

Sunday, June 28, 2020 – Fourth Sunday after Pentecost
“The Resurrecting Christ”

Romans 7: 1-11

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Frame & Refrain Structure

Adapted from CSL “God’s Greater Story”

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

For a year, Vincent Van Gogh had been in a mental asylum in the southern part of France. 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? Into his suffering and confinement came a letter. Small but powerful. It came from his brother, Theo. Theo sent Van Gogh a copy of an etching by Rembrandt. In that letter and in that etching, Van Gogh discovered life and hope. The picture that Theo sent was Rembrandt’s fifth etching of “The Raising of Lazarus.” In it, Jesus stands there – ruling, powerful, looking out over the scene. At his feet, Lazarus is coming out of the tomb. No one looks at Jesus, all eyes are on Lazarus, as he rises from the grave. Yet Jesus stands there, the Resurrection and the Life. Here is the Resurrecting Christ.

When Van Gogh received this picture, he was inspired by its power. He remembered the etching. He remembered what had been written about it. But, when he looked at it, he saw more than could ever be written. 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. Written in letters, painted on canvas, the Resurrecting Christ brought life and hope and beauty into the world.

Our text this morning is another letter. A letter that proclaims the power of the Resurrecting Christ. The apostle Paul first sent this letter to the church in Rome but it comes among us today to bring

life and hope and beauty to our world. The power of Christ is found not only in this text but actually flows throughout Paul's letter.

Consider how he opens the letter: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus... [who] was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead." Paul presents himself in language very similar to that used by servants of Caesar, only the powerful ruler that Paul serves is not Caesar. Paul serves Jesus Christ, the ruler of all things, declared to be the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead. Paul then states the main theme of his letter: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (1:16).

Paul's letter is all about power. The power of the gospel to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. Finally, consider how Paul closes the letter, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (16:20, cf. also 15:18-19). God's power is there at the beginning of Paul's letter, at the end of Paul's letter, and all the way through. Paul's letter is filled with the power of the resurrecting Christ, bringing life and salvation to all people. And why wouldn't it be? Paul, himself, had met the resurrected Christ and, in that meeting on the Damascus road, Paul discovered Jesus to be more than the resurrected Christ. He was also the resurrecting Christ. When Jesus appeared after his resurrection, he changed lives – Mary outside the tomb mourning, Thomas in the room doubting, Peter out on the lake fishing. Individuals raised from sorrow and fear and discouragement to life. And last but not least, the apostle Paul. Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus and raised him to life. Paul now proclaims this power to all people, to the church at Rome and to us today. Paul turns our eyes to Jesus, for Jesus raises us to life.

Sometimes, however, Jesus is hard to see. Like the figures in Rembrandt's etching, people are looking everywhere except to Christ. For the church in Rome, Paul was concerned that people were looking to the law as a source of life. Israel believed in God's law. God's Torah was good, it was a design for life and they couldn't imagine their relationship with God apart from it. They saw the law as a power

for life. They turned to that law, seeking to obey it, in order to participate in God's life in the world. Unfortunately, they were so focused upon the law that they lost sight of Christ.

Let's say there's a family that brings their son to Sunday School not because they want him to grow in relationship with Jesus but simply because they want him to get a good moral foundation. Later, he may choose to follow God in any religion, for now, what is important is that he get the basics. The law of God. This family sees the law as holy and righteous and good. But they have lost sight of God. Paul writes this letter to be sure that no one sees the law without seeing Jesus. And Paul does this because he knows something. Paul knows the terrifying power of the law. It has power, all right. The power to awaken our sin. Although the Romans may see life in the law, Paul knows that eventually they will see death. God's law is good but our lives are not. Holding on to the law without Christ is like holding on to a knife as it cuts you to death. The law has a condemning power. Paul writes that it arouses "our sinful passions." When you hear what you are not supposed to do, you end up wanting to do it. Paul didn't know what coveting was until he was told not to covet and then sin awakened and created all kinds of coveting within him. Sin comes alive and we end up dying. Dying while holding on to the good law of God.

For this reason, Paul points us to Christ. The One who dies while holding on to us. We were sinners in the hands of an angry God but now we are sinners in the hands of our gracious Savior. Christ saw us in our sin and offered his life for our salvation. He died under the condemning power of the law for you. Through his dead body Jesus Christ sets you free. As Paul writes, "Likewise, my brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ." In his death, Christ puts to death the condemning power of the law. By his death, Christ brings life to you. Those who see the law and hold on to it without Christ will ultimately die. You, however, who are baptized in Christ, are baptized into his death and, by his death, Christ sets you free.

Paul reveals the power of Christ to set us free from the condemning power of the law and to raise us to life as a people for God. It seems odd, to be living in America, and listening to Paul tell us about freedom. After all, as Americans, we pride ourselves on freedom. In fact, in America, our infatuation with freedom has led some to believe that they have the freedom to rewrite the laws of God and create a different way of living in the world. In Deuteronomy, God commanded Israel to remember his commandments, to “tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads” (Deut. 6:8). And that’s precisely what they did. God’s people literally tied his word to their bodies, winding leather straps up their arms. For many, that’s how the law of God feels today. Christianity is filled with rules that bind your life. You can’t do what you want when Jesus calls you to love your neighbor. You can’t follow others when Jesus calls you to follow him. So, some Christians celebrate a freedom from God’s good design - a distinctly American freedom from the laws of God.

Take God’s good design of marriage or human sexuality. Such things can be redefined, self-justified to whatever fits your personal proclivities. These redefinitions of God’s law stress that God is loving and good. His love and his goodness set us free us to be whatever we want to be. Old notions of sin and punishment and the law of God are discarded as we live in the freedom of the American dream and claim that God is loving toward us and good.

Such attitudes, however, would seem strange to the apostle Paul. The law of God is not something you can redefine. It is part of God’s design and it has been built into creation. You can delude yourself that it doesn’t exist or that it doesn’t matter to God. But in the end, you will be held accountable to God. A person could pretend that laws and directives don’t exist in our community. She could pretend that the safety protocols don’t exist, or choose to ignore them, and try to skirt them or even push the issue by walking into various businesses and public places and challenging people to make her follow the new rules. In the end, however, she would discover that she is not alone, she does not make her own laws, but she is part of a larger community and lives under its laws. So, too, Paul wants

you to know that you are not alone. God does exist and rules over all creation. He has set his law in place and everyone will be held accountable to it before him. He has claimed you in the death of Christ, to free you from the condemning power of the law; but he has also raised you in the life of Christ to live and bear fruit for him. Christ stands there, on the edge of Paul's letter, ruling over the world and raising people to life in him. Paul does not stop after writing about the death of Christ. He continues. He writes about the resurrection of Christ because he knows that we have been raised to new life in him. Paul writes, "Likewise my brothers, you have also 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" (7:4). With these words, Paul turns our attention to the resurrecting Christ. He not only frees us from the condemning power of the law but he forms us by his Spirit to live as a people for God. In him, our lives are shaped by the Spirit and reveal the goodness of God's law, God's ways, God's people in the world.

When Van Gogh looked at the etching by Rembrandt, 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, not seen by Lazarus, not seen by his sisters, not seen by the viewer, but known to be there. 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, a thin pale man with a red beard, rising from the grave. Not yet able to see all that God has done for him, not yet able to see Jesus ruling over all, only beginning to live, to taste the wonder of the Resurrecting Christ in his flesh in this world.