absolution for what it really and truly is – God’s spoken Word of forgiveness – we might then go out into the world to bring to others that same word of life and forgiveness.

What a comfort it is to know that there is life in the Word God speaks into our ears – and that this life is the life of Jesus Christ. Amen.

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1. Romans 6:4
2. 2 Corinthians 5:7
3. Matthew 15:19
4. 1 Corinthians 15:22



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5. 2 Corinthians 5:17
6. 2 Timothy 1:10
7. Walt Kelly, *Pogo*, April 22, 1971
8. Titus 3:5
9. Proverbs 26:11