

“IT TAKES DELIBERATE PRACTICE”

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5th Sunday in Lent

Texts: Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4-14

Philippians 3:4-14 (NLT)

⁴ Indeed, if others have reason for confidence in their own efforts, I have even more!

⁵ I was circumcised when I was eight days old. I am a pure-blooded citizen of Israel and a member of the tribe of Benjamin—a real Hebrew if there ever was one! I was a member of the Pharisees, who demand the strictest obedience to the Jewish law. ⁶ I was so zealous that I harshly persecuted the church. And as for righteousness, I obeyed the law without fault.

⁷ I once thought these things were valuable, but now I consider them worthless because of what Christ has done. ⁸ Yes, everything else is worthless when compared with the infinite value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have discarded everything else, counting it all as garbage, so that I could gain Christ ⁹ and become one with him. I no longer count on my own righteousness through obeying the law; rather, I become righteous through faith in Christ. For God’s way of making us right with himself depends on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ and experience the mighty power that raised him from the dead. I want to suffer with him, sharing in his death, ¹¹ so that one way or another I will experience the resurrection from the dead!

¹² I don’t mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me. ¹³ No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.

As I gather today in this sanctuary with only a skeletal crew to record this service, I want you all to know that you are missed more than you know. I look around at where people typically would sit and I say a prayer for each of you. Especially those who are higher risk these days. I miss your smiling faces in this place. I miss your handshakes, your hugs, your pats on the back. I miss you! As this sanctuary is a holy place, this is just another reminder that it is the people of God who are the church—not the building. I don’t miss the building—I miss you!

Today, while you are sitting at home, possibly in your pjs, lounging on the couch, we’re going to focus on practicing our faith—practicing being resurrection people, practice being the church of Jesus Christ!

It has been said that *anyone* can master *anything*, given 10,000 hours of deliberate practice. “Deliberate practice” does not mean a few hours a day of half-hearted plunking on a piano will make you an expert concert pianist any more than playing around on the monkey bars would make you an Olympic gymnast. Deliberate practice requires total, whole-bodied, whole-hearted focus and devotion. It is the kind of practice for something that you would feel incomplete without; something that finds an echo in your very bones. Ten thousand hours is about 10 years’ worth of persistent, intentional effort, until mastery becomes more like muscle memory. Then doing that *one thing* that you’ve worked so long and hard to master feels like coming home.

For the people of God, our *one thing* is resurrection—the movement from death to new life. We practice resurrection as a church and as individuals all the time, or at least we should. Every time we gather in a space of confession, we practice resurrection, unburdening our lives and our hearts from the weight of sin we have carried far too long. Every time we come to the Table, we practice the movement of death toward new life. We come starving, hungering for nourishing grace and bread that sustains our bodies and souls and we leave the Table, full of community, hope, and memory. Every time we lift ardent prayers for one among us who is suffering, trusting that our prayers rise to a God who hears our every need, we step out of a grave into a new reality. Every time a child of God comes to the waters of baptism and we recommit ourselves to be drenched in the same Spirit that hovered over the waters at the beginning of time, we walk into newness of life. It is deliberate, this practice that we do, until something as counterintuitive as resurrection seems like the most natural thing in the world to us. It is our truest home.

In this long preparatory time of Lent, which has gotten longer as we struggle with being homebound, we still practice resurrection. It is still our *one thing*. It is still our home. We still pray and confess and come to Christ’s Table. We still affirm, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” If we have really immersed ourselves in this Lenten season, we will find our hearts transformed on Easter morning. It still takes deliberate practice. We are starting that final push toward the empty tomb, but there is still some practicing we must do before the stone can be rolled away.

The Old Testament text for this week is from the prophet Isaiah, the themes of which are almost identical to that of Paul’s writing from 2 Corinthians (last week’s text). This passage comes to us from a section of the text most commonly called Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55). What differentiates this section of Isaiah from the others is the experience of exile. These 15 chapters are written as a reminder that God is still practicing resurrection even when (especially when) life is at its darkest and it seems like hope is lost. These words from the prophet were a reminder that when the people of Israel were tempted to go back into slavery because the wilderness seems too challenging and endless, God made a way from that death into new promise and will do it again (and again and again).

Here these words from Isaiah 43:16-21 (NLT).

¹⁶ *I am the LORD, who opened a way through the waters,
making a dry path through the sea.*

¹⁷ *I called forth the mighty army of Egypt
with all its chariots and horses.*

*I drew them beneath the waves, and they drowned,
their lives snuffed out like a smoldering candlewick.*

¹⁸ *“But forget all that—
it is nothing compared to what I am going to do.*

¹⁹ *For I am about to do something new.
See, I have already begun! Do you not see it?*

*I will make a pathway through the wilderness.
I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.*

²⁰ *The wild animals in the fields will thank me,
the jackals and owls, too,
for giving them water in the desert.*

*Yes, I will make rivers in the dry wasteland
so my chosen people can be refreshed.*

²¹ *I have made Israel for myself,
and they will someday honor me before the whole world.*

It seems strange that the prophet writes, “*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old*” (Isaiah 43:18). Traditionally, every time that Israel forgot their history, dreadful things happened to them. Without being rooted in memory, the people of God were easily led astray and would neglect all the things that made them God’s people in the first place. The prophet here, however, is talking about past trauma, haunts, and hurts that tended to keep the people of God bound in grave clothes rather than memory that propels them forward toward a future with hope.

Every human experiences dark times that are hard to release—grief, shame, despair, death, disappointment, anger, depression, and addiction can keep us from practicing resurrection. Especially right now as we are all hunkered down in our homes. It’s easy to let the dark times take over—disappointment and anger of events and vacations cancelled (high school seniors), depression from lack of connection and social interaction, maybe a feeling of despair and hopelessness with the whole situation. What holds you in your wilderness? These shadows can even make us forget that resurrection is possible and natural for the people who claim the name of Christian. It’s in times like these that the muscle memory of walking from death into new life is crucial. There is so much that can hold our hearts in death these days. There is only *one thing* that can compel those same hearts to open to new life. We have to perceive this *one thing* that is always springing forth. Before we can fully embrace that *one thing*, we must let go of all that holds us back—even during social distancing.

In Isaiah, God promises that the new thing that is springing up will make gardens out of deserted places and even the weirdest looking animals (jackals and ostriches) will honor God by practicing resurrection. This newness is about transformation. Rivers will not run through deserts without fundamentally changing them, just as God's love cannot flow through our hearts without transforming us. We are reminded through the prophet's words that God has made us for this exact purpose. We cannot praise the risen Christ, let alone rise ourselves, if we are still mired in the old, former things.

As we turn our faces toward Jerusalem this week and the cross that awaits in a story of betrayal, crucifixion, and death that leaves us in stunned silence, we must remember to practice resurrection. The world knows too well this sad story. The world knows too often the pain of death, of innocents accused or injustice inflicted upon the least, the last and the lost. The church is the **only** witness that can authentically testify that these deaths are not an ending. They are an opening for a rising up into a new life with more promise and joy than we dare to dream of as long as we keep practicing resurrection.

How do we practice being resurrection people when we are stuck in our homes? It's going to require us being creative. We all have phones—call your neighbors, call the people who sit next to you in church, call those who are higher risk—practice being resurrection people through your care and love of one another. Send emails, write letters, draw pictures and send them to those you love and those who might need a little pick me up. For the younger adults who are not high risk, offer to do a Walmart run for those who are higher risk. Take advantage of technology. There are lots of opportunities out there for video conversations. Most importantly, deliberately practice being resurrection people through your prayers for one another. Go to God on behalf of your loved ones.

My Momma always said, "Practice makes perfect." I think that's what Paul was saying too, in the Philippians text, "*But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.*"

Press on, my friends! We were made for such a time as this! Practice, practice, practice the faith! This is our time to shine. Don't allow your wilderness experience to put your light out.

Don't tell your God how big your fear is—tell your fear how big your God is!

Amen.