

WGUMC March 13, 2016 Philippians 3:4b-14
"The Power of the Resurrection"

We all know stories of people who had to lose everything to find Jesus. Here's another one for you. Jürgen Moltmann was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1926. As a boy, he was obsessed with Einstein's theory of relativity and planned to study math at the university. Instead, he was drafted into Hitler's army. Ordered to the front lines in 1945, he surrendered to the first British soldier he met. For the next couple of years he was a prisoner of war.

At first, he was in a POW camp in Belgium. His captors had decorated his hut with photographs taken at Buchenwald and Birgen-Belsen, two German concentration camps. Wracked by guilt and hounded by "gnawing thoughts", he sought the help of an American chaplain, who gave him a copy of the New Testament and Psalms. Though he had been raised in a secular home, prison was a good place to become convinced of the

Gospel of Jesus Christ. He said, "I didn't find Christ, he found me."

Later, Moltmann was transferred to a camp in England, run by the YMCA. There he read his first book of theology, written by an American, Reinhold Niebuhr (President Obama's favorite philosopher and long-time professor of theology at Union Seminary in NYC).

After he was released, Moltmann went back to Germany, became a Lutheran pastor and professor, wrestled with how anyone could have hope in the aftermath of the Holocaust, and went on to become one of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century. His "theology of hope" had a big impact on me.

In one sense, it's easy to be found by Jesus, when you have lost everything that matters to you. Moltmann lost his freedom, his innocence, his pride and his patriotism. But Jesus came to him in prison, so in the end, he did not lose his soul.

The question for us is, do we really have to lose everything in order to be found by Jesus? Do we truly have to hit rock bottom in order to be redeemed?

The Apostle Paul comes at this question from the other direction. Paul tells the people of Philippi that he has everything. He has all the credentials. Circumcised on the eighth day, he has a lifetime membership in the people of Israel. He has VIP status as a member of the tribe of Benjamin, which was King David's tribe. He has religious clout as a Pharisee. As a righteous observer of the law, he has moral authority. And he hasn't given up any of these things when Jesus meets him on the road to Damascus.

But meeting Jesus changes everything. Compared to the surpassing value of knowing Christ, all of Paul's qualifications now seem pretty worthless. Having a good pedigree, a good family background, a good reputation in the religious community: none of these things gets him closer to God. While

he doesn't have to lose everything in order to meet Jesus, he does have to let go of the notion that these things are important if he really wants to get to know Jesus. Having all these things doesn't count for anything, but gaining Christ and having faith in Christ is everything.

Paul's story is our story. Thankfully, we are not prisoners of war. We may have lost many things, but we haven't lost everything. We still cling to what we do have and to the illusion that it somehow matters. In Paul's words, we haven't yet learned to regard everything as loss because of Christ. We haven't been freed of our attachments to all the things—and the people!—that give us a false identity and sense of security.

When we think of how hard it is to let go of the things that make us feel significant and safe in this world, we don't want to hear that we have to give it all up in order to gain Christ. But look at the Apostle Paul and take heart. He doesn't have to renounce these things beforehand. Christ met him on

the road to Damascus. He was going there with all his credentials in order to persecute Christians. Christ met him anyway. It was only after meeting Christ that Paul discovered that the things that used to make him feel good about himself could no longer do so. When Christ showed him how utterly unimportant all those things were, he didn't need them anymore. No longer relying on his own righteousness, he was saved by God's righteousness through his faith in Jesus Christ.

The people that I pastor through a terminal illness usually come to this same realization. They start giving things away, things that they have clung to in this life but then realize they don't need anymore. They also start giving people away, which is much harder. They are keen for that last visit, that last chance to say what needs to be said before they are ready to let go. If you've ever been close to someone who is getting their affairs in order, you can't help but ask yourself, what do I need to let go of now? What are the things I've been clinging

to that I don't really need? Look at how close she is to Jesus. She makes me think, why wait until I'm getting ready to die to get ready to live?

Here we come to one of my favorite verses in all of Scripture: "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." [Phil 3:10] What Paul discovers following his experience on the road to Damascus is that none of the things we have can do *for us* what the power of Christ's resurrection can do *in us*.

To grasp this, we have to stop thinking about resurrection as something that happens to us after we die. Moltmann says, "Resurrection is not a consoling opium, soothing us with the promise of a better world in the hereafter. It is energy for rebirth in this life. The hope doesn't point to another world. It

is focused on the redemption of this one." [Moltmann, *Jesus Christ for Today's World*, p. 81]

Who wants to know Christ? Who needs the power of his resurrection in their life? A better question: who doesn't? I need the power of the resurrection just to get out of bed. Still struggling through the chemo—five more Herceptin treatments to go—when I wake up, I don't want to get up. For me, every morning has to be Easter morning. "Up from the grave she arose!"

But we don't just need to know Christ in the morning. We need the power of his resurrection throughout the day. We need it in our family life and friendships, in our schools and workplaces, our churches and communities, in our politics and in our economy.

I have gotten to know some women who need to know the power of the resurrection in their lives all day every day. They are grateful for simply having a bed when they wake up in

the morning. But they know better than the rest of us do that we can't rely on what we have; we have to rely on who God is. I also know some young people who have seen the power of resurrection at work in their own lives and have been willing to lose a lot of sleep to help others see it in theirs.

When we made the commitment to open a winter shelter for fifteen women, we didn't know if we had the man- and womanpower to do it. We knew that getting volunteers to spend the night who would then have to function the next day was going to be a tough job. We decided that we would have to hire a shelter director to manage the operations and an overnight supervisor for each night just to make sure that we had our bases covered. But we wanted to hire people we know and trust. Just so happens that we have some youth ministry alums around here who were available. Several of our shelter staff are young adults that Susan and Lisa have watched grow up in this church. They went to Sunday School and learned

about God's love. Then they went to church camp and to youth group and on mission trips and came to know Christ and could see the power of his resurrection at work as they were losing themselves in service to others. Now, over the last four and a half weeks, they have been taking turns watching over the women with love and compassion and wisdom beyond their years. They have been losing sleep but surely gaining Christ. Susan is so proud of these young people, and so am I.

We can follow their lead by losing ourselves in our love for God and neighbor. If we knew Christ and the power of his resurrection, we wouldn't have any excuses not to, because we wouldn't have a need to hold on to the things that aren't going to bring us any closer to God. Instead we could regard them as loss because our one goal would be to know Christ and to know the power that can make his resurrection happen in our life. First Peter describes it as being given "a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead."

[I Peter 1:3] I thank the women and our young adults for giving me some much needed new birth and some living hope. All of us want to know Christ; none of us have quite reached the goal. But like Paul, we can press on to make it our own, because Christ Jesus has made us his own. So we forget what lies behind and strain forward to what lies ahead, pressing on toward the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.