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Ephesians 1:19-23

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THE SURPASSING GREATNESS OF HIS POWER

As we gather on this Easter Sunday morning we praise God for the most amazing miracle of all: the miracle of the resurrection. We rejoice that God raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus wasn't partly or almost dead. He was completely dead. And ever since that first Easter he is not partly or almost alive. He is completely alive. He is risen! He is risen indeed!

Our subject this morning, to borrow Paul's phrase from the book of Ephesians, concerns the surpassing greatness of God's power.

I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all. (Eph 1:19-23 NASB)

These verses constitute one of two prayers in this book of Ephesians. Here in chapter 1, Paul prays that believers in Ephesus and the surrounding region might come to know and experience three things, the last of which is the surpassing greatness of God's power. He says that the primary evidence or proof of that great power is the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The words "These are" (verse 19) are not found in the original text. This means that everything Paul says about Jesus in verses 20-21 is meant to modify only the phrase relating to God's power. The greatness of God's power toward believers is in accordance with the working of his might when he raised Jesus from the dead.

Paul uses the word surpassing three times: to quantify the greatness of God's power, the riches of his grace (2:7), and the love of Christ which surpasses our knowledge (3:19). The word means extraordinary, outstanding. It goes beyond what we can grasp or see. It outdoes what we think is possible. It goes past the limits that we have set. The power of God released and displayed in the resurrection goes beyond anything that has ever been done or ever will be done. If we had a scale for measuring power, the needle would extend far beyond the last mark of measure. It would be like trying to install the speedometer from a Model T Ford on a jet airplane which flies fast enough to break the sound barrier.

When you think of power, what comes to mind? Perhaps you think of powerful people who yield great control through their station in life, personality or wealth. Perhaps it is powerful weapons, like nuclear bombs or guided missiles. You might think of powerful automobiles, airplanes or space shuttles, or acts of nature, like tornadoes, hurricanes and tsunamis. Perhaps you might think of intangible things, like the power of a smile, a touch or a hug. You might even think of the supernatural acts of God: healings, miracles or mighty deeds. Power attracts

us. We marvel at it, and we fear it. But every form of power that we can conceive of pales in comparison to the surpassing greatness of the power that raised Jesus from the dead.

It is amazing that at the resurrection of Jesus, God was silent. In Genesis 1 we read that God spoke the world into existence: "Let there be light"; and there was light" (Gen 1:3). He spoke when Jesus was baptized and when he was transfigured. He said, "This is My beloved Son" (Mark 1:11; 9:27). Even though Matthew says that at the resurrection there was an earthquake, and an angel appeared (Matt 28:2), God's voice was conspicuously absent. We might have expected a spotlight beamed from heaven on Jerusalem, or even a great proclamation. But all we have is a simple story, told differently by each of the gospel writers.

And each story has a different cast of characters. There was a great deal of confusion. There were no bells and whistles, no pomp and circumstance, no drama or fanfare. One gets the impression that the resurrection occurred secretly. God performed his greatest act of power, his greatest miracle in silence. Jesus rose from the dead. All that is left is an empty tomb for each of us to contemplate and take to heart.

But there is something even more amazing for us to think about: What God did for Jesus, he does for us too. This has two ramifications for us. God raised us from the dead, and that same resurrection power is at work in our lives today.

Here is what Paul says in chapter 2:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:4-7)

Paul says that everything that happened to Christ has happened to us too. We were dead, not just partly or almost dead, but completely. We too were made alive, not just partly, but completely. And we too have been raised and seated with Christ in the heavenly places. The same words which Paul uses to describe what happened to Jesus apply to us as well. All of this happened to us when we believed in Jesus and received the grace of God.

And not only have we been raised from the dead, the same power that raised Jesus and raised us is at work in us right now. This is why Paul prays in chapter 1 that we might know the surpassing greatness of this power. Here is how he puts it in Romans 8:11: "But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you."

This has huge implications for our lives. The power that raised Jesus from the dead is the same power that can defeat sin in our lives. Even though we are new creations in Jesus, we still carry around this thing called the flesh. And frankly, the flesh stinks. We have died to sin,

and yet it appears that sin is quite alive in us. It still can entangle and paralyze us. The enemy wants us to believe that we cannot be free from the patterns and habits in our lives. But we can, because resurrection power brings life to our mortal bodies.

The power that raised Jesus from the dead is the power that allows us to have life in the face of great fear. We live in a world of fear. Wars and rumors of wars circulate all around us like wireless networks. Death and destruction make for prime time television. Fear has a way of gripping our hearts and rendering us powerless: fear of disease, fear for our safety, fear of tragedy, fear of losing our job, fear for our children, fear for our parents, fear for our environment, fear of terrorists.

But death is our greatest fear. In many ways death is the root of every fear. Death will come for all of us at some time. The thing that we fear most will ultimately take our mortal life. But as we come to the cross and enter into the death of Jesus, we are raised with him. Nothing can take away the life that he gives us. No power can surpass the greatness of God's power. Even in the face of fear, resurrection life is ours because Jesus was raised from the dead.

That very same power can overcome the emotional struggles that plague us. We struggle with despair, discouragement and depression. We are tormented with guilt and shame, worry and anxiety. We are overwhelmed with feelings of isolation, loneliness and a sense that we don't belong. We feel that we have missed out on life, that our deepest longings will never be met. Who among us has not struggled with such thoughts?

But Easter reminds us that the tomb is empty and Jesus has risen. Our despair and anxiety can be turned to hope. And our hope is not based on the cessation of world conflict or on the futile wish that the government will solve all our domestic problems. Our hope is based on something so much more real and permanent: the power that raised Jesus from the dead and is now at work in us. As Peter says in his epistle, God "raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (1 Pet 1:21).

The power that raised Jesus from the dead is the power that can reveal the love of God in our hearts. Perhaps this is our deepest longing: for home, for a place where we can be warmed by overflowing love. We fear that it may not exist. The resurrection means that we have a home—a home in the heavens not made with hands. Jesus went there to prepare a place for us.

But the surpassing greatness of God's power can reveal a home right now in our own hearts. We can be embraced by God's hug and reassured by his voice. Last week I met with a young man who has been going through struggles recently. In the midst of it all, God revealed something to him in a new way. The truth he has known for years made its way for the first time from his head to his heart. That is resurrection life, the surpassing greatness of God's power.

How does resurrection life work itself out in everyday life? We need to remember two things. First, God is often silent, as he was at the first resurrection. Occasionally he thunders from heaven, but more often he moves in our life quietly, secretly, almost without our noticing it. We cry out to him, Why have you forsaken me? We want to hear him shout from heaven. We think he is not at work. Sometimes we are in the tomb, surrounded by darkness, for far longer than we would want. At times God is waiting for us to fully throw ourselves upon him and trust in him before resurrection life can begin to work. At other times we are not even aware of God's working until after the fact. But, God's silence doesn't mean that he is not at work. The two disciples walking on the road to Emmaus didn't even recognize the One with whom they were speaking, but he was with them in the same way that he is

with us. God has raised us with Jesus, and resurrection life is always at work.

Secondly, God's power reveals itself in our weakness, and in spite of our circumstances. We would want it much differently. We want God to give us a new personality or a new body, to make us confident and able. We want God to overturn the company, or get our boss fired, or change the person we are living with. But that doesn't happen for us. God's power did not save Jesus from the cross. It worked through the cross. God's resurrection power gives us life and hope and faith while we are weak and struggling. The truth is that God can unimaginably transcend the worst things as he also unimaginably transcends the best things. That is the nature of his resurrection power.

At Easter, God raised Jesus from the dead and made his power known. This day reminds us that God has raised us too from the dead, and all is well. Listen to these words by Frederick Buechner: "The proclamation of Easter Day is that all is well. And as a Christian, I say this not with the easy optimism of one who has never known a time when all was not well but as one who has faced the Cross in all its obscenity as well as in all its glory, who has known one way or another what it is like to live separated from God. In the end, his will, not ours, is done. Love is the victor. Death is not the end. The end is life."¹

In his poem *Easter*, George Herbert invites us into the resurrection this morning:

Rise heart; thy Lord is risen. Sing his praise
 Without delays,
 Who takes thee by the hand, that thou likewise
 With him mayst rise:
 That, as his death calcined thee to dust,
 His life may make thee gold, and much more just

"Calcined" means to heat to a high temperature but without fusing, in order to drive off volatile matter or to effect changes. As Christians, that is what happens to us in the death and resurrection of Jesus: we are united with him in his death; but from the dust we also rise with him, and he makes us to be pure gold, to his glory, forever.

One of the joys of Easter is to hear how resurrection life is happening in our midst, how God continues to raise us from the dead. At this time I want to introduce Beth Smith and let her share her story.

A Story of Redemption

Reflecting on the 20th anniversary of PBCC a couple of weeks ago, I realize how blessed I have been to be a part of this community for all of these years.

For the first 11 years I was very involved here, including the Children's and Women's Ministries. Eight years ago I had an emotional breakdown and was diagnosed with clinical depression. I was a director in the Children's Ministry and I had to walk away from the job overnight. My husband Bill and I have three children, and at that time Anna was 15, Kristine 13, and Paul 10. I had good friends in the Body and until this time most people probably thought my life was intact. What they didn't realize, nor did I, was that I was desperately trying to hold my world together. Circumstances and image were how I measured my worth. My personality is such that I wanted to please everyone, and it was terrifying to think that I might disappoint someone. But I was exhausted and my reservoir was depleted. The pressures

of my life had caught up with me and I couldn't manage them any longer. I was afraid. It took many years to begin a process of identifying how my world was colored with pleasing man, not God.

During this time I experienced tremendous love and support from my husband, children, family, friends and the staff here. As I gained emotional strength through medication, counseling and rest, I began working nine months later at a new job. I continued in counseling for three years and felt I was on a path to complete recovery. I was grateful for the experience of seeing God's provision for me and my family.

I began to move forward but it didn't take long for me to see that the same stressful circumstances were still threatening to have my world fall apart. Fear began to take over. I told Bill that I was not intending to continue living under this kind of stress. We both needed help in many areas of our lives and not addressing them was taking a huge toll on both of us. I was not going to get sick again. I could not risk being part of a life that would fall apart. The shame of that idea scared me to death.

Besides taking care of me and playing a big role in caring for our children, Bill was under extraordinary stress at his job in the insurance industry. He too was suffering deeply, but quietly. He began counseling, and I thought once this difficult process of working through some of his issues began, God would have our attention and we could move forward together and on the same page in the same direction. I would be stronger and I could get back to my Christian community and be ready for another perfect "family picture."

Mounting financial pressure, fear of losing our home, plus other high pressure points were dominating our lives. I was gripped with the thought that one final wind would blow over our house of cards.

The cloud of depression began returning. First, looming in the distance, then making its way over the plain until soon I could smell, touch and taste it. I was engulfed by it. I couldn't understand why this was repeating itself. I managed to keep up appearances at my job, but it was getting harder. I would go home and fall apart. I began isolating myself further from church, friends and family. I no longer knew how to offer hope to my kids through a relationship with Christ, because I wasn't sure if I even had one. I was very confused and had lost hope. I felt like I was living a lie, and people could see right through me. If I came to church at all I would do everything to avoid seeing people I knew. The medications that once were helping seemed to be losing their effectiveness. I was privately sinking into deeper depression. My entire identity was shaken.

I was so sick of myself. I thought I should be able to pull myself up, but I couldn't. And so the road to numbing my pain began. At work on every break I would try to find an empty office where I could turn the lights off and close my eyes. I dreaded going home at night. I wondered how I was going to get through the evening until it was time for bed. In the morning I would get up and look in the mirror. I hated what I saw. I was not taking care of myself, and worse, I didn't care anymore.

What started as an occasional glass of wine to relax quickly became routine, and the amount I needed to take the edge off of my pain increased. It didn't take long until the slightest amount of daily stress would trigger my thoughts to escape. Soon I was drinking every night and the emotional grip it had on me became consuming. I would move through my day knowing when I got home I could shut my mind off from conflicting voices.

I often found myself disguising what I was drinking from my family. Many times after finishing an entire bottle I would be filled with so much shame that I would put another bottle in its place so no one

would notice how much I drank. I would shop at stores out of my way to avoid running into the few people who knew of my struggle, for fear they would see the bottles of wine in my cart.

Alcohol being a depressant, only intensified my depression. I didn't know how to be there for my family and friends. My isolation hurt many of them because they didn't know how to interpret it. I knew this, but didn't know how to manage differently. I needed my world to be small, preferably all by myself. I missed out on a lot of life around me. My thoughts soon went to self-loathing. On the way to work in the morning I would visualize being in a solo car crash that would take my life. Depression took me into some very dark and destructive thinking. I found myself entertaining thoughts of dying. I would have never believed that I could think this way. The guilt and shame was enormous. I felt abandoned by God and my heart was bleeding. I was desperate, but I didn't want to hurt my family.

I was completely dead inside when I went into Gary's office for counseling. I didn't know what to tell him. I didn't know how to articulate the ache in my heart. Eventually I was able to put down some words in a journal. This was my first entry exactly two years ago:

To Disappear

My props are gone
 I struggle to stand
 My legs weak, my attempts failing
 Confidence shattered
 I lay naked and ashamed
 My soul is crushed
 My heart is bleeding
 The pain runs deep
 I long for relief
 Refreshment evades me
 Hope has no meaning
 Darkness fills my days
 Turmoil my nights
 Confusion always my companion
 "Abba, Father," I cry to the heavens
 His silence deafening
 Retreat, escape
 Voices waging war
 Frightening thoughts consume me
 "How can I disappear?"

Words started flowing from my pen onto paper expressing a pain so deep and indefinable that it would only be God who could pull me out, stand me up and shine a light in my darkness. But at that time I didn't want God to find me. I was afraid of Him. I didn't trust Him. I turned away from Him.

Besides Gary, God reconnected me with a dear friend who has walked beside me every step of this journey. I didn't ask her to, but she wouldn't go away even when I deceived her and when she was brought into my humiliating situations. I'm grateful she didn't. Together, they gave me safety to unlock hidden fears, anger and insecurity that I never knew existed. They became my lifeline. Other dear friends encouraged me and prayed for me daily to the extent I would let them in. I know their prayers reached a caring all-powerful God.

I was strongly encouraged to seek continued help with medication and professional counseling. Depression is a chemical imbalance and I needed medication to bring my body into balance so that I could

begin the hard work of wrestling with a powerful God. I was in no condition to begin that process as depressed as I was. The medication didn't remove my pain, but it brought me to a place of being able to seek Him with clearer thinking and begin the healing process of the misguided view I had of my Heavenly Father.

I moved from despair to being honest with God. I didn't know if I really believed Him. I began seeing how I had based my worth up till now, and God was not intimately connected. I observed other people sharing a banquet with Christ, but I could only watch. I saw an empty place setting at the table, but I was not capable of believing it was reserved for me. I didn't know how to go to my Heavenly Father and be comfortable without needing to bring something more than myself. I kept refusing His mercy and grace, yet my heart was aching for something I could not put words to.

I began experiencing what C.S. Lewis calls "the drippings of grace," a term for what awakens deep longing for "a scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited." My friend would bring me gardenias. I would smell them and my heart wanted to cry. It was almost what I was longing for...but the beautiful fragrance could not capture it...It was a dripping of God's grace and he was luring me in. I would listen to beautiful music; again the ache in my heart would long for more; I was not yet satisfied...but my senses were coming out of slumber. I went to a spot in the mountains and spent several days among beauty so nurturing I would weep. God was calling me to Himself and I was beginning to understand the language he was speaking. However, the wait was almost unbearable.

Through loving words I was told that maybe I needed to surrender the hold alcohol had on me in order to heal. I needed to recognize that it had become an idol. It had become a friend that would allow me to escape. So, I took a step beyond my range of light and began attending a Christian 12-step group, which proved to be a gift from God.

I continued writing. Somehow honestly expressing my doubts, fears, disbelief, sadness and shame and not being able to shock Gary gave me much freedom. I thought eventually I would write or say something so alarming that I would not be invited back into his office. But he kept nodding his head, saying, "I understand, and God loves you anyway." I had trained myself to refuse God's love, and so I needed to be told this over and over and over.

God let me ask hard questions. He was patient with me. My heart began to soften and soon I recognized a sense of hope returning. "Will you restore to me these days of waste? Will I long for that familiar heavenly taste? Will your arms remain open waiting to embrace, this lost child who is searching for her Father's face?" My fear was that I didn't want any of the things I used to rely on to be given back to me until I truly could believe that God loved me right where I was. I knew myself well enough, that as soon as my ducks were in a row, I would feel confident and I would miss opening His gift. I wanted the gift so badly, and I needed to open it where I was at. It was scary, but it was the only way for God's love to penetrate my heart.

And He has done just that. He has pierced my heart with His love. He let me fall far enough to be at the end of myself but not far enough out of his reach. I was safe and I didn't even know it. He breathed life back into me, stood me up, took my face in His hands and told me He loves me. I can add nothing to have Him love me more and do nothing to have Him love me less. There is tremendous freedom in that truth. I don't have to do anything except to let Him love me. He

created me and cherishes me and delights in me. He has gathered me up and brought me to himself and gently back into his fold.

Now I look forward to Sunday mornings and so enjoy stopping and talking to friends. I don't feel the need to hide. He is bringing healing in our marriage and Bill and I are growing together. We still struggle, but we struggle together now. I can hope and dream again with Bill, something I had long ago stopped doing. I still struggle. I still have difficult circumstances to deal with. I still can be taken completely off guard with wanting to escape. I still fall. But that's OK. My Heavenly Father is there, waiting to pick me up again. And He does. I don't need to sit in the shame. Jesus died for that and I never want to count that sacrifice as loss. He died for my gain.

I'm not settling for the drippings any longer. I am feasting at the table with my Heavenly Father. The fragrance of the flower, the sound of beautiful music and the majesty of his creation now lead me to a place of worship, and I want to please Him only.

I now know that this story is His. It isn't about me. I can stop thinking about myself and think about Him. He loves, forgives and waits for me. When he sees me walking up the road to Him he lifts up His garments and runs to greet me. He pursued me, showed me my need for a Savior, and has breathed life back into my bones.

He has given each of us a place in His story. He wants to use the broken pieces in our lives for others to hear about Him. Amazingly he uses these cracked vessels to shine His light through.

I end with this poem for you.

Redeeming Love

Come humbly with me to the foot of the Cross
 Be washed with me so His blood is not lost
 Behold with me the sacrificial Lamb
 Nail pierced feet, Nail pierced hands
 Weep with me at the shame He endured
 As the crown of thorns on His head is secured
 Wail with me as they spit in His face
 Gamble for His garment, offer Him vinegar to taste
 Hear mercy spoken to me and you
 "Forgive them Father; they know not what they do"
 Mourn with me for three dark days
 Wait with me where Jesus lay
 Be amazed with me at the empty tomb
 Hope with me we'll see Him soon
 Dance with me for He is raised
 Sing with me in abundant praise
 Rejoice with me of His redeeming story
 Shout with me in all His glory
 Claim with me the Victory won
 Worship with me, our Redeemer, God's Son

1. Frederick Buechner, *Listening To Your Life* (San Francisco: Harper-SanFrancisco, 1992), 102.

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