

Pastor Troy E. Medlin
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Practicing Death, Finding Resurrection

If Christ has been in the tomb, we know what is on the other side.

A few weeks ago I bought a whole chicken from the Oak Park Farmers Market. I love cooking. Being in the kitchen is so relaxing. It is an opportunity to create something. There is not much better than the glorious incense that begins to rise from a saute of onions, with a little butter and garlic. Back to that whole chicken. I had never cooked one before. I was a little nervous but I talked a big game. I brought it home with confidence and told a few people- “guess what I’m going to?” Roast a whole chicken. People were impressed. The truth is I was a little scared of getting out the giblets, removing the unsavory skin, trussing appropriately, and all the ways you have to handle the bird before it goes into the oven. I took some short cuts. It didn’t turn out exactly as I wanted. As silly as it sounds, I felt like I failed. Lost. Let myself and others down. It takes practice.

Jesus asks the disciples, “who do you say that I am?” Peter answers rightly, “you are the messiah.” Jesus then, immediately begins to explain to those disciples what that means. No matter how many times we hear these words they still sound a bit jarring. I can feel my old self rising up within me to protest. Jesus reveals that he will become like the suffering servant from Isaiah. Rejected, killed, and then on the third day rise again. And, those of us who want to follow him? Deny ourselves. Take up our cross. Lose our lives. We attempt to explain and theologize our ways out of it. We hear Bonhoeffer echoing in our hearts- “when Christ calls a person he bids them come and die.” By faith we see the cross, indelibly marked on our brow in baptism. But we wish there was another way. We try to fight this call. This life. This death. This practice. We resist death even when we know who is beckoning us through those tombs.

One article from the Atlanta Journal Constitution reads “Although nobody has yet been scientifically proven to live forever, many scientists believe that it will someday be possible.” It goes on to talk about blood transfusions from younger people, freezing corpses, brain transplants, and uploading consciousness to the cloud. We might not go to those lengths, yet all of us deny and try to escape our mortality in one way or another.

As another pastor noted, in many ways, through the rapid growth of technology, AI, and social media, we have gained the whole world and carry it around in our pockets. We have a limitless supply of knowledge. The amount of access can make us feel invincible. And we don’t have to look far to see that we are losing our souls.

We spend so much time constructing our identities, crafting the image we want others to see. We cling to our things, our independence, competence, and our opinions. We hold on to the way things used to be. We protect our lives with all we have. At the same time, we have already died in the waters of baptism. We know that every death is a door into life. This is the promise of the crucified and risen one. Whether it is the final death that comes for us all or the little deaths that we face everyday but our faith is faltering and the pull of the world is so strong. Daily dying is hard, it takes practice. Yet, we have all we need. We know that new life *will* emerge.

However we might answer Jesus' question, sometimes fickle, confident, unsure, even more importantly is who Jesus says that we are- and he has already answered it for you eternally in his own death and resurrection. This cross- his answer. You are God's beloved child. Held in his embrace. He calls you by your true name. You belong to Jesus Christ. He is your daily bread. Your future.

It becomes our practice, as those who now carry Christ into the world to practice what it means to lose our lives. Take up our cross. Deny ourselves. We know what is always promised on the other side. Losing looks like letting go. Dying looks like stepping back. Forfeiting our life is like conceding our own agendas. Quieting our tongue from its obsessive need to get the last word. Asking for help. Embracing our vulnerability and mortality as a gift. Admitting failure in big and small ways, even in the kitchen. That chicken helped my ego die one more time. When the chicken came out, I sat down and said how I was a little afraid and embarrassed. I needed someone to help me get used to preparing it appropriately. to get over my squeamishness. I have more to learn. In that moment something opened up in me. Room to be honest even about that. We all need a poultry preacher every once in a while.

Earlier we sang "Christ is the death of all that is; a broad and beckoning (I might add, inviting) tomb, who welcomes us from well-worn ways to darkness of the womb. Christ is the death, the sinking down past all desire and fear, whose promise in the gentle dark bids newness to appear."

It's not on you. The pressures off. give it up. As Robert Capon says, "Simply trust that Somebody Else, by his death and resurrection, has made you and everything all right, and you just say thank you. Because at the very worst, all you can be is dead – and for him who is the Resurrection and the Life, that just makes you his cup of tea." We practice death and find resurrection. When we receive it, it feels like spaciousness, relief, possibility, courage, a deep breath, living water flowing freely again, streams in the desert, and always, like a gift.