

“The Resurrection and the Life”

Third Sunday after Pentecost; Series A
Romans 7:1-13

“You have died to the law through the body of Christ so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God.” – Romans 7:4

For a year, Vincent Van Gogh had been in a mental asylum in the southern part of France (Saint-Rémy-de-Provence). At times, he was allowed outdoors on the grounds, accompanied by an attendant. At other times, he was confined to the building, painting scenes he saw through the window in his room. Van Gogh was disturbed. Not only by the confines of his room but also by the confines of his mind. He suffered seizures and mental distress. Where could Van Gogh go for relief?

In the midst of this time of suffering in Van Gogh’s life, he received a letter. It came from his brother, Theo. Theo sent Van Gogh a copy of an etching by Rembrandt.



The picture that Theo sent was Rembrandt’s fifth etching of “The Raising of Lazarus”. In it, Jesus stands there. A ruling figure. Towering. Powerful. Looking out over the scene. At his feet, Lazarus is coming out of the tomb. All eyes are on Lazarus, as he rises from the grave. Yet Jesus stands there, a towering and powerful figure. He stands there as the Resurrection and the Life. Here is the Resurrecting Christ. He has the power over death and the power of life. In his rule, he raises Lazarus. The power of the resurrecting Christ (Idea for use of the image adapted from a sermon by Dr. David Schmitt in a sermon series entitled, *God’s Greater Story*).

When Van Gogh received this picture, he was inspired. He remembered the etching. He remembered what had been written about it. He pondered it, painted it, and sent his brother a letter, with his own small etching, trying to put into words what he saw.

Here, in the suffering and confinement of an asylum, Van Gogh experienced the power of the Resurrecting Christ. The Resurrecting Christ brought life and hope into the world and into his life.

This morning we continue reading and reflecting on Paul’s letter to the Romans. Last week we started in the middle of the letter and were reminded that we are baptized into God’s greater story. We are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore, we present ourselves and a portion of the time, talents, and treasures that God has given to us as instruments of righteousness to be used for the purposes of his greater story and plan of salvation in this world. This week we are reminded that Christ raises us to new life in him. Trusting firmly that we are raised to new life in Christ as his baptized children, we find freedom and formation in the risen Christ. We present ourselves to God so that through his Spirit at work in our bodies, in our hearts, and in our minds, we may be formed and shaped more and more to the image of his Son (Romans 8:29).

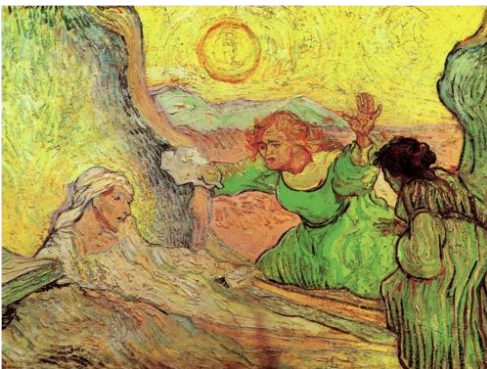
In our reading from Romans this morning Paul presents us with the same powerful, towering, ruling Resurrecting Christ that met Van Gogh in the midst of his suffering in a mental asylum hundreds of years ago. Through a painting tucked in the pages of a letter Van Gogh experienced the one who is the resurrection and the life and who gives him resurrection life. This Christ brought Van Gogh hope and freedom. So also through the pages of a letter we meet the same portrait of Christ who is the resurrection and the life. Paul tells us, "Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit to God" (Romans 7:4). We meet this Christ anew again this morning and the portrait of this one who is our resurrection and the life give us hope and freedom.

We need to meet this Christ often. Every day we need to meet anew the Christ who is the resurrection and the life and meets us in the waters of our Baptism, in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, and in the Holy Word of the Scriptures. We need to meet this Christ every day because we often forget the hope and freedom, the forgiveness and life that he gives to us. In our forgetfulness we slip into the modes of self-preservation and self-interest. Like Van Gogh we experience the moments of pain and suffering, the events of our lives that give us stress and anxiety, and we forget who we are. We forget that we have died to ourselves, to our passions and desires, and we are alive to God in Christ Jesus. We forget that we have risen to new life in Christ and that we belong to him who is the resurrection and the life. In our forgetfulness we fail to live with resurrection life, trusting God who has ultimately won the victory for us over all the pain and suffering, all the stress and anxiety of this life. We slip into the modes of self-preservation and self-interest. And we are in need of Christ again and again.

There is a WWII era movie of which I am sure some of you might be familiar. It is called *Twelve O'clock High*. In this movie the actor Gregory Peck plays Frank Savage, a General who has to clean up a high strung, low morale bomber group stationed in England. At one point in the movie he addresses his soldiers and says the following, "We are in a shooting war. We have to fight. And some of us have to die. I am not trying to tell you not to fear but stop worrying about it. Stop making plans. Stop thinking about going home. Consider yourselves already dead. Once you accept that idea it won't be so tough."

As long as the pilots were skittish and fearful and worried about saving their own necks, they couldn't do and be what they were called to do and be. So also if we live in self-interest and in self-preservation we cannot be God's people who are alive to him. We cannot bear fruit of faith. Only when we believe and trust more firmly in our identity as one who is risen to new life in Christ and has freedom and formation in Christ can we do what we have been called to do and be. You are dead! You are baptized. You are dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. You have participated in his death and resurrection. You truly are alive in Christ!

When Van Gogh looked at the etching by Rembrandt of the raising of Lazarus, he couldn't put what he saw into words. He tried but he couldn't find the words.



Instead, Van Gogh painted his own Raising of Lazarus, based on a small detail in this etching. Van Gogh focused in on the figure of Lazarus rising from the grave. Martha is pulling the veil from his eyes and Lazarus is only beginning to

see the world again. Jesus is not even in the painting. He stands as that ruling figure in the background. What is seen, however, is amazing.

If you look closely at the face of Lazarus, rising from the grave, you see that Van Gogh painted himself into Lazarus. There he is, rising from the grave. Not yet able to see all that God has done for him, only beginning to live, to taste the wonder of the Resurrecting Christ in his flesh in this world (Adapted from a sermon by Dr. David Schmitt in a sermon series entitled, *God's Greater Story*).

In the same way, this part of Paul's letter we have been considering invites us to live in the power of the Resurrecting Christ. Though we do not see him now, we know that he is risen and ruling over all things. In him, we have died to the curse of the law, in his body crucified for us on the tree. In him, we have been raised to a new life in the Spirit. And we are only now beginning to experience the first fruits of faith in the kingdom of God. Amen.

