

An Easter Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

By Eric Howell

Psalm 133

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We come together this morning in the bright light of the recent celebration of the resurrection of our Lord. Of course, every Sunday is a little Easter in which we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord, but Easter Day is special as you know and as we experienced. I learned something last week. You people can really sing. I have heard the Lord's Prayer sung by solo tenors and sopranos many times, but I don't think I've ever been a part of a congregation singing it together. I wondered how it would go. It's a difficult tune. But you people really nailed it. You sang with your souls. It was a holy moment, looking up at the fresh white wrap on the empty cross and being part of this congregation on that day worshipping our risen Lord.

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ has eternal significance for each one of us. It's the moment in God's unfolding history because of which each of us can have our sins forgiven and come into relationship with our Creator. It is the invitation and gift of eternal life that God has made possible for you. The invitation is to each of us to enter this life of faith in Christ.

But it is not just individualistic. It is not just about you. Perhaps the most unfortunate contribution to the world of generally western, and particularly American, Christianity has been the individualistic emphasis of the way we understand and talk about faith. We talk about a personal relationship with Jesus sometimes in ways that make God seem very small and needy and as if it's all about you. As Rick Warren rightly began his enormously popular *Purpose Driven Life*: It's not about you (it's an irony that the rest of his book was about you, but that's a different story).

Perhaps the way to begin to live is to say it's about me, and the people seated on either side of me and in front of me and behind me and those who came before me and those who are yet to come. Life in light of the resurrection is about being invited and included together with other people experiencing Christ together and joining together as one. And that's not always easy. We could go on and on with stories about the pain that church has caused us and people we know. But when it's good, when church is good, it's really, really good. It might be the closest thing to heaven.

"How very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!" the psalmist declares. This psalm 133 is the 14th of 15 consecutive psalms to bear the superscription psalm of ascent. What does that mean?

In the old days, travelers would come from all of Israel, from north to south to make pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the holy city of Mt. Zion, on which sat the Temple Mount, on which stood the temple of God, in which was the Holy of Holies, in which was the ark of the covenant, and God himself. So people would walk or ride donkeys from all over to climb the hill to the city, to climb the city streets, to climb the temple steps, to come in the temple. Coming to God meant going up. So if you are making your way to

Jerusalem for a holy day or festival or pilgrimage, you find yourself in a valley and you see the city high on a hill. You see the city walls looming before you. Every step of your journey from this point forward is up. Up to the city walls. Up through the city streets. Up to the Temple Mount. Up the temple steps. As our guide in the Middle East said to us as we sweated and grumbled through one more hot summer climb, “Everything in the holy land that is worth seeing is up.”

So there are 15 psalms in the Bible that carry the label psalms of ascent. Psalm 120-134. And you can start reading at 120 and journey with a pilgrim through the geography of Israel leaving his home and troubles to join with others to make their way to the Temple. It is the geography of prayer.

120: In my distress I called to the Lord Woe to me that I sojourn in Meshech, that I dwell among the tents of Kedar!

121: I lift my eyes to the hills. From where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth.

122: I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go to the house of the Lord.” Our feet have been standing within your gates, O Jerusalem.

123: To you I lift up my eyes, O you who are enthroned in the heavens.

124: Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

125: Those who trust in the Lord are like Mt. Zion, which cannot be moved, but abides forever. As the mountains surround Jerusalem, so the Lord surrounds his people.

126: He who goes out weeping bearing seeds for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, bringing his sheaves with him.

127: Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stay awake in vain.

128: The Lord bless you from Zion! May you see the prosperity of Jerusalem.

129: May all who hate Zion be put to shame and turned backward!

130: My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning.

131: O Lord, my heart is not lifted up, my eyes are not raised too high.

132: The Lord has chosen Zion, he has desired it for his dwelling place.

And so then we come to 133, this song of intense familiar imagery to them . . .

So with a little imagination you can journey from the outskirts of Israel observing, reacting, and praying all the way through the city streets to the temple. Further, there is a tradition that there were 15 steps leading up to the temple on which each of the 15 psalms of ascension were sung. So 133 is the next to last psalm of ascent. The next to last step. The penultimate expression of the journey upward to the presence of God.

And it's about community. The journey to God and with God is a shared journey. It's about the blessing of the journey together with each other. One can imagine the pilgrims standing on that step with each other. "We are almost there. We've almost reached it. It's been quite a journey. You have helped me along the way. We have laughed together and cried together and helped carry each other's loads. I have told you the deep secrets of my heart and you have listened and loved me. You have shared with me your fears and troubles and I pray for you and care even more for you the more I know you. We are almost there." Not just I am almost there. We are almost there together. Isn't it good when we can share a journey together and walk with each other—walk with each other in every sense of the phrase! When church is good it's very, very good.

The New Testament is full of us and not so much of I. In the aftermath of the empty tomb, the disciples are huddled together in a locked room. But in that room Jesus appears. Receive the Holy Spirit! Peace be with you—he says. In so doing he unlocks their hearts toward one another and the world. In Acts 2, we see these first disciples gathered together along with Jesus-followers from all over—the first sermon—the first church service—the Holy Spirit. In Acts 4, we hear the account of how they shared all they had in common with one another. Christianity is a 'we' and 'us' thing. It's not ever been a 'me,' 'mine,' 'I' thing. One of you at lectionary breakfast Friday morning taught us that Augustine said that in the Garden of Eden, the image and nature and perfection of Christ was fully within each of us. But it was shattered into countless pieces at the Fall. At the resurrection, we were each given a small shard of that shattered picture. When we come together we each bring our small part and piece it together with the small parts that each of us has to make the mosaic of Christ together. Paul uses the language of the body of Christ and how each of us plays our small part and the whole is served. As a good Baptist philosopher might say, "Life is a potluck supper." We each bring what we can to share and we all enjoy it together. And no one goes away hungry.

The Bible word for life together is *koinonia*. It's the word for community that is pictured in John and Acts as Christians living together in light of the resurrection of Christ. The group who started DaySpring felt it as they shared life together. It's the draw we feel toward each other today because of our common life in Christ. It's potluck meals. It's the Chart. It's meals for new mothers and grieving families. It's pitching in to work on a Saturday at the church. It's going together to Ridgecrest to visit the elderly. It's meeting for prayer and Bible Study and really listening to what other people say. We recall that there were two disciples on the road to Emmaus. We recall a cord of three strands is not easily broken. We recall Paul and Barnabus. We remember "Greater love has no one than this that someone lays down his life for his friends." We remember "Where two or three are gathered, I am there in the midst of them." We remember the Trinity is an eternal unity of three persons Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We remember "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul."

It's what we hunger for. And it comes with challenges. We have grown so fast and so large that experiencing *koinonia* with one another requires an intentionality in a different way than when a group has a handful of members. When you get past a certain size, it can be hard to get to know people. And ironically it can be easy to get to know a

lot of people a little without really going deeper with some people. Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that we have heard on several occasions these two comments:

"I love DaySpring. I love the liturgy, the architecture, the teaching and philosophy. But I can't figure out how to get to know people. Where does that happen?"

Second comment:

"I love DaySpring. I love the liturgy, the architecture, the teaching and philosophy. I enjoy the people and my friends here immensely. I give large amounts of money (Well, we don't hear that a lot). I've heard what we are talking about. I'm ready to live it out. I think we are a different kind of church. I want to have a different kind of Christianity than I've ever experienced. How can I/we do that?"

In both cases, people are hungry for deeper connections and shared life with others. The first person is ready for relationships, friendships. The second is hungry for intimacy, accountability, and shared journey.

Actually, both people are looking for the same thing. They are both looking for *koinonia*. Augustine's commentary on this psalm is interesting at this point. He notes that what is good and pleasant is to live in unity: *mono*. But *mono* doesn't mean individual. It means being of one. The word 'monk' comes from *mono*. The monk doesn't live as an individual, but becomes part of a community of Christians with one mind and one heart that functions as one body—the body of Christ. Like a monastery, Church is about people. I hope DaySpring continues to look and feel like an experiment in new monasticism. A new oneness founded on the Creed of Christ, the experience of redemption, and a shared commitment to love one another and serve the world in Christ's name.

This poses an encouragement and challenge to us. How can we as a church live this out as we grow? This is the question before the staff certainly, but in front of each of us: How can we live this out more and more fully? It is no utopian ideal to which we aspire, no emotionally-melodramatic kumbaya session, but the nitty, gritty of shared daily life together as people who remember that Christ's body was broken for us and so break bread with one another, and in so doing are given the imagination to see that my weed eater is yours too, my car is yours too. My children, dedicated to the Lord and church, are your children too. My time is yours. My home is yours. My hurts are yours. My celebrations are yours. My life is yours. And yours are mine.

This doesn't happen overnight. It takes trust and forgiveness, grace and humility. It's a risk. But the reward of living in unity and community is the experience of ascending to that next to highest step. The one just right up next to the glory of God, looking at fellow travelers in the eyes and being glad that you didn't make the journey alone—and indeed couldn't have.

May you . . .