

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 16, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

COLOSSIANS 1:14

“Christ bought our freedom with His blood.” (Living Bible)

Experience *FREEDOM* This Easter!

Many of us remember July 20, 1969, when Neil Armstrong and Edwin Aldrin became the first humans to land on the moon. But I was utterly appalled when President Nixon, with his adrenaline flowing too vigorously, made the outlandish and almost blasphemous statement: “This is the greatest day in the history of mankind.” He was dead wrong. We here today are celebrating the greatest event that ever happened in cosmic history. More than a billion Christians today are rejoicing with joy unspeakable as they remember the resurrection of our Lord from the dead.

Why is the resurrection so all-important? Because it proved Who Jesus is. Our Lord made some statements that many people of His day must have thought were outrageous. He said things like, “I am the only Savior of the world. I am the only way to heaven.” Aren’t those claims mind-boggling? It’s interesting to note that Jesus never claimed to be a great teacher, even though He was. But He said, “I am GOD come to earth in human form so you may know what God is really like.” And He said, “I’m going to prove it by coming back to life three days after they kill Me.” And He did.

Now George Gallup says that 84% of Americans believe in the resurrection of Christ as a historical fact. Lots of people were witnesses who testified that they had seen Him after He was restored to life. So what? The real issue this morning is — what difference does it make on April 16, 1995, to people sitting in a worship service in Springfield, Virginia? Why should we be celebrating this miracle of resurrection?

Well, the Bible says in Colossians 1:14 (Living Bible) that “Christ bought our freedom with His blood.” Now that verse suggests the question: “From what can Christ set me free?” Well, turn to your outline and we will explore together this wonderful theme.

Basically what I want to say to you this Easter Day is that the Lord Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and exalted, can set you free from your four greatest problems; and that’s good news!

1. Christ can set me free from GUILT concerning my past.

Guilt is the number one destroyer of happiness. It’s the number one source of stress and depression. It can cause physical illness. And all of us feel guilty at times. We all have regrets because none of us is perfect. We’ve all said and done things for which we feel extremely guilty. “Oh, if only I hadn’t said or done that!”

But here's the good news. God wants to give you a second chance. He wants to let you start over again. And what Christ did by His death and resurrection means that you can live guilt-free. Isn't that good news?

Notice Ephesians 1:7 (Good News): "By the death of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven." God wants to set you free from feeling guilty. You know, even if there were no such place as heaven, it would be worth becoming a follower of Christ just to have a clear conscience!

Look at Colossians 2:14 (Jerusalem Bible): "Christ... has cancelled every record of the debt that we had to pay; He has done away with it by nailing it to the cross." Would you circle that word "cancelled?" When we think of this word, don't we think, for example, of a cancelled check? How long do you remember a cancelled check? Not very long. How long do you remember a bill that has been paid? You don't; you forget it. Here's the point: What God has forgiven I can forget! I don't have to beat myself to death over the things I regret in the past. I can quit nailing myself to a cross over things I feel bad about, because Jesus was nailed to the cross for me.

How many of you as children had an "Etch-a-Sketch"? You know what I'm talking about, don't you? You played with these little dials, and you made sketches, and if you made a mess of it, what did you do? You simply turned it over, shook it, flipped it back up, and the surface was clean! Colossians 2:14 is the "Etch-a-Sketch" verse of the Bible. God says, "I want to wipe your slate clean. I want to give you a clear conscience." And that's fabulous news!

Notice another verse, Romans 8:1 (LB): "There is now no condemnation awaiting those who belong to Christ." Now if you get nothing else out of this sermon, would you get this: Regardless of who you are, and regardless of what you've done, you matter to God, and He loves you, and He wants to forgive you, and He wants to set you free from guilt and regrets that oppress you. It's never too late to start over again.

I remember seeing an experiment once where red ink was poured into a bowl of clear water. And what a mess that was. But then another liquid was poured in and the whole thing stirred with a spatula; and lo and behold, the solution became clear and pure again! That is what the blood of Christ can do to even the most sin-stained life. Isaiah says, "Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow" (1:18). You remember the old Gospel hymn:

What can wash away my stain?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
What can make me whole again?
Nothing but the blood of Jesus!
Oh, precious is the flow
That makes me white as snow!
No other fount I know,
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

God wants to blot out every stain from your past. But that's just part of it.

2. Christ can set me free from WORRY about my future.

Have you noticed that America is a nation of worriers?! I mean, we worry about everything — about bills, about health, about career — we worry about our worries! One of the things that bothers me is that every time I pick up the newspaper they're telling me that another food I love to eat is bad for me! They tell us to eat less red meat, so I've stopped putting ketchup on my hamburgers! We worry and worry, and pretty soon we can't even breathe because the air is so polluted. We can't drink water because it's so full of bad stuff.

And I'll let you in on a little secret—we ministers worry. We worry about what we're going to say to you people week by week. They tell a story in Ireland about a minister who preached twice a Sunday, a sermon in the morning and one in the evening. People noticed that he walked home after the evening service with his head down, wringing his hands and muttering dolefully to himself. Someone followed him within earshot one night, and this is what he heard: "Two more next Sunday; two more next Sunday"!

If you look up the word "worry" in the dictionary you find that it comes from the Old English verb *wyrgan* which means "to strangle." And that's what worry does; it grips you by the throat and tries to strangle the life out of you.

Would you like to be free from worry? Look at 1 Peter 1:2 (LB): "Dear friends, God the Father chose you long ago and knew you would become His children. And the Holy Spirit has been at work in your hearts, cleansing you with the blood of Jesus Christ and making you to please Him. May God bless you richly and grant you increasing freedom from all anxiety and fear." The Bible says, "Don't panic; PRAY!" 1 Peter 5:7 is a magnificent verse: "Cast all your cares upon Him, for He cares for you." If it's worth worrying about, it's worth praying about.

You see, worry never solved a problem. Worry is useless; it cannot change your past; it can't control the future; and all it does is mess up today. In fact, most of us spend a great deal of our time regretting the past and worrying about the future, so we are powerless for today.

Now, what's the secret of worry-free living? Look at Philippians 4:13 (Phillips): "I am ready for anything through the strength of Christ Who lives in me." The secret of worry-free living is just this — trust your future to Christ. Say, "God, I don't know what the future holds, but I know Who holds the future. You do! So I'm not going to sweat it, because with Your resurrection power within me, I can handle whatever comes." The same power that raised Christ on Easter morning is the same power available to you and me to help us rise above our problems.

Did you know that there are 365 "Fear nots" in the Bible? That's one for every day of the year. God says, "Get the message; don't be afraid; I'll handle it if you'll trust Me!" So I can be set free about worry concerning my future as well as guilt about my past.

3. Christ can set me free from living without PURPOSE today.

You see, deep inside you God put a desire to know Him. You may not even recognize it, but you have a desire to know what really matters in life. It comes out in questions like these:

‘Why am I here? Is there a purpose to my life? Does my life count? Am I here just to take up space? Is there more to life than... get up in the morning, go to work, come home and watch TV, go to bed, relax at the weekend, and finally, retire and die?’ The good news is, there *is* more than that!

But until we know what that purpose is, we look for anything to give our lives meaning. Some people try to fill their lives up with *pleasure*, and every weekend is ‘the great escape,’ trying to find purpose in life. “If I can just have thrills and chills then I’ll be happy.”

Some people aim for *power and prestige* to give their life meaning, so they strive for position, status and fame. They drive a certain kind of car. ‘Watch me, because I must be important because I can afford this!’

Some try to find meaning through *the acquisition of possessions*. ‘The one with the most toys wins.’ There’s a tee shirt that says, “The one who dies with the most toys *still dies*.” And eventually you realize — “What’s the use? Why bother? If there’s really no purpose to my life except acquiring things that I’ll pass on to my children when I die, why even get out of bed tomorrow morning? I’m fed up.”

By the way, did you hear about the proposed merger of the Federal Express and UPS? It will then be called “Fed UP”! A lot of people are fed up with life. Just think about the increasing rate of suicide, especially among young people.

You see, success does not ultimately satisfy, because what you need in life is not really SUCCESS; what you need is SIGNIFICANCE. You need to feel: “My life matters; I count for something; there’s some rhyme and reason to all of this in the final scheme of things.”

Well, the good news is this — you are no accident. God made you for a purpose. In fact, the Bible says that God planned you even before you were born. Notice this verse, Ephesians 2:10 (Jerusalem Bible): “We are God’s work of art, created in Christ Jesus to live the good life as from the beginning He had meant us to live it.” God uniquely designed you — you were custom made, there is no one just like you, and when God made you He broke the mold! You are His “work of art.” (Isn’t that a delightful description of you!) God has a personal life mission that He wants you to fulfil. The tragedy is that many people go all the way through life never discovering what their life mission really is. That’s what our church is here for — to help you discover God’s plan and purpose for your life, and then help you fulfil it. God wants you, and we want you, to succeed in every area of life — physically, mentally, socially, financially and spiritually — being what God meant you to be, because true success is being what God meant you to be. And when you begin to discover and fulfil the purpose for which God created you, you will experience the fulfillment, the satisfaction and the significance that you’ve been looking for.

Notice Acts 20:24 (LB), where Paul says, “Life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus.” What he’s saying is this: “If I don’t fulfil my purpose, I’m not living; I’m just existing.” And so I beg you — don’t waste your life.

(4) **Jesus can set me free from having to earn my way to HEAVEN.**

Colossians 2:20 (LB) says, “Christ has set you free from following the world’s idea of how to be saved by doing good and obeying various rules.” Paul says, “That’s the world’s idea. You get to heaven by living a good life.” You know, if I were to go to Springfield Mall and take a personal survey of people and ask everybody: “Are you going to heaven?” 99% would say this — “I hope so!” And if I were to follow that up with the question: “On what do you base that hope?” 99% of them would say, ‘Well, I try to be good.’ And God says — “Wrong answer!” He says, “That’s the world’s idea of how to get to heaven: by keeping rules and regulations and all that kind of thing.

Now here’s what the Bible says about your future:

(a) God says that heaven is a perfect place, where there is no sin, no disease, no crime.

(b) God says that you have to be perfect in order to get there. You say, “I don’t stand a chance!” Right; neither do I. That is why Christ came to Earth. Since heaven is a perfect place, if God let you in, being imperfect, then it wouldn’t be perfect any more, would it?

Now here is some very essential information. There are two ways to heaven:

Plan A was offered to Adam. God said to Adam, “Be perfect, never sin, and in due time I will take you to be with Me in heaven. If you never sin, then when you present yourself at the pearly gates, I will say to you, ‘You’ve earned it; come on in.’” But we know that Adam flunked the test. He sinned, and in sinning he dragged us all down with him. Every one of us sins because we are born with a sinful nature.

So God came up with Plan B. He came to Earth in human form to do for us something that we could never do for ourselves — to die on a cross bearing the punishment that *we* ought to have borne because of our sin. And God in His justice and mercy accepted Christ’s sacrifice for your sin and is prepared to forgive you and count you righteous (even though you aren’t!) because of what Christ has done for you, and because you are trusting Christ alone for your salvation.

Here you are, a poor sinner, dressed in filthy rags, and God comes and offers you a white robe (it is the robe of Christ’s righteousness). And by faith you accept that robe, and put it on, and it covers completely the filthy rags. And God says, ‘When I look at you now, I know that you are trusting Christ for salvation, not yourself, because you have accepted the robe and put it on; so when I look at you now, I don’t see your sin because it is covered by the snow-white robe of Christ’s righteousness. And *that* is why I accept you as My child, and *that* is why one day I will admit you to heaven!’”

Notice this verse, Romans 4:4 (LB): “You don’t earn your right to heaven by all the good things you do. No, for being saved is a gift; if a person could earn it by being good, then it wouldn’t be free — but it is! It is given to those who do not work for it. For God declares sinners to be good in His sight if they have faith in Christ to save them from God’s wrath.” He saves you

because He sees you wearing the white robe that Christ has provided!

You don't get to heaven by keeping various rules and regulations; you don't get to heaven by rituals; you don't get to heaven by religion! Not once in the Bible does it say that religion saves you. You may be Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or Moslem. Religion is simply man's attempt to get to God; but religion doesn't work because by nature we don't really want God. Indeed we are in rebellion against Him. God says that what saves you is a personal relationship with Christ.

Salvation is a free gift — you don't deserve it and you can't earn it. One day you are going to stand before God, and God is going to say: "Why should I let you into this perfect place, heaven?" You can either say: "Plan A — I was perfect"; and that's not going to work. Or you can say: "I trusted in Jesus Christ Who said You would let me in because of what He did for me on the Cross."

A lifeguard told me once that when someone was drowning, he would swim out to the victim who was flailing around in the water, and he would then keep treading water until the drowning person would run out of energy and collapse and start to go under. Then it is simple for the rescuer to put his arm over the person's shoulder and swim with him back to shore. Rule one for a lifeguard is this — never try to save anyone until he stops trying to save himself. As long as they're trying to save themselves, they'll pull you down with them, for with the adrenalin pumping, they have colossal strength.

God says, "You don't get to heaven by thinking you can get there by your own effort." Romans 6:23 (LB) says, 'The free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.' It's a gift!

You're going to die some day, and you don't know when that's going to be. I ask you; why go through life totally unprepared for something you know is inevitable? Listen to me — you're not ready to live until you're ready to die.

How can you be *certain* what will happen to you after you die? Accept the free gift that God offers. The obvious question is — have you received it? God wants to make the rest of your life the best of your life. And that means receiving Christ. Remember, God knows all about *you*; He wants you to know *Him*.

Now these four benefits: I can live guilt-free and worry-free; I can live with a purpose; and I can live not having to earn my way to heaven—that's the good news of Easter! Jesus was raised from the dead to prove that He is the Savior you need! He came to save us from guilt, worry, meaninglessness and self-righteousness.

Have you received the gift? Say to God, "I'm scrapping Plan A—I know I could never be perfect and thus deserve to get into Heaven. So I ask You, Lord, work Plan B in my life; I'm putting my trust in Christ and in Him alone for my salvation!"

Do you really want this freedom that Christ offers? This Easter, come home to God!

AMEN.

Dear heavenly Father, I believe Jesus Christ is Who He claimed to be — God in human flesh — and that He proved it by rising from death. Jesus Christ, thank You for dying for me on the Cross, and for bearing the awful punishment I ought to have born because of my sins. I want to know You personally and experience the freedom You offer. As best I know how, I repent of my sins and ask You to come into my life and be my Savior and Lord. I gratefully accept Your free gift of salvation, and desire above everything else, from this day forth, to live a life that will please You. Amen.