

+ John 21:1-14 + “Jesus Lives” Means Power + 3rd Sunday of Easter + 14 March 2013 +

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

“Save me! Help me, God!”¹ Jeff’s 3,000 lb. tractor had tipped over trapping him underneath. With each shout, it got harder to breathe. He was helpless, and there was no sign of help or rescue anywhere to be found.

About a year before, Jeff had purchased a small farm in western Oregon and moved his family out there where he had spent much of his life. Jeff put a lot of work into improving the farm. Western Oregon is heavily wooded, so he had to clear trees and remove stumps—a dirty job, but one that was worth the work. The land was becoming more farmable. Plus his family loved living there. It was a great place to raise his two teenage daughters.

It was time to get the garden ready for the spring planting. Jeff got most of the soil tilled, but it wasn’t easy. The ground was wet and caked his boots with mud. He would’ve finished the job, but there was one particular stump that had to be removed before planting could begin. So as he’d done many times before, Jeff hooked up his old tractor to the stump, put the tractor into gear, and started pulling on it. The stump wouldn’t cooperate. Jeff kept trying, but as he did so, his mud-caked boot slipped off the clutch and the tractor rolled over, flipping upside-down. Jeff was pinned face-down in the mud. He was powerless to do anything about the 3,000 lb. tractor pinning him to the ground, except yell for help, and even that was getting harder. He was helpless to get himself out with no rescue in sight.

As Jesus’ disciples sat on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, they felt just as helpless, except the enormous weight pinning them to the ground wasn’t a 3,000 lb. tractor, but a massive burden of helplessness. Sure, Jesus had appeared to them on Easter Sunday evening and again a week later, but the guilt of those days before Easter still weighed heavily on their hearts.

They had all abandoned Jesus in his hour of need. Simon Peter had even publicly denied Jesus three times. They had all doubted the incoming news reports that Jesus was alive. They weren’t as fearful of the mobs anymore. After all, they had traveled to Galilee from Jerusalem, but there was still that enormous weight pressing down on them. Would they ever see Jesus again? What was going to happen to them now? What were they going to do? Would he ever forgive them? Would things ever be the same? Yes, they knew Jesus was alive, but they felt so helpless, so powerless.

As they sat on the beach looking out over the Sea where they had spent so much time with their Master, Simon Peter got up and said, **“I’m going out to fish.”** The others joined him. Why not go back and do what many of them had done since childhood? They got a boat and some nets and headed out on the water as the sun slowly set on the horizon. Maybe they could go back to doing that...but the apostle tells us, **“That night they caught nothing.”** Nothing at all. No fish. Not even an old piece of armor or the wheel of a cart. There was nothing they could do about it, nothing at all. Every time they pulled up an empty net, they only felt more helpless.

How often don’t you and I feel that way too? Deep down inside you know what’s weighing on your heart and mind, and you know how impossibly heavy that burden is. Sometimes it feels like a 3,000 lb. tractor crushing down on your soul. Perhaps it’s the guilt of a sin that haunts you from your past—a poor decision, a foolish action, a thoughtless comment that ended up having a damaging ripple effect on your life and your relationship with someone you loved. You feel powerless to take back what you’ve done and to restore that relationship you once treasured.

Perhaps it’s the burden of a sin of weakness that you just can’t seem to escape, a sin that always lurks in the shadows, that’s always tempting you to indulge in it. You give in to it so easily, so helplessly, and then guilt washes over you with the realization of what you’ve done...again.

Perhaps it’s the crushing weight of worry—worry about your kids, worry about your spouse, worry about your job, worry about your finances, worry about your health, worry about your friends, worry about your government, worry about the future, worry about what the future will be like for your kids or your grandkids or your country or your church. Worry leaves you feeling powerless as you read another dire article about the economy or another attack on Christianity or another fearful report about what’s happening in the world with threats of war and rumors of war, natural disasters, pandemics, unbridled violence and immorality, and relentless change. Worry crushes you with helplessness, leaving you feeling utterly powerless.

Like the disciples, we know Jesus is alive. We know he’s powerful, but where’s that power when the hostile world around you seems to gain more and more victories against God’s people? Where’s that power when you wake up in a cold sweat in the middle of the night haunted by a life of guilt for the sins of your past? Where’s that power when

¹ This illustration is based on an account from 7 April 2013: http://democratherald.com/news/local/dad-in-distress/article_33de96aa-9f33-11e2-b28e-0019bb2963f4.html.

you fail to once again stand up to that old, familiar temptation that appeals to you when you are weak? Where's that power when you realize you can't control what's going on around you or in your life or in the life of people you love? At times like that, the message of "Jesus lives" might ring hollow because you don't see the power in it right now. Yet just because you can't see the power of the risen Savior in the midst of your weakness doesn't mean it isn't there, but if it's there, how does Jesus show it?

Jeff started wondering if those moments beneath the tractor would be his last. His two daughters, ages 14 and 16, were out walking the family dogs when they heard their father's screams for help. They ran over to the garden and found him pinned under the tractor. The girls tried to dig him out, but they just couldn't dig fast enough. They called 911, but being out in the country, who knew how long the emergency crews would take to get there?

So the girls made a split-second decision. They got on either side of the tractor and grabbed hold. After six or seven tries, they finally got some movement. So they braced themselves on the tires, and then those two average-sized teenage girls actually lifted the tractor up just enough for their dad to shimmy out. His arm was still pinned, but by that time, a neighbor had come over with his own tractor and freed their father the rest of the way. When the emergency crews finally arrived, they were astonished to find out what those two young ladies had done to save their father. No one expected that kind of power. Later at the hospital, their father was treated for a broken wrist and compression damage in his arm, but otherwise he was okay.

Now when we're in our own times of weakness, God rarely displays his power with the kind of "shock and awe" that you and I might expect. Instead the merciful and living Lord displays his power in surprising and unexpected ways. For the disciples, they saw it in a reminder of how Jesus had first changed their lives. After hours of fishless fishing, the risen Jesus stood on the shore, but they didn't recognize him. When he told them, **"Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you will find some [fish]"**, they figured it couldn't hurt. Yet **"when they did, they were unable to haul the net in because of the large number of fish."** In fact, it was 153 fish to be exact, one of their largest catches ever.

Instantly John knew who it was. After all, Jesus had done the same thing when he first called them to follow him three years before. When John cried out, **"It is the Lord!"**, Simon Peter tied his robe around himself and dove into the water swimming to shore. When the other disciples finally hauled the net full of fish to shore, Peter ran out and dragged it up to shore himself. He was so excited!

What power the risen Lord displayed when they least expected it, but power displayed when they needed it most! In performing this miracle for his disciples, Jesus reminded his disciples that he was in control of all things, even the fish in the sea. He reminded them that they need not fear or worry about the future, that as their living Lord and Savior he could and would take care of the massive guilt that still plagued them. They knew it was Jesus. They didn't need to ask. They knew he was alive, and they knew that because he was alive, he would use his unexpected power to help them.

The living Jesus shows his power in unexpected ways in your life too. He answers your prayers. He fulfills his promises to you. He pours out abundant blessing even when you think you have nothing. He takes the crushing guilt of your sins and places it on his own almighty shoulders, and then he gives you life eternal with him forever free of guilt and sin and worry. He gives you his power to kill sinful desires and rise again to a new life of godly obedience—the power he used to rise from the dead. He gives you willpower to say "NO" to those seductive temptations and familiar sins of weakness—the power he used to say "NO" to Satan's temptations. He gives you the power to love others when they seem unlovable—the power he used to love those disciples who abandoned him and even you though you sin against him.

What's most amazing is how Jesus shows that power using unexpected means. He uses his Word, the simple message of "Jesus lives", to shatter your stone-dead, unbelieving heart and then makes it grow in faith. He uses a little water connected with that Word in Holy Baptism to transform you from a dead, hostile enemy into a living, beloved child of God. He uses a little bread and wine to actually give you himself in his Holy Supper to forgive you again and free you of that massive burden of guilt and weakness.

Your living Jesus displays that power through unexpected means in unexpected ways. He takes on your worry and reminds you through his Word, "I'm in control. Look at what I've already done for you. See how I've remained in control of human history, how I've protected my people and allowed my Gospel to be proclaimed to the ends of the earth in spite of every attack from my mortal enemies and in spite of every cause for worry that comes up in your life. I'm alive. Because I live, you also will live. Trust in me and know that I am in control and will one day bring you to be with me in heaven forever." My friends, rejoice in the power of your living, loving Jesus! Amen.

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