

September 6, 2009
Pentecost 14
Philippians Sermon Series

“The Joy of Running for the Lord”

PHILIPPIANS 3:10-16

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. ¹² Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. ¹³ Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. ¹⁶ Only let us live up to what we have already attained.

It was the last event of the decathlon in the 1976 Olympics. A young man named Bruce Jenner had accumulated enough points in the previous nine events to walk around the track in the 1500 meter run and still take home the gold medal. Instead, Bruce Jenner, with victory guaranteed, ran one of the best times he had ever run in the 1500. The cameras showed him running the grueling last lap of the race with a smile on his face.

This morning we hear the Apostle Paul, the prisoner in Rome, writing to the dear Christians in Philippi about running a race for Jesus. He is in chains, but his life in Jesus is not bound by these chains. He knows the victory is his because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead, and the righteousness he possessed in Christ his Lord.

Dear Christian, you know the victory is already yours in Jesus. You live each day wrapped in the beautiful robe of Christ's righteousness. You are a child of your heavenly Father. That makes you want to run the best race you because eternal life is already yours in Christ.

What chains are wrapped around your legs this morning? What problems from your past life haunt you? What difficulties are you facing this week? What new problems and struggles are yours in the future? Whatever chains may be ours, we can join Paul in saying, "I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

The joy we have in Jesus resurrection

We can joyfully push ourselves in this race, because of what we have seen in Jesus and his resurrection from the dead. Paul writes, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead." Paul knew Christ and he knew the power of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. He longs, as a prisoner in Rome, to know this power even more. The Greek word for "power" is "dynamis" from which we get the word dynamite. We used dynamite on the family farm to blow huge stumps out of

the ground. The earth shook when the dynamite exploded, and piece of the stump went flying high into the air. If you have ever been to the Diablo nuclear power plant then you are amazed at the heat that is generated from a nuclear reaction, that heats water, that drives steam turbines, that generates electricity that allows you to have electricity in your home. Think of the power that was generated when the Lord created all the matter in the universe on the first day of creation. All of this power pales in comparison to the power that Jesus showed us in his resurrection from the dead.

Look at Jesus after he rose from the dead. He appeared to his disciples and showed his power by letting them see the nail marks on his hands. Think of the power it took Jesus to pay for the sins of the world. What power was there when he cried from the cross, "It is finished!" We are attached to that power because we are branches connected to Jesus the Vine. We have absolutely no power in ourselves to generate the good works necessary to pay off our debt of sin. How we would laugh out loud if PG&E would announce they are opening up a new power plant to generate electricity. They hire Lance Armstrong to ride a stationary bike with a small generator to generate electricity for the state of California. It is even more foolish for human beings to think they possess the power to do good works to pay off the debt sin either for themselves or to others.

In the resurrection we also see the power to manage our lives and watch over the whole world in which we live. Ephesians 1 speaks of this tremendous power when it says, "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church." The Apostle Paul, sitting in Rome, under house arrest, with chains attached to his body, wants to know more of this power in Jesus' resurrection, and so do we. The risen Lord and Savior can raise your body back to life again on judgment day, and he can also bring fill your life with power to face your prisons of life whatever they may be.

Paul also wants to experience more of Jesus suffering in his life. "I want to know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death." Usually we don't like to see things die, whether they are family pets that we love, or people that we love, or even plants that we love. There are certain things we don't mind seeing die, such as snails in the garden, deadly viruses, or the sin that finds its way into our lives. We want to die to sin and live with Jesus as we are told in Romans 6, "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him." As we sing in the hymn, "Jesus, I my cross have taken, All to leave and follow you." And if I have to suffer to get rid of certain sins in my life, then it is the most glorious suffering that fills my life with joy. There is a saying in working out and exercising, "No pain, no gain." Saying no to sin in your life is painful but also a most wonderful and joyful experience as you grow in your new life for the Lord.

Paul writes that he wants to attain to the resurrection. He is not speaking about the resurrection on the last day. He speaks of the confidence and strength that comes with a greater appreciation of the power of Jesus' resurrection in our lives. The United States Army has the slogan, "Be all that you can be." The slogan for your life and mine is, "Be all that we are!" Be what you are in Christ and in his resurrection. When it comes to the resurrection of my body on the last day, it is already finished and taken care of by Jesus. When it comes to how my body is going to be used in this life to glory Christ, there is so much that still needs to be done and needs to be attained. Paul is filled with joy as he contemplates how Jesus' resurrection from the dead, changed his life and continued to

change his life every day.

The joy we have in running the race for him

With the joy of resurrection victory already yours in the future and already here and now, let's return to Paul's picture of running the race for Jesus. "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me." Paul shares with us the joy of pressing on to take hold of that for which Christ took hold of him.

Look again at how Jesus took a hold of Paul and snatched him like a stick from fire. There he was on the road to Damascus looking for more Christians to kill and then Jesus reached down into his life with the words, "Saul, Saul why are you persecuting me." When Saul cried out, "Who are you Lord?" that voice that came back to him said, "I am Jesus." The risen Lord Jesus took hold of Paul and brought him to believe in him. From that time forward Paul took hold of Jesus and wanted to serve him. We want to take a hold of Jesus and serve him just because he served us. Every day is an opportunity to run the victory lap in a race where the victory is already yours.

Paul speaks in runners' terms about pushing himself forward and staying focused on the privilege of serving Christ. "Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. It is important to forget the past and look ahead the race that lies before us.

In sports if you constantly think of your past mistakes, you will not be able to push yourself forward to do your past. Have you ever noticed that some people are always bringing up their past as an excuse for not going forward in the present? Paul had a terrible past life. He killed Christians, took moms and dads from their kids and put them to death. How do you ever fall asleep at night when you recall children screaming in terror: "Why are you taking my daddy away from me?" If the risen Lord and Savior helped Paul put his sins of the past behind him, he still has the power to do the same for you and me today. The sins of the past have been forgiven. The hurts of the past can also be put behind you and forgotten as you press forward to run the race for Jesus. It is hard to run a race with chains on your legs such as these, but even harder if that chain is attached to some heavy weight.

Paul says that he presses towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." I asked Stephen Trevarrow if he would bring one his gold medals that he won at the Special Olympics. The Lord puts a medal around your neck and says, "I want to have you live for me and my kingdom." As Luther said in his Small Catechism: "...That I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." I think of that young man with cerebral palsy, spending his life in a nursing home in a wheel chair, coming to our weekly devotions, with his Bible study T-Shirt that said, "I love Jesus." And we sang the song, "Oh, how I love Jesus... because he first loved me." That's the high calling.

We press on towards the goal. The Greek word here has the thought of the marker post.

On the 1970's there was a popular saying, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." You have heard it said, "Take it one day at a time." Today is another marker post, another day to live for Jesus and press on to fulfill the high calling that is yours and mine in Jesus.

Paul wants us to have this mindset. "All of us who are mature should take such a view of things. And if on some point you think differently, that too God will make clear to you. Only let us live up to what we have already attained." Let's get on the same page. Let's line up at the starting blocks and run that race with joy on our faces, because at the end of the day because of Jesus we can hear him say to us, "Well done good and faithful servant." May this amazing race you have for Jesus put a smile on your face, a spring in your step and a song in your heart. Amen.