

Easter's Amazing Grace

1 Corinthians 15

It was 20 years ago, on Feb. 27, 1991, at the height of the first Gulf War, Desert Storm, that Ruth Dillow received a very sad message from the Pentagon. It stated that her son, Clayton Carpenter, Private 1st Class, had stepped on a mine in Kuwait & was dead.

Ruth Dillow later wrote, "I can't begin to describe my grief & shock. It was almost more than I could bear. For 3 days I wept. For 3 days I expressed anger & loss. For 3 days people tried to comfort me, to no avail because the loss was too great."

But 3 days after she received that message, the telephone rang. The voice on the other end said, "Mom, it's me. I'm alive." Ruth Dillow said, "I couldn't believe it at first. But then I recognized his voice, & he really was alive." The message was all a mistake!

She said, "I laughed, I cried, I felt like turning cartwheels, because my son whom I had thought was dead, was really alive. I'm sure none of you can even begin to understand how I felt."

Perhaps not, but some who walked the pages of the New Testament would have understood how she felt because they experienced the same emotions themselves. One day they watched their best friend & teacher being nailed to a cross. They witnessed His pain as He cried out, "I thirst!" and "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?"

They listened as finally He bowed His head and said, "It is finished!" and "Father, into Thy hands I commit My spirit." They watched as His body was taken from the cross and buried in a cold, cave-like tomb with a huge stone rolled over the entrance. All their hopes and dreams were buried with Him.

Friday & all day Saturday they mourned, until finally, on "the first day of the week, early in the morning," the scripture says, some women made their way along the path that led to His tomb. They were going there to mourn and to complete the embalming of His body which had been hastily buried before the Sabbath. They wondered who would roll away the stone so they could enter the tomb.

But when they arrived, they found that the stone had already been rolled away. And an angel there told them, "You're looking in the wrong place. You're looking for Jesus among the dead. He is not dead. He is alive. He is risen, even as He said!"

"He's alive! He is risen!" That is what we celebrate this morning. When all the evidence is in we are convinced that Jesus is alive. He is risen from the dead, and what a difference His resurrection has made!

The 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians is the great resurrection chapter of the Bible. In vs's 1-11 Paul writes,

1 Corinthians 15

- 1 **Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand,**
- 2 **by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you; unless you believed in vain.**
- 3 **For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,**
- 4 **and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,**
- 5 **and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve.**
- 6 **After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep.**
- 7 **After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles.**
- 8 **Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.**
- 9 **For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.**
- 10 **But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.**
- 11 **Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.**

With that introduction, Paul goes on to present a compelling testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. Then he turns his attention to us, "**Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed; in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.**" [15:51-52].

As our choir sang this morning, the Easter event is defined by the word **GRACE: God's Riches At Christ's Expense**. It is God's unmerited, undeserved favor that God lavishes on us because of what Jesus has done. While we deserved judgment He acted in love. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us.

I. The Message of Grace is Good News. See the word "gospel" in verse 1? That's what gospel means, "good news." It's good news because as verse 2 says, by it we "**are saved.**" Saved from what?

- from sin, "**Christ died for our sins ...**" The Bible is clear that we have all sinned, we have all rebelled against God, broken His commandments, and fallen short of His glory. The Bible is just as clear what the the penalty for sin is: death. The good news is, "**Christ died for our sins ...**" The death we should have died, He died in our place. He took the penalty and paid the price for our sin with His own blood. And because "**He rose again the third day,**" we are also saved from:

- from death, As Paul says later in the chapter, **“The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** (1 Cor. 15:56-57). We now have hope beyond the grave. Death is not the end. Jesus is the firstfruits, His resurrection the promise and the guarantee of our resurrection.

The message of grace is the Easter message. Christ Jesus died.... He was buried He rose again the third day ... He was seen.

II. The Product of Grace is a Changed Life. Paul says, **“by the grace of God I am what I am,”** (1 Cor. 15:10).

Being what he once was, and considering what he had done, there is no way Paul should have been an apostle. Paul (or Saul as he was known then) **“made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison,”** (Acts 8:3). Saul hated Christ, and Christians, **“breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,”** (Acts 9: 1). When a disciple named Stephen was being stoned to death because of his belief in Jesus, Saul looked on approvingly (Acts 8: 1). You would not think that Paul, a man, full of hate and murder would be one that Jesus would be interested in appearing to, but surprise, **by grace** Jesus appears to him.

Paul recognized that he did not deserve this experience. He says, **“For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”** (1 Corinthians 15: 9, 10). **“But,”** he says, **“by the grace of God I am what I am.”** By God’s grace, by God’s grace alone, Paul was included in the number who saw Jesus! By God’s grace Paul was one who has seen the Lord. And by God’s grace, his life was changed. Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle. A sinner became a saint; a murderer became a minister.

By God’s grace he saw the Lord, by God’s grace he was saved, by God’s grace he was transformed. The grace of God changes lives. Grace can change a man from a persecuter to a preacher. It can take a bottle out of his hands and put a Bible in it. It can take a filthy mouth and turn it into a mouth of praise. It can take a man who is a shame to his family and make him an example to his family.

The INSCRIPTION ON THE GRAVE OF JOHN NEWTON, the writer of that great hymn, Amazing Grace, reads:

John Newton, Clerk, Once an infidel and libertine
A servant of slaves in Africa,
Was by the rich mercy of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ
Preserved, restored, pardoned,
And appointed to preach the faith he had long labored to
destroy.

It is by that same amazing grace that I too can see the Lord and be changed! Paul, suggests, that there was something abnormal, unusual, irregular about his experience of the Risen Lord. What Paul discovered was that there was nothing

that he had done could make him right with God; and nothing he had done could keep God from saving him. If God can save the likes of Paul, maybe, just maybe, he can save the likes of me. By God's grace, I can be numbered among many who have seen the Lord.

Tony Campolo has told a stirring story about a drunk who was miraculously converted at a Bowery mission. Prior to Joe's conversion, he was viewed as a hopeless, dirty wino. It seemed as though his existence in the ghetto would fade away one night in a drunken stupor. But God had a different plan for Joe. He made a life-changing commitment to Christ and was supernaturally transformed. He became a compassionate and caring person who spent his days helping in the mission. No task was too lowly for Joe. He cleaned up the vomit of alcoholics, scrubbed down the restrooms of careless drunks, assisted men into bed when they were too drunk to find their bunk, and always maintained a smile that communicated his gratitude for being able to help. One night when the mission's director was giving an evangelistic appeal, a repentant drunk came to the altar and began to pray. He prayed, "Oh God, make me like Joe. Please make me like Joe!" He shouted this prayer over and over. Finally, the director stepped down and said, "I think it would be better if you prayed, 'Make me like Jesus!'" The man looked up and asked, "Is he like Joe?"

If a person didn't know about Jesus, would he want to be like you?

Can others see the grace of God on display in your life?

Can you say, **"by the grace of God I am what I am?"**