

A New Life Through Cold Walls

Sermon for Easter Sunday – 2 Timothy 2:8-13



“⁸Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, ⁹for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! ¹⁰Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. ¹¹The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; ¹²if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; ¹³if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.”

When Paul wrote this second letter to Timothy, he was in his second imprisonment. This time, the conditions were far worse than before. Many of his friends had abandoned him, fearing they too would be imprisoned. Yet some remained loyal to him.

Paul clutched a cloak tightly around himself (someone from outside had smuggled it in) and looked across at Aristarchus. He thought of these dear people who stood by him and was filled with deep gratitude. Aristarchus was not a privileged Roman like himself, but a Macedonian. He had stood by Paul’s side and shared not only the warmth of the cloak but also the food the two of them received from outside. Next to Aristarchus sat a slave, a person without any rights. Yet he too was included in the small community within the cold cell. All three shared the same fate. In all likelihood, they would not live much longer but would soon be executed.

In such a situation, one’s entire life is seen much more clearly than before, as if through a magnifying glass. Paul thought of his former life as a faithful rabbi and once again a shiver ran down his spine. He recalled the miraculous encounter with the living Christ on the road to Damascus. That experience had changed everything. He hardly thought anymore of the peaceful and privileged life he had left behind. For him, life in Christ and his connection to Him were more important than anything else.

He whispered to Aristarchus, “Did you get it?” “Yes,” said Aristarchus, handing him a small scrap of paper and a pen. Paul began to write. He looked at his fellow prisoners and thought of the Christian community which was constantly under threat. Yes, the Church too was like a small group of prisoners and faced death. Then he wrote what moved him: life in Christ, which surpassed everything else. It was close to his heart that the gospel of the living Christ (Whom he had come to know on road to Damascus) be passed on to all people. This is his concern when he writes to Timothy. In doing so, he begins with the one who matters most: the Risen One. This is crucial: “Remember Jesus Christ, who was raised from the dead, a descendant of David.”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is, so to speak, the headline and definition of the entire missionary work of the apostle and the Church as a whole. It also encompasses the personal suffering Paul was currently enduring in prison. Without this resurrection, everything is just an empty shell. Or, as he wrote to the Corinthians: “But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... We are of all people most to be pitied.” (1 Corinthians 15:13-14, 19) Without the resurrection, we would believe in a shell without content.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the power of God. A power that did not merely occur 2,000 years ago but penetrated the cold walls of the apostle’s prison and flowed into the scratching of his

pen. The resurrection shaped his words and gave them life so that these words have been believed, preached, prayed, endured, and lived out over the centuries. Dear congregation, when we say today that “He is risen indeed!” this is no empty phrase. It means that the resurrection of Jesus Christ also permeates and defines our lives.

Today I would like to draw your attention to a special image. Our neighboring association, “Die Kreativstube,” has gifted us a beautiful parament that now hangs in the sacristy. You can also see it on the first page here. When you look at it, you see a branch of thorns. It reminds us of the crown of thorns of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is hard, dry, and lifeless. And yet, at the very end of the branch, almost unnoticeable, there is a blossom. This blossom is not yet the whole tree. The tree is not yet even there. All you see is a hard, withered thorn and seemingly nothing else. But the promise lies in that blossom. It not only shows new life but also proclaims it. We must understand the resurrection just as concretely in life. In prison, Paul saw nothing but cold, dampness, and impending death. But the blossom of the resurrection changed everything. The resurrection is to be understood not as a distant hope, but as a promise that has already begun to unfold in the midst of the drought.

Paul understood the resurrection of Jesus Christ in a very real way. Life returned to the limbs of Jesus Christ in the same way: first the heart began to beat, then came breathing, then the movement of limbs, then the new living person rising again, healed from death. This is also how Paul understood the beginning of the new life for every Christian. One thing is clear: whomever has died with Christ will also rise with Him. This is not merely a promise for the future, but for real life that is already stirring in the present. That is why Paul, in the midst of the terrible conditions of prison and shortly before his death, could write such lines full of hope and faith.

The thing that Paul experienced in his cell—the power of the resurrection which penetrates the darkness and cold—is happening among us here today. For today, our brother Sasan is being baptized. Paul does not merely want to explain the resurrection and new life in Christ in abstract terms. Rather, he applies this very concretely to Timothy’s situation and to each one of us. Whoever is in Christ does not merely follow a new philosophy or commit to observing certain commandments. Whoever is a Christian dies and is born anew. At first, dying does not sound like a positive image, especially not when a small child is being baptized and is supposed to “die” right at the beginning of life. However, what is meant by it is this: Our identity becomes completely different. Whoever dies is no longer the same person as before. Whoever dies in baptism no longer belongs to themselves but is wholly under Christ.

Sasan is still named Sasan and will retain his language, his culture, and his personal characteristics. But he is now, together with his entire language and culture, under the rule of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has received a new identity. You can understand this, dear Sasan, in a way similar to citizenship. If you have German citizenship, then the German state is responsible for you. You can expect protection and care from it, but you also have duties: paying taxes, obeying the laws, etc. It is the same with us Christians. Through baptism, we have a new citizenship. But (and this is crucial) this citizenship is not something you apply for or earn. It is a gift. That is what distinguishes it from any earthly naturalization. We have been transferred from the dominion of sin and death into the dominion of Christ. Not through our own efforts, but through His grace. Like any citizenship, this one also raises questions: How do I live as someone who now belongs? What do I focus my life on?

Of course, things change in the process. Nothing stays the same. Just as Paul embarked on a completely different path in life after his baptism, so also do our lives as Christians take a new direction. Our life is like the needle of a compass. No matter which way you turn it, it always points north. Aligned with Christ, we find our true direction. Do you remember the thorn branch on the

parament? At the end of the branch is a blossom. It knows what is coming, and it proclaims it—quietly, unobtrusively, inexorably. So it is for us as well. The path may be thorny, filled with tears, but at the end lies the promise: new life, resurrection, a life in Christ, in His life.

It is the same with our lives as Christians. We read God's Word and find there what a new life in Christ means for us. Sometimes we must face the bitter reality that our lives do not always align with what Christ wants from us. That makes us sad. Yes, a Christian's path to repentance can sometimes mean a thorny journey full of tears. But that is precisely why we return continuously to the Christ to Whom we truly belong. We repent, we go to the Lord's Supper, we seek Christ through His Word.

At the end of the branch, almost unnoticeable, quite inconspicuous, stands a new blossom. It points to the future. It knows what is coming: new life. Resurrection. A life in Christ, in His life. Amen.