

Context: John 20: 1-23

Text: John 20: 22-23

"FREEDOM TO FLY" **CH (COL) John A. Wells**

There is a story told of a preacher who placed an old battered bird cage next to his pulpit one Sunday. He told his congregation, "I want to tell you a little story today about this old battered bird cage. A few years ago one of my neighbors, a kind and compassionate man, was out in front of his house mowing his yard, when along came a boy, dirty from playing out in the field. He was carrying this battered old bird cage. When the boy got close, the man could see that in the cage were two wounded little birds. So, he asked the boy what he was going to do with the birds, huddled in the corner."

The boy replied, "I thought I'd play with them, and scare my sister with them. I might even tease our old cat with them." The man said to the boy, "well, what are you going to do with them when you get tired of playing with them?"

The boy replied, "I know that cats like to eat birds, so I can just feed them to my cat. They are no good anyway." The man then asked the boy, "How much do you want for the birds?" The boy, staring in surprise at the man said, "Well, I don't know. They are only crummy old field birds. Why do you want them?" The man just asked again, "How much do you want for them?" The boy, a big grin on his face, said, "I'll sell them for two dollars."

The man reached into his pocket and pulled out two one dollar bills and handed them to the boy, who quickly clutched the money and ran down the street feeling really good about this lucky deal he made with that dumb old man. The man, then, took the cage in his back yard and encouraged the birds to come to him. He spent the next few days caring for the birds until they were well enough to fly. Then he coaxed them out of their cage and said, "come out and fly."

There is another story that goes along with this one. It has to do with Jesus and Satan. It seems like Satan was carrying around a lot of people in a battered old cage. Jesus said to him, "What are you going to do with these people?"

Satan sees people - they are really quite interesting. You ought to see how they try to kill each other and fight all the time. You ought to see how they mess up their lives, their relationships, and their children. They pollute their world, cheat, steal, gossip, and lie. They really are quite useless you know."

Jesus asked Satan, "What do you intend to do with them once you are tired of playing with them?" Satan replied, "It's easy. I'll just kill them and throw them away."

Jesus then asked, "How much do you want for them?" Satan said, "What do you want with them? They are crummy useless people. Jesus asked again, "What do you want for them?" Satan, with a sneer on his face said, "I want your humiliation, your blood, and your very life."

So Jesus willingly handed himself over to Satan who promptly had him undergo a tortuous and humiliating death on a Roman cross. Satan was still holding on to the cage of this world with all of the people huddled in fear on the inside. All of the time, he was gloating and laughing about the deal he made.

Three days later all of that changed. Jesus walked out of the grave, went over to the door of the battered old cage Satan was guarding, and said to the people, "come out and fly. You're free. I love you." Then he proceeded to care for them and heal them until they were strong enough to fly on their own.

Henry Ward Beecher said "God did not call you to be canary birds in a little cage, and to hop up and down on three sticks, within a space no larger than the size of the cage. God calls you to be eagles, and to fly from sun to sun, over continents."

The great gift of Easter is God's invitation for us to come out of our cage and to enter a new world - the world of the eagle. He freed us from the most devastating type of imprisonment that that we could have - being prisoners to ourselves and our own limitations. We were in bondage to our own wills, our fears, our guilt, our hopelessness, our diseases, our culture, our thoughts, our feelings, our self-protectiveness, our mortality.

The Gospel of John records the resurrection message with an interesting sidelight that is not recorded in the other accounts. It says: When Jesus appeared to his disciples he said: "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." And with that he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

When Jesus released us out of the cage, and when he breathed on us and said "Receive the Holy Spirit", something profound happened. If you remember the creation story, God breathed into Adam and he became a living person. In this re-creation story, Jesus breathed on the disciples and us with His Holy Spirit and we became forever-living persons. The breath of God, in the Holy Spirit, is the fresh breath of freedom and forgiveness, total love and abounding grace. We became the living, breathing forgiveness of God Himself offering freedom to truly live. The breath of God released us into a whole different world; a whole different way of living; a whole different power; a whole different future.

We were released out of a world centered on ourselves to a world centered on the God who created us. We were freed to center on the needs of others because we have a God who sees to our needs.

We were released out of a way of living that was based on what we can get, to a way of living that is based on what we can give. We were freed from the limitations of the provisions of

this world because we are children of the God with access to the resources of this world and the next.

We were released from a perspective that says power rests in what we can do, to a perspective that says power rests in what God can do. We were freed from the power of legalism that rests on our efforts to walk powerfully a path of grace that rests on God's efforts. We were freed from sole dependency on the strength of our own mind to now have the strength of the mind of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

We were released from a future that says life ends at the grave, to a future that says life never ends. We were freed from the bondage and fear of mortality, to the sure hope of eternal life that is as Peter says, "to an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade...shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."

I like the way a poem goes by James Bisse:

We were chaff, now we are wheat;
 we were dross, now we are gold;
 we were ravens, now we are doves;
 we were thorns, now we are grapes;
 we were thistles, now we are lilies;
 we were strangers, now to Satan, now we are heirs of God
 and co-heirs with Jesus Christ.

We now have the freedom to live life not from the crucifixion but from the resurrection. We now have the opportunity to live life fully in the present, not from the guilt and hurts in the past. We live life not from Golgotha's tree or Joseph's tomb, but from heaven's mansions.

There was a poem written by an elderly nun. In that poem she reminds us that the name of God is I AM, not I WAS or I WILL BE - but I AM. The resurrection means we are now capable of moving in a different sense of time. We are daily held in God's hands and heart in the eternal present - the eternal I AM is with us always, even unto the end of the age.

This week began with palms of loud hosannas and ends with lilies trumpeting the sound of victory. In between was the cost of the cross, the day of darkness, the day of pain, the day of sacrifice. This day, this week, we celebrate lilies not thorns, freedom not bondage, life not death. To God we honor forgiveness instead of paying homage to guilt and sin. To each other we offer lilies of grace, not thorny crowns of judgment. To ourselves we offer the smiles of peace, not the cries of fear.

This Easter day of resurrection is a time of joy, not a time of mourning. Today we offer each other the reminder that we belong to a different world order. Today we support each other to try our wings in a new way of living. Today we call on the Spirit to empower our faith, our love, and our thoughts. Today we celebrate with each other the guarantee of our future beyond

the grave signed by the God of all with the blood of His very own Son, Jesus, the Christ,
the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Today, we hear this Jesus saying to us "Peace be unto you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. And with that He breathes new life into us and sends us out with these words, 'Receive the Holy Spirit'." If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven." This Easter we stand beside our brother or sister with thorns in one hand and lilies in the other. Let us together take the risk to throw away the thorns, leave the cage, and offer the lilies of Christ's forgiveness and resurrected life to an imprisoned, starving world. Alleluia! Amen.