



“Living Over Your Head”

Text: Colossians 3:1-4

a sermon by Kevin Fleming

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FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

At the Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, England, are the remains of a Cistercian monastery founded in 1132. It has not served as a monastery since 1539, but it remains a popular tourist attraction. The official guide for the Chapter House, the place where the monks would meet as a community to conduct business and meet for prayer, has the following notation: “Here the monks gathered every Sunday to hear a sermon from the Abbott, except on Trinity Sunday, owing to the difficulty of the subject.”

I feel the same way about Easter as the Abbott felt about Trinity Sunday. My problem is somewhat the reverse of our ancient brother. The monks of that ancient monastery may have been a little unfamiliar with the tricky doctrinal formulations that form the Doctrine of the Trinity. That unfamiliarity and even irrelevance was likely reason enough to avoid a sermon on the Trinity.

But on Easter Sunday, everyone knows the story – even if they don’t believe it. Everyone comes to church, expecting to hear “Christ is risen! Alleluia! The Lord is risen indeed!” You come here on Easter Sunday morning, knowing full well that we will sing “Jesus Christ is Risen Today,” and that the lilies will decorate the Chancel, and that we’ll celebrate the Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and we’ll try to get all of that done in one hour, so everyone can go to brunch. Some of us, frankly, don’t want to be here this morning, but we do it to please our parents, or out of some other outdated sense of responsibility.

In all honesty, my hunch is that many of you are here with rather low expectations. Researchers continue to tell the church that the general population is looking for relevance and significance and are failing to find it in the church. So, I get that my job this morning is a little more than challenging.

I take heart in that the earliest visitors to the tomb on that first Easter morning had pretty low expectations, too. Mary Magdalene and the other Mary couldn't have had lower expectations on that first Easter morning. They were going to a tomb to properly prepare the body of their friend and teacher for burial in the tradition of the ancient Jews. So, there's the first good news of the morning: at least you're not being called to serve as undertakers this morning.

But, who could blame them? They had seen it all, witnessed it all, lived it all. They were there: through the mockery of the trials, the beating and scourging, the march to Golgotha and the crucifixion. They had watched every hope, every dream, every expectation they carried come crashing down around them. You can almost imagine an image of the women going to the tomb with the caption, "let's just get this over with."

Kind of sounds like they were going to church, doesn't it. "Let's just get this over with." It's funny how that has been a recurring mantra in the church's history.

The simple truth is that we have become increasingly low-expectation people. We don't expect much of anyone or anything. This, of course, helps keep us from being disappointed.

We don't expect answers to poverty, because even Jesus said, "The poor you will always have with you," even though that is a complete distortion of what Jesus was talking about. We don't expect answers to the challenge of educating new generations, because teachers aren't as good as they used to be, the parents aren't as involved as they used to be, or there isn't as much money as there used to be. We don't expect answers to the challenges of injustice, or environmental destruction, or racial discrimination – because it is what it is and it would be impossible to change any of it.

We have embraced the mediocre. We have hallowed the average. We have exalted the commonplace and have proclaimed the ordinary as "good enough." We have derided those who call for significant change and ridiculed those who dream bigger dreams that we can wrap our heads around.

We are nearing the time when we will adopt, as our official motto, the motto of Lake Wobegone: "Sumus quod sumus" – "we are what we are" – and there's not much hope for being anything more than that.

Are you glad you came to Easter morning services?

But...therefore...so...

We're turning the page and we're going to the Letter to the Colossians. "Therefore, if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above...Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth..."

"If you have been raised with Christ..." Start right there. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that those who are his disciples and followers have already been resurrected - have already begun to live that new life about which Jesus spoke so much and so often. Resurrection has already happened in our baptism, for when we were raised from the waters, we were raised with Christ. That's first.

"Seek the things that are above." Let's get this straight: we're not talking about heaven. If the only reason you are following Christ is to get to heaven, you're missing the point. If the only reason you are following Jesus Christ is because some snake-oil preacher dangled your feet over the fires of hell and scared you into believing so that you would get to heaven, you were sold a bill of goods.

Being Christian has everything to do with this world - here and now. Being Christian has everything to do with the quality of life in this world and not just the next. Being Christian means living a life in connection with God and with neighbor, so that the world is a place of justice and peace and love and joy. Being a Christian is all about life - here and how - and making the lives of all people what God intended life to be.

So we are told, "Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth..." Set your minds on things as God would have them be and not as they currently appear. Catch a glimpse of the world as God intended it to be. Dream a dream of the world as God envisioned it. Seek a vision of the world as a place of excellence and beauty.

That is what the resurrection of Jesus Christ is all about. The resurrection of Jesus Christ breaks the chains that bind us to a limited view of life - a view that accepts the mediocre as normative. The resurrection of Jesus Christ shatters the well preserved image of blessings for a few and much less for many more. The resurrection of Jesus Christ challenges us to imagine a life without constraints, without pre-existing conditions, without self-imposed limitations and to pursue that life with all that we have. If God has destroyed death, God has destroyed all the excuses for accepting anything less than full and abundant life.

I am here to tell you: if you came here this morning to remember a pseudo-historical happening from 2,000 years ago, you are missing the point of Easter and the resurrection. If you are here because someone made you come, you have an unexpected opportunity to find a whole new way of living. If you are here because you needed someplace to be before brunch, you're getting desert before the meal!

The resurrection of Jesus Christ assures us that new life has begun, resurrected life has begun, that this life has been radically changed. Fulfillment, purpose, joy, excitement, happiness, love, peace, contentment – all of these are the fruit of the resurrection and all of these are available to each and every one of us today.

Jesus Christ is risen today and we have been raised with him! So, “set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth...”

One of my favorite responsibilities as a pastor is to meet with people who are preparing to marry. In the course of our conversations, I will pose the question, “what are your expectations for your marriage?” This usually brings forth some rather predictable responses. Sometimes we discover that one partner in the marriage assumes that they will live the role that their parents or grandparents played, only to discover that their soon-to-be spouse has other ideas.

And then, I will often ask the question, “Are you marrying up?” Are you marrying someone who is better than you, smarter than you, wiser than you, more organized than you? Are you marrying “up?”

I ask this question, because I can tell you from personal experience, that marrying up is a good thing. I married up – way up – so far up that for the first five years of marriage I had nose bleeds. But my wife – who is a good person – opened my eyes and ears and heart and mind to things I never knew existed. I married over my head and I have lived over my head for 26 years this week.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that we can live over our heads – far beyond our dreams and expectations. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that a whole new way of life is available to us. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that we refuse to accept the mediocre and mundane and, instead, pursue the exceptional and the extraordinary.

Jesus Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Set your minds on things above. Live over your head. For now and evermore. Amen.



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