

Sermon: The Resurrection Effect**Scripture: Acts 4:32-37****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 23, 2016**

Jesus resurrected for the early church wasn't an idea or a proposition to believe in or not, but an experience; a visceral, emotional, metamorphic experience that shook the foundation of their lives and actually the foundations of Jerusalem, and then the entire Roman Empire, to the core. Those under the Resurrection Effect had 3 experiences in common - they had this sense of being liberated from the oppressive spirits of their culture and time, they began to see their everyday lives as connected to a much larger movement and purpose – like cosmically so - and they suddenly found themselves brought together with very different people, some they never would have been in the same room with, in a unity of heart and soul. It was not new beliefs that caused this, it was an experience, not an intellectual assent but a moving of the heart and affections that meant a whole life change, a truth that came, as one later reformer would put it, “big and sweet, moving and affecting, dawning on the heart”. They prayed that the Spirit of Jesus would come to them and boy did it come:

Come sweet to us, come gentle breeze
 Come whisper words reminding
 The ways of life that set us free,
 The ways that are confining.

Come Heart of hearts, Love of loves
 Our words do fail to capture
 Your Name of names, 10,000 fold
 Our souls in greater measure.

Come strong as stone, come passion-hot
 Come breaking our indifference

Ignite imaginations from
 Our greed and our affluence.

Come crucified, come tomb-enclosed
 Come Risen One, forgiving
 And redefine what we've divined
 Should be a life worth living.

Come satisfier of our souls,
 Come desire of all nations.
 Help us to seek a peace among
 All earth and Her relations.

They didn't think their way into this new life, it was an experience of God's grace so powerfully at work among them that it couldn't BUT have had the effect of changing who they were and how they lived. So those early followers under the resurrection effect did two primary things – they moved outward witnessing to Jesus' resurrection and lived inwardly among themselves in a whole new way. They went around telling other people about this fire in their hearts that was consuming them in the sweetest way and they touched others so they too would be feel its heat. They understood themselves as a part of the unfolding and overflowing of God's purposes, the Maker's design for His creation coming to fruition. History itself finally made sense as it found its fulfillment in Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified resurrected one, and they were awash in His Spirit.

It was so much bigger than their individual selves that it was not surprising some sold what they had and laid the money at the feet of the Apostles to ensure that this community of people here at the center of it all would remain strong. Have you ever felt so moved, so convicted of heart by something that you gave and gave significantly to it, believing that there could be nothing better done with your money? Have you ever believed in something so deeply and strongly that you wanted to sacrifice for the sake of that greater thing, and that your sacrificial giving didn't diminish you but instead expanded your life into something much greater than your small self?

Well, this is what the early followers were experiencing. "The treasure of my land?" Barnabas, Son of Encouragement, asks. "My treasure and its value is nothing, of no consequence, compared to the treasure of my Lord's affections and the value of my God's purposes. Ask for my very life and I'll give that too!" And we the readers know that for many of those

early followers that too would be asked. Peter, legend has it, was crucified upside down by Nero and Paul because he was a Roman citizen had the lesser death of beheading. Wow! Can you imagine believing in something so profoundly that you would suffer such a death for it? What would have to be asked of you to take such a stand? Where in our lives might we imagine that kind of conviction and commitment surfacing? We are rightly troubled by the modern day version of religious belief leading to sacrifice in the suicide bomber, but its there, or we might see it in what we believe to be the more noble way of military service, where soldiers sacrifice for their country and their brothers and sisters in arms.

But the early Christians were very very clear that to follow Jesus, to be Christian, was to be willing to sacrifice *the self*, never anyone else. It was a thoroughly nonviolent movement, the early church was, a movement of grace and love welling up and overflowing and washing the world in connectedness and forgiveness and mercy, despite the world's violence. Never would the early Christians have justified the killing or sacrificing of others for God's purposes. That wasn't The Way at all. It was really only after Christianity became married to the state, when Constantine became a Christian in October of 312 and looked up into the sun just before the Battle of Milvian to see a cross in the sun and heard the words – "in this sign conquer!" It was only then that there came to be violence justified in Jesus' name. It would have been unheard of before that point.

What was so distinctive about the early Christians was their love and their willingness to sacrifice themselves before betraying their Lord in word or in violence against others. And what was so distinctive about them, is that they took care of each other radically, made sure that there was no one at need among them, which was why Barnabas sold his land and why they

shared property and possessions amongst themselves, because that was the nature of the Spirit of their risen Lord; love and generosity in abundance, shaken up and overflowing!

And here we are 2000 years later, in this church, the inheritors of that beautiful tradition living in a country that has designed its government around biblical principles of justice and equality, and we are here no longer having to fear for our lives when we proclaim Christ as Lord, worshipping freely and safely with no modern-day Nero or Caesar or anyone else able to force us to do otherwise. And this is a beautiful thing. And yet as a result, some of the fire that was there in the early church has receded. There is nothing like being persecuted for your beliefs to stir the fire of them within!

And yet there are ways in which the grace of God is still powerfully at work among us in Winchester, 2016, even though that grace might look different from the early church. In a culture where individualism and self-sufficiency is prized above all, the church is still a place that holds out for our mutual dependence upon and care for one another. And in a culture that promotes consumption and the unconscious discarding of what we do not need, the church is in the business of celebrating redemption and insisting that no one is to be discarded but is a valued child of God. And in a materialistic culture where there is a steady diet of lies suggesting that meaning can be derived from what we buy and own and collect and surround ourselves with, the church is a place where the unseen, the spiritual, the deeper dimensions of existence are exalted and we remind ourselves that the materials of this world are no end in themselves but are here in service to love and relationship. And in a culture afraid of death and obsessed with youthfulness, where the old and infirm are shunted away and out of sight in care homes, the church faces death squarely and proclaims it as a place of

transition to grace not destruction into oblivion. How important that we are here together doing what we do.

And so this is my point, while God's grace was so powerfully at work among the early church and this was evident in dramatic ways in which they sacrificed themselves and cared for one another, even some selling their property to take care of others, even though our being church isn't quite as dramatic, still the Spirit of Christ is alive and well and inspiring this community in the ways of grace and love and without this place, without this church, our lives, our community, our world would be a far smaller and less graceful place to live in.

And so we begin our pledge campaign for the coming year, inviting you to consider how you can generously support God's church, our community here, and while we won't ask you to go sell your house and lay the proceeds at the church's feet - although we could end the pledge drive right now if one of you decided to do that - but seriously what we do want to ask you to do is to consider what this church means to you and find that swelling affection of the heart in you for what is offered here, for the love of God that is promoted, the work of grace that is engaged in, the unity of heart and soul that is encouraged, the restoration of spirit that is nourished, and then consider what you might pledge for the coming year to this community where the grace of God is so powerfully at work among us, amen.