

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

Seven words changed his life. Seven simple words. Pvt. Michael Delaney lived in a frightening time. Our country was at war with itself. During the Civil War America saw terrible battles and loss of life on an unprecedented scale. When you think of the tens of thousands of men who fell to muskets and bayonet, cannon and canister, you can't blame a man for being scared to go into battle, but Michael Delaney had sworn an oath.

Pvt. Delaney was a soldier in Colorado. When his battalion was ordered to march down to New Mexico to fight the Confederates, he asked his commanding officer, really begged him to let him stay behind and take care of his young wife. There was nothing the officer could do. They had all sworn an oath and now they had to fight. So as the unit started marching south, Pvt. Delaney quietly fell out of formation and walked away.

When they finally found him a few months later, it was a quick trial. He was charged with desertion. It didn't help that he wasn't a good soldier anyway often drunk on duty with a bad reputation. Then he ran away. A jury of his peers reached a swift decision, and he heard seven fateful words, "The Court finds Pvt. Michael Delaney, guilty." He was to be executed by firing squad for his crime.

On 18 July 1863, Delaney woke up in the dark and came to the slow, but certain realization that it wasn't all a bad dream. It was real. He had waited five months for the day of his death. He knew he would die. They just hadn't decided when. Can you imagine waking up in your cell morning after morning having to live with that? Kicking yourself every day for the bad decision you made? Trying to deal with the guilt that comes from your past?

I know some men who could relate to Michael Delaney, men who woke up in the dark on Easter morning, blinked the sleep out of their eyes, and came to the slow, but certain realization that it wasn't a bad dream. It was real. Jesus was dead, and they had deserted him. Oh, they had talked big just a couple days earlier. They said nothing would make them run. They'd even die for Jesus, but then in the darkness, when the soldiers came to arrest him, to torture him, to kill him...they panicked. Jesus' friends, his disciples panicked and ran. They deserted him and fled into the night.

They were so scared that they didn't go to the crucifixion. The ladies and John had to tell them how Jesus died, how he cried out, "***It is finished!***" (John 19:30), and then breathed his last under the dark afternoon sky. Some of the ladies wanted to go early Sunday morning to anoint the body. They needed help moving the heavy stone that closed the tomb, but none of the disciples was willing to help. Sometimes your past is just too painful to confront. So they let the ladies deal with the dead, and they just laid there, holding their guilt.

The past has a way of catching up with you, doesn't it? Have you ever been like Michael Delaney or Jesus' disciples, waking up in the dark and coming to the slow, but certain realization that what happened really wasn't a bad dream? Maybe you failed a friend or your family. Maybe you failed your God. The guilt weighs heavily on you, but you don't want to think about it.

So how do you deal with it? Each of us has a favorite way for dealing with guilt. Some of us make bargains with ourselves. "If this works out, I'll never do it again..." Some of us try to make it up to the people that we hurt. We shower them with affection, or we overcompensate physically or emotionally. Some of us try to pretend it never happened. "Just don't think about it. Let the ladies deal with the dead." Yet none of those ways can free us from our past. They're just Band-Aids we try to stick over the gaping wound of unresolved guilt. To fix your past, you need something else.

On 18 July 1863, Pvt. Delaney heard seven words that changed his life. Not the seven words of the jury: "The court finds Pvt. Michael Delaney, guilty", but rather seven words from the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln. Five months after Delaney's conviction, President Lincoln used one of the greatest powers of the presidency and wrote seven words that changed a young man's life. He wrote: "Let him fight instead of being shot."

In that moment, Delaney was pardoned, freed from his past with seven words from the pen of the President. Just like that...a past, guilt that should have meant death, was pardoned. He was free.

¹ Many of the thoughts and language of this sermon were received with thanks from an Easter sermon by Pr. Jonathan Schroeder.

Leave it to Lincoln to show mercy, humanity, and wit in seven words. Even more amazing is that President Lincoln did this at all! There was nothing special about this young soldier and an awful lot that wasn't very good. He was a drunk, a deserter, a condemned man with nothing good going for him—except for the mercy of the man in charge willing to free him from his past. Freedom from your past doesn't come from resolutions or bargains or acting like it never happened. Freedom from your past requires pardon.

The disciples wouldn't help them. So the ladies set out in the dark that first Easter morning, and walked to where Jesus was buried. They had watched Jesus suffer and die. They had watched his body placed in the tomb. It wasn't a dream. It was all too real, but when they got to the tomb, the guards were gone. The stone was rolled away, and when they went inside to investigate, an angel told them, **“Do not be afraid... You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified.”** (Mark 16:6) The women came looking for the man Jesus from Nazareth, who died a disappointment. The angel lifted their heads and their hearts and pointed them to the place where a dead Jesus should've been, but was not—saying seven words that changed their lives. **“He is not here. He has risen!”**

The women had come to the tomb with arms full of spices and hearts full of disappointment. They left with seven words of pardon and promise. As they ran to tell the disciples, they ran right into what the angels had told them. They ran into Jesus in the flesh, alive! They fell before him, clasped his feet, and worshiped him. They had come looking for a dead man, but what did they find? **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!**

Seven words of pardon and promise that changed their lives. This meant that every one of Jesus' promises was true. Jesus Christ is risen to free us. He came back from the dead in victory to set you free from your past. That's what he promised, and that's why he died. He died because there is nothing you and I can do with the sins that haunt us and the guilt that burdens us. There's no way to undo it. The only answer was that it be pardoned.

So God's Son took your place and took my sin. He went to the cross and paid for it all. He paid for all the sins that stoke your conscience and scald your memory. He paid for them all and purchased your pardon. With his dying cry of **“It is finished!”** he made a promise that came true when he rose from the dead. **Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!**

Those seven words changed everything for us. They free us from our past. Do you want proof? Look at what Jesus said to the ladies: **“Go and tell my brothers.”** My brothers! That might not seem so strange at first, but then you realize that this is the first time Jesus ever calls his disciples, **“My brothers.”**

Remember what they did? They deserted Jesus—turned their backs on him, ran away leaving him to die. They didn't even deserve to be called his disciples anymore, but still Jesus told them: **“Go and tell my brothers...”**

He didn't say, “Go and tell the disciples.” He didn't say, “Go and tell those deserters.” He didn't even say, “Go and tell my servants.” No, Jesus, the Son of God, said to those sinners like us, **“Go and tell my brothers.”** Something changed. The past had been pardoned, because Christ is risen to free us.

Jesus wants you to live in the freedom of forgiveness. He wants you to hear God's promise: **“I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sin no more.”** (Jeremiah 31:34) That's what Jesus was telling you when he looked at weak and sinful people and called them, **“My brothers.”** The resurrection of Jesus means that God has taken all the sins of your past and all the guilt of your failures, and has buried them in the depths of the bottomless mercy of Jesus.

Michael Delaney walked out of his jail cell because he had been pardoned by a president. Can you imagine the sense of gratitude he felt towards President Lincoln? The President freed him, and he freed him for a purpose. Let him fight instead of being shot. That's exactly what Michael Delaney did. He rejoined his unit and reenlisted until the war was over. No more court martials, no more deserting. He fought for the man who saved him.

My friends, Jesus freed you for a purpose. He freed you to live, to love, to fight for the Man who saved you. What does that life look like? For those of you who haven't been to church in a while, or who haven't belonged to a church ever, this is important: the Church is not here to give you a bunch of rules. Christ didn't come to give you rules. He came to set you free.

To free you from living like this life is all there is. To free you from living like a rat on a wheel, chasing after trinkets that the world says you should value. To free you from worrying about what your future holds. Jesus Christ is risen to free you from all that, because he's got a purpose for you, a future all tied up in those seven words that change your life. **Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!**

My friends, without Jesus, we would be forced to think that this life is everything. You live, you die—end of story. So enjoy this life while it lasts, because it's all over with death! If that were the case, then death destroys all your hopes and all your dreams. We would have nothing to do but rage against the dying of the light, but that's not the end of the story! Before that first Easter morning, no one had made that impossible journey to conquer death and then come back, but Jesus did. Because he is risen, that changes everything for us. Jesus said, ***"I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies."*** (John 11:25)

Do you see what that means? Not even death can rob you of the love of God and the future you have in Jesus! You can live in peace, knowing that this life is just a preamble to life eternal, and when you die, your Father will welcome you with open arms, because Jesus is risen to free us.

My friends, we live in a new era that dawned on Easter morning. It's an era where sin no longer convicts us. It's an era where Satan no longer controls us. It's an era where death no longer contains us. Jesus lives! That is the beating heart of all our hope, all because of seven words that change your life: **Christ is risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED!** Alleluia! Amen.