

Message: Find Life in Christ!

How is it with your soul? Easter Sunday was dramatic in many ways. Thank you for your faithfulness and prayers. It was great to have so many of our family and friends join us as we worshipped God and celebrated Jesus’ resurrection. We wrestled with the question “who is Jesus?” The answer has a huge impact on how we live, our spiritual life and our overall health – our soul.

It’s a week later. Life, with all of it’s trials and challenges, continued or intruded this week. If we’re honest, many of us haven’t even thought about Jesus, God or what we believe at all in the days since we last gathered. I’m saying that to be real about how life is.

God, Jesus, faith, a spiritual life ... these all sound good. But we struggle with what it means outside the four walls of this building. We wrestle with an age old question, “how does faith apply to my life?”

It’s an important question. It reflects the reality that it’s one thing to know about Jesus, but it’s another thing to know and follow Jesus with all our heart, mind, strength and spirit. Sadly, there are those who have attended church for years, said all the right words and done all the right things, yet they don’t have an authentic relationship with Christ.

Why? The reason is simple. We want life to be our way. We’re like Thomas. Unless God shows us, personally, we don’t – or won’t – open our heart and mind to who Jesus is, the Son of God, our Redeemer, who willingly gave his life to save us. Like Thomas, we may have great passion and a willingness to go long distances and do exceptional things when there’s a cause. But tell us something we don’t like or don’t show us what we want and ... we’re looking for the back door.

We doubt because we find it hard to accept what an empty tomb means. We prefer to explore fictional stories of disciples stealing Jesus’ body or him having children with Mary Magdalene or somehow faking death in front of hundreds of witnesses, including Roman soldiers. To believe otherwise means we have to accept Jesus’ resurrection. What does that even mean? I don’t know anyone who’s risen. Do you?

Jesus rose from the dead, believe it or not. Accepting Jesus for who he is lies at the heart of faith. Some can believe and follow without hesitation or doubt. Jesus said to Thomas, “*Blessed are those who don’t see and yet believe*” (John 20:29). Others of us need something more, which leaves us at an impasse. God doesn’t have to respond. The problem isn’t with God. The problem is with us. We have to admit that we need Jesus. We have to be willing to turn away from our own desires and look at life from God’s perspective. When we do that, we’re confronted with something we don’t like: sin.

Sin is an old word. It carries a lot of negative baggage with it. It’s meant to. We don’t like the idea of sin. We think, “God made me this way. I’m a good person. God loves me. How can I sin if I’m made in God’s image?” There’s only one problem: we forget free will. We’re made in God’s image. That means that, deep down inside of us, we have the capacity to make informed choices. We’re the ones who decide what we do. No one else does. Conversely, we can’t make anyone else’s decision for them, though we can have a lot of influence. Are you choosing to do good all the time in your every day life or do you find that difficult?

Rev. Andy Stanley puts it this way: we prefer the word “mistake.”¹ We don’t do wrong; we make mistakes. We didn’t mean to say that hurtful thing. We didn’t mean to hurt our spouse. We didn’t mean to break that law. We didn’t mean to drink that extra adult beverage or take those drugs. We didn’t mean to visit that web site. We didn’t mean to neglect our child. We didn’t mean to ignore God. There’s only one problem with that view. How do you make an intentional mistake?

We’ve all done it. We’ve done wrong and we knew it before we did. In fact, we may have planned it so no one would catch us at it. And, if we got caught, we lied about it – to others, to ourselves and to God. After a while, we get really good at lying and making excuses. Rather than embracing what is good and right and just – those things that give life and freedom, we turn to things that are dark and wrong and unjust – those things that lead to death and captivity. Even worse, it’s like an

¹ Stanley, *Conversation about Faith*, 2004, p. 26

addiction. We find ourselves doing the same things, over and over again. We can't break the cycle, even when we want to. We may even pray to God, but without a basis for a relationship, we come away with our prayers unanswered most of the time. Why go to God if there's no help when we're in trouble? After a while, we just don't have the energy to try ... or believe.

John's first letter shows us the way. 1 John is the first of three letters. It resembles a sermon or tract in some ways. Most likely, the author knew the group of people it was written to and they knew him. That supports the traditional view that it was written by John near the end of his life (around 90 AD), when he was living in Ephesus.

The message of the letter is straight-forward. John's writing to a group of people who have been subject to false teaching. He wants to set them straight on what he saw, heard and experienced. Even though awkwardly written, the purpose is clear. John experienced Jesus Christ, who is the living embodiment of life, the Word of God made flesh (John 1:1-4). Jesus is the life of God and he came to give eternal life to those who believe (1 John 1:1-2). Amen!

John writes for two reasons. First, John is reminding the reader (us) that he's an eye witness. John personally experienced what he's sharing. Second, John is letting us know that he's only a witness. The greater thing is the reality of the life and ministry of Jesus. John has a great message to pass on and he feels an urgent excitement to do so. The message John heard directly from Jesus is this: “*God is light, pure light. There's no trace of darkness in God*” (1 John 1:5b, MSG). We can embrace that light and have eternal life.

Why does that matter? John tells us a few verses later, “*If we claim that we're free of sin, we're only fooling ourselves. A claim like that is ... nonsense. On the other hand, if we admit our sins ... [God] won't let us down; [God's nature is true]. [God will] forgive our sins and [cleanse] us of all wrongdoing. If we claim that we've never sinned, we out-and-out contradict God – we make [God out to be a] liar. A claim like that only shows off our ignorance of God*” (1 John 1:8-10, MSG).

John is writing to guide us, showing us the path to light and true life.

John wants us to admit we do wrong and turn to God. When we do, we find out that we have an advocate, a redeemer, who will save us and give us true life, eternal life. That’s Jesus. Jesus willingly atoned for your sins, my sins and the sins of the whole world, forever. That’s what the cross means. That’s how deep God’s love is for us. And we need deep love.

We all face the same dilemma: *“How can we do the good we feel called to do, rather than the wrong that we end up doing? We can will it, but can’t do it. We decide to do good, but don’t really do it. We decide not to do bad, but then we do it anyway. Our decisions don’t result in actions. Something deep inside of us gets the better of us – every time! We try everything and nothing helps. Eventually, we’re at the end of our rope”* (Romans 7:17-24, MSG). This is the dilemma of life.

Paul teaches us: *“With the arrival of Jesus, the Messiah, that fateful dilemma is resolved. Those who enter into Christ’s being-here-for-us no longer have to live under a continuous, low-lying black cloud. A new power is in operation. The Spirit of life in Christ, like a strong wind, has magnificently cleared the air, freeing you from a fated lifetime ... at the hands of sin and death”* (Romans 8:1-2, MSG).

Jesus’ resurrection breaks the hold sin and death has on us. When we accept Jesus for who and what he is, our risen Savior, we’re admitting we need help. We’re admitting we’ve done wrong, in spite of our good intentions. Jesus intercedes for us. Jesus breaks the tension between our attitude and our behavior. Jesus reconnects us to God. That’s the beginning of a deep healing process. It’s what love does in us, from the inside-out, one step at a time. We’re no longer putting Band Aids on things. We have a guide, an advocate living in us when we trust God’s action within us. That’s the work of God’s Spirit.

And that’s how faith applies to life. Love shows us another way. When we pay attention to God in our lives, we find ourselves changed, no matter what burden, situation or trial we may face. Our focus shifts from our own problems and burdens to the needs of others. We feel better – spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically, when we help others. You know the prompting you feel when the Holy Spirit is at

work inside you. When someone comes to mind you haven't thought of in a long time or when you see someone in need or when you see a situation where you could help, that's God's Spirit guiding you.

This isn't just an unrealistic dream. Most of you are crazy busy with your lives. So when you hear "care for others", your first, natural response is something like "are you crazy? I don't have enough time for _____ (myself, my spouse, my kids, my job, fill-in-the-blank), much less another person, particularly someone I don't know." And yet that's exactly what Jesus tells us to do when he said "... *love your neighbor as yourself*" (Luke 10:27). When we care for someone else, we're showing them love. And, when we make little deposits of God's love in other people's lives, we're making deposits of love with God and in our own soul at the same time. Trust God. Love is powerful, even if you don't see an immediate response (or appreciation). When coupled with faith, love gives hope, which may be the greatest gift of all.

Paul wrote, "*May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*" (Romans 15:13). "Hope doesn't usually come as the just reward for our hard work and struggle. It comes as a gift. The experience of hope is like the experience of receiving the perfect surprise gift. A really good gift is one that fits perfectly both the giver and the receiver. Hope fits our needs perfectly. But if a gift is out of character with the giver, then it may be difficult for the receiver to accept without reservations. Fortunately, hope is just the kind of gift that fits God's character. It's a perfect fit for God. The God of Hope loves to give hope.

So let's remind ourselves daily. We don't worship the god-of-relentless-cheerfulness, or the god-of-naivete, or the god-of-blind-optimism. We worship the God of Hope. God is hope-full and loves to share hope-full-ness with us. We can come to God with our fear, doubt and despair and God will give good gifts to us. When all other reasons for hope fail us, we can return to the God of Hope because God is greater than our disappointment, greater than our failure, greater than the problems and conflicts in our hearts and our homes and our communities

and our world.”² I don’t know about you, but that sounds like a pretty good way to live each day.

Trust God, believe in Jesus and live by faith, love and hope.
You’ll be glad you did.

Let us pray ...

“God, you are the God of Hope. That’s what you gave to all of creation on that first Easter morning when the disciples came to your tomb, expecting to find a body, but finding faith instead. For in your resurrection, love, light and life win over hate, darkness and death. Forgive us, Lord, for our sins, for our self-centered way of living. Break the tension between our attitude and action by leading us to the way of love. Give us the faith to embrace your love, follow you into new life and find hope, even when it seems impossible. For all things are possible with Christ, in whose name we pray. Amen.”

² Dale and Anita Ryan, National Association for Christian Recovery,
<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/1/#inbox/16299137e085eaf5>

John 20:24-29 (CEB)

Thomas, the one called Didymus, one of the Twelve, wasn't with the disciples when Jesus came. The other disciples told him, “We've seen the Lord!”

But he replied, “Unless I see the nail marks in his hands, put my finger in the wounds left by the nails, and put my hand into his side, I won't believe.”

After eight days his disciples were again in a house and Thomas was with them. Even though the doors were locked, Jesus entered and stood among them. He said, “Peace be with you.” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here. Look at my hands. Put your hand into my side. No more disbelief. Believe!”

Thomas responded to Jesus, “My Lord and my God!”

Jesus replied, “Do you believe because you see me? Happy are those who don't see and yet believe.”

1 John 1:1-2:2 (CEB)

We announce to you what existed from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have seen and our hands handled, about the word of life. The life was revealed, and we have seen, and we testify and announce to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us. What we have seen and heard, we also announce it to you so that you can have fellowship with us. Our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that our joy can be complete.

This is the message that we have heard from him and announce to you: “God is light and there is no darkness in him at all.” If we claim, “We have fellowship with him,” and live in the darkness, we are lying and do not act truthfully. But if we live in the light in the same way as he is in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from every sin. If we claim, “We don't have any sin,” we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from everything we've done wrong. If we claim, “We have never sinned,” we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

My little children, I'm writing these things to you so that you don't sin. But if you do sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous one. He is God's way of dealing with our sins, not only ours but the sins of the whole world.