

RESURRECTION RESPONSES (2) “New Life in Christ” – a sermon by Gary R. Hindman, FPCUC. Scripture: Acts 2:14a, 36-41

Text: “Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

--Acts 2:38

It was quite a sermon Peter gave on the day of Pentecost. I do not know any preacher who would not be impressed with these numbers for it is recorded: “And that day about three thousand persons (the Greek implies 3,000 *souls*) were added.” There was quantity for sure, but more than that, there was quality, too. Lives were changed for Christ for these folks were not only “hearers of the word” they were people who wanted to “do” something in the light of their new faith.

When the Risen Christ spoke to Ananias, he replied, “Here I am, Lord.” When the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary she said, “I am the handmaid of the Lord.” When the God of Israel spoke to young Samuel and he finally understood that it was the voice of God and not old Ely, he said, “Speak Lord, for your servant is listening.” Sincere people of God want to obey, they want to serve and they want to demonstrate their sincerity. That is why untold millions of people this week turned out to mourn the death of Pope John Paul II. People were moved by his life and faith and wanted to show it in visible ways.

The Scriptures often differentiate between those who “get it” and want to be God’s person from those who are just going along for the ride. In the Old Testament there is a holy remnant among the whole Jewish community; Jesus spoke of sheep and goats, wheat and tares, those who walked by the broad path that leads to destruction and the narrow path that leads to life. I want everyone here to be on that narrow path, among the sheep, the wheat and the holy remnant.

There is an epitaph on a tombstone in Scotland that reads, “Angus McDonald was not a particularly religious man, but in all other respects he was an ideal churchman.” That’s not a very comforting compliment to the Scotsman or his church! But notice what happened after Peter’s sermon. Three thousand souls heard and wanted to do something about it. “Brethren, what shall we do?” they asked. This is crucial: they do not want to walk away unchanged; they do not want to be hearers of the word only, deceiving themselves. They are ready to do something in the name of Christ and to deepen and broaden their faith.

Peter, the good pastor, has a ready answer for them: “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” There’s a sequence here. Repent, be baptized, and receive the Holy Spirit. These are the essentials to a vital faith and the proper response to the resurrection. Let’s begin with repentance.

Tallulah Bankhead once said, “My heart is as pure as the driven slush!” I take that to mean, her heart was not very pure and she was not too concerned. That is one of the problems with repentance. A lot of people view repentance as the other guy’s problem, not mine. In fact, what amazes and dismays me these days, is the way so many people wear their bold sins right out in the open for all to see. They advertise their base values with sayings on their shirt or bumper sticker or tattoo.

A lot of people refuse to come clean with their sorted past. They dodge the bright light that would let them confess and get on. They make excuses for their behavior and their decisions instead of seeking forgiveness and restitution. We saw something of that this past week. Jane Fonda is busy hustling her latest book by giving interviews on television. She has let it be known she is a Christian now so I kept hoping she would say something like this: “I apologize for aiding and abetting the enemy and causing untold misery to our POWs when I sided with the Vietcong during the war in Vietnam and, as a visible sign of my repentance, I am giving all the proceeds of this book to assist military personnel who have been injured in the war in Iraq.” Instead, what I heard was that she regretted what she did because it has caused her to be unpopular with many Americans and it has put a dent in her otherwise lucrative career.

Years ago, a prominent New York businessman came for counseling to the Reverend Norman Vincent Peale. Not known as a judgmental pastor, Peale heard the man’s tragic tale of confusion, frustration and misplaced values. He painted a very dark picture and closed by asking, “What do you think I should do?” “I have a solution for you,” said Peale. “It is simple and you are a very sophisticated and intelligent man. I doubt that you would want to hear it.” But the man came back saying, “I think I would like to hear it.” Peale responded, “No, I really do not think you want to hear it.” Again, the man responded, “I want you to tell me.” Peale said, “I really don’t think you want to hear it.” After a while the man became angry, “Look, tell me what your answer is.” So Peale told him, “What you really need to do is get down on your knees and tell God that you are a sinner and ask God to forgive you and change you.”

Whether that man really took Peale’s advice, I cannot say. But what I can say is that advice is good for all of us. There is a universal need for repentance. Repentance takes away the barriers that are blocking you from a closer relationship with God and with others. That is why David writes in Psalm 51:17: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

Peter’s sermon cut to the heart and they asked, “What shall we do.” Peter’s first response was *repent*.

The second step in the Christian faith is to be *baptized in the name of Jesus Christ*. For those of us already baptized Peter might say, it is good to reaffirm your baptism, to remember what God has done and is doing in your life. To affirm and re-affirm one’s baptism is to take a step of faith and say, “I come with

my sinfulness and shame and I yield myself to Christ; cleanse me, O Lord, and let me walk again with you in newness of faith.”

Pastor Dave preached on one of the great passages of Scripture during Lent. Revelation 3:20 says, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sup with him (or her) and he with me.” But you have to open the door. Christ will not intrude.

Robert Lobert, in his little book entitled *My Heart, Christ's Home* takes this thought a step further. He says there is one kind of believer who does invite Christ in but then only offers Christ a chair in the hallway. There the Lord sits and waits for hours, days, months, or even years. Meanwhile, the host carries on business as usual with Christ out in the hallway at a safe distance.

A similar thing occurred under the Roman Emperor Constantine when he became a Christian. Having taken this step he wanted everyone else to become a Christian, too. So he took his soldiers into the river to be baptized but commanded them to hold their right arms out of the water. You see, he wanted everything about them to be baptized except the arm that wielded their swords and spears. If that hand were not baptized then they could use that part of themselves to do those things that might not be in the will of Christ.

I wonder if a lot of us do not make similar deals with God. We give him a piece of ourselves but not the whole self. We reserve some for us so that we can do what we want without recourse to God. We want to hide the things we do in the darkness but thank God, “the light (of Christ) shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Peter called upon the people to repent and then to be baptized, meaning, repent all the way and immerse yourself in Christ, give him your all.

Finally, to the question of “what shall we do?” Peter says, “Receive the Holy Spirit.”

A young woman worked in an enormous factory. She had always liked the job and the wages were good. But recently she confided to a friend that she was going to have to quit. “Why, what’s the matter” the friend asked, “doesn’t the factory have enough orders to keep you going?” “It’s not that,” she said. “The problem is they have more orders than they can fill but there is not enough electricity to keep all the machines going at the same time and while my machine is lying idle I get no pay! We have more machinery than power!” That happens to people on a spiritual level, too. Sometimes we get flat, drained, discouraged, dejected because we are not plugged into the power, and the power is that of the Holy Spirit of God.

Before Pentecost the Risen Christ told his followers to wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit. But now that Pentecost has come the power is turned on, it’s

available to any who call upon the Lord for strength and deliverance. Receive the Holy Spirit. He is a Comforter, a Convictor and a Friend!

Tom Harris, the psychiatrist and Presbyterian elder who wrote the book *I'm O.K., You're O.K.* says there are three reasons people change. First, they change when it is more painful to remain as they are than to change. Perhaps you are in a job you hate and you cannot imagine working this way the rest of your life. Perhaps you are in a relationship that brings constant conflict. Maybe you have developed a bad habit that is eating away at you. When shedding the problem feels better than keeping it, you will make a change.

Then he says some people change when they reach a point of despair. Perhaps we come to that sudden and dark place, an abyss, where we know we just can't go on any longer. Many times an alcoholic has to reach bottom before he can turn around and climb out of the pit. Sometimes the breach in a marriage only heals when one is faced with the specter of divorce. Perhaps it is the real fear of losing a job that will cause someone to amend their ways and rectify the problem.

There is also a third way people can change. This is the most positive and most wonderful of ways. Harris calls it the "Eureka Stage." It comes from a profound, new insight that captures your heart, mind and soul. It happened to a thief on a cross who said, "Jesus, remember me." It happened to Saul, bent on destroying the church when he heard the voice of Jesus on the road to Damascus. It happened on the road to Emmaus when two disciples' hearts burned in the presence of a stranger who opened the Scriptures for them so that their eyes were opened and they recognized him. It happened to a whole room full of people on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit filled the room and descended upon them. Later that day, the "Eureka" experience fell upon 3,000 listeners who accepted the Lord Jesus and asked, "Brothers, what should we do?" It can also happen to you. You can turn around, change your old ways for Christ's way and walk in newness of light. It's not too late; in fact, this is the day the Lord has made and has brought you here for such a time as this.

God desires that each one of us live full, abundant lives full of joy and purpose. Those who heard the sermon of Peter got the idea and asked, "What shall we do?" The answer he gave them the Lord is giving to each one of us. Repent (seek forgiveness and get into right relationship with God); be baptized (or remember your baptism and how God has been and continues to work in your life); and receive the Holy Spirit (plug into the unlimited power and goodness of God).

You and I need to take these steps each day of our life. They are the rhythm of the Christian experience and the key to a life that is full, rich and eternal. Amen!