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“This Treasure in Jars of Clay”

Matt. 28:1-10, II Cor. 4:7 – 5:1

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Tony Campolo, the beloved Christian author, activist, teacher, and one of the best storytellers I have ever heard, tells a story about attending a funeral at a large African-American church in Philadelphia. Campolo was seventeen at the time and the funeral was for a friend of his who had been killed in a tragic accident.

The minister was magnificent. He preached about the Resurrection and he talked about life after death in such glowing terms that I have to tell you, even at seventeen I wished I was dead just listening to him! He came down from the pulpit. Then he went over to the family and spoke words of comfort to them. Last of all, he went over to the open casket and for the last twenty minutes, he preached to the corpse. Can you imagine that? He just yelled at the corpse. “Clarence! Clarence!” he yelled. He said it with such authority. I would not have been surprised had there been an answer.

“Well,” he said, “Clarence, you died too fast. You got away without us thanking you.” He went down this litany of beautiful, wonderful things that Clarence had done for people. Then he said, “That’s it, Clarence. When there’s nothin’ more to say, there’s only one thing to say, good night!” . . . He grabbed the lid of the casket and he slammed it shut and he yelled, “Good night, Clarence! Good night, Clarence!” As he slammed that lid shut he pointed to the casket and he said, “Good night, Clarence, cause I know, yes, I know that God is going to give you a good morning!” Then the choir stood and started singing, “On that great gettin’ up morning we shall rise, we shall rise.” People were up on their feet and they were in the aisles hugging and kissing each other and dancing.¹

And that is what Easter is all about: “*We shall rise, we shall rise.*” Because that is precisely what Jesus did on this day. On Good Friday, the Romans, the scribes and the Pharisees, even Jesus’ own disciples all knew that Jesus was dead. They had watched Him take His last breath, they had lowered Him down from the cross and carried His body to the tomb. They had laid Him inside and then sealed the tomb shut with a great stone. On Good Friday, Jesus was dead. Not pretend dead, not mostly dead, but dead – the same way you and I will one day be dead.

But then came Sunday morning, this morning. Three days and the Sabbath restrictions past, the women – Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, says Matthew – the women went to the tomb to give Jesus’ body its proper burial anointing. There simply hadn’t been time for that on Good Friday. So they went to the tomb early in the morning, anointing oils in hand, worrying how they were going to get that large stone moved so that they could go into the tomb. But when they got there, the tomb was already opened, and there sitting on top of that large stone was an angel of the Lord, radiant with the reflected glory of God in heaven. And the angel said to them, *“Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, as he said. Come, see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.”*

The women believed the angel. With a mixture of fear and great joy – which seems an appropriate response to the news that Someone you just buried on Friday is now alive again on Sunday – with fear and great joy they raced back to tell the disciples. But along the way, the most amazing thing happened. Suddenly there was Jesus, alive and well and standing right in front of them. *“Greetings!”* He says to them. Which, in the original Greek, actually comes across as much more casual, something like, *“Hey, there!”* – as if of course He would be standing there in front of them risen from the dead. *“Greetings!”* He says to them. And the women are so stunned and awed and joyful that they simply fall at His feet and worship Him. And then Jesus repeats to them the message of the angel, beginning with that most profound of all the Words our God has ever spoken to us: *“Do not be afraid.”*

Do not be afraid – because now that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, so shall we rise with Him. Because Jesus Christ was crucified, dead, and buried – and then, on that third day rose again from the dead – we need no longer be afraid of death. That is His Word to the women, that is His promise to us, that is what we celebrate here today. That because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, so now shall we – *“We shall rise, we shall rise!”* Because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, death need no longer scare us the way that it often does – for the grave can no longer hold us and death can no longer end us – *“We shall rise, we shall rise!”* Because Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, death – our death – has now been swallowed up in the victory of our Lord Jesus over death. *“O death, where now is your victory?”* – Paul is practically taunting defeated death with those words. *“O death, where now is your sting? Thanks be to God, who gives us that victory over death through our Lord Jesus Christ!”*² We will rise, we will rise!

So, *“Do not be afraid anymore,”* Jesus says to the women and to us – because death no longer threatens us. Yes, we will all still have to die – that is our mortal lot. But our death will be for us but a passage from one life into an even greater life. And knowing that, believing that, trusting in what our Lord Jesus Christ has done for us on this day means that we really don’t need to be afraid anymore about our death and dying. We really don’t need to be afraid of **anything** anymore – because what’s the worst thing that could happen to us? Death! And Jesus has already taken care of that for us. Because of Jesus’ victory over death, we need no longer be afraid of anything which we might meet with in the midst of our living. It’s not just death He has taken care of for us – it’s life also!

That’s what Paul is getting at when he tells us that we *“have this treasure in jars of clay.”* Jars of clay – that’s us. An apt description of life in these fallible bodies, of life in this fallen world.

Jars of clay – fragile. Easily chipped and broken by events and circumstances over which we have but little control. Jars of clay, you and me. But now, because of all that Jesus has done for us, these jars of clay contain that heavenly treasure He has given to us. That heavenly treasure which is His love for us, His grace towards us, His promise that death cannot defeat us nor ever separate us from His love and His grace; and, above all else, His powerful resurrection presence with us always in the midst of life, even to the end of the age. *“Do not be afraid,”* says Jesus – but not just don’t be afraid with regard to death, but also don’t be afraid with regard to life. That is what Paul is getting at – that because we now have this treasure of Christ’s resurrection power in these jars of clay which is our earthly life, we need no longer be afraid of anything which life – not just death – but anything which life might bring upon us.

Listen to what Paul says: *“We’ve been surrounded and battered by troubles, but we’re not demoralized; we’re not sure what to do, but we know that God knows what to do; we’ve been spiritually terrorized, but God hasn’t left our side; we’ve been thrown down, but we haven’t broken . . .”*³ *“So we do not lose heart.”* We do not lose heart because we have this treasure of life, eternal life – grace, peace, power, love, strength, presence – all the treasures of His resurrection dwelling within us. So that we can not only withstand trials and tribulations, but overcome them in Christ. Just as He overcame death for our sake, so now we do not lose heart – because we shall overcome whatever life throws at us through His presence and power in these jars of clay lives of ours. Because of His resurrection, we need no longer fear death. And, because of that same resurrection power now living in us – jars of clay that we are – we need no longer fear life. Because of Jesus, we do not lose heart!

Let’s put it this way – I truly think this is how Paul means it – that Easter is not just about getting us into heaven when we die, it is also about Jesus getting something of heaven into us even now, while we are still alive. Heavenly treasure in these jars of clay. Or let’s put it another way – how about a picture? Look at the picture on the cover of your bulletin insert. See how those ribbons of gold run through what were once shattered jars of clay? This is a Japanese art form called “Kintsugi,” which literally means “golden joinery.” The story is that the favorite Chinese tea bowl belonging to a seventh century Japanese shogun one day broke, and the shogun sent it back to China to be repaired. It came back to him repaired, but in a most unappealing way – the broken pieces now were held together by ugly metal staples. So the shogun set his craftsmen to work to come up with a better solution. And they took the broken pieces and joined them back together with molten gold. And because of the gold now joining the tea bowl back together, the tea bowl had become even more beautiful than before, when it had still been whole.

And that’s what Paul is getting at. This treasure in our jars of clay isn’t just about the defeat of death. It is also about what Jesus Christ is doing in us and to us and through us right now. Because of Jesus’ resurrection, we have become God’s workmanship – His living kintsugi. These jars of clay lives of ours become readily chipped, scratched, and sometimes even completely shattered by what life, much less death, brings upon us. But His resurrection power is always at work in us to put us back together again. Putting us back together again with the solid gold of His grace, love, peace, power, and promise – and by His workmanship, making us even more beautiful than we were before. The very places where we were broken now bearing golden witness to the power of the One who not only raises us up from death, but raises us up in the midst of life. This treasure of Christ’s resurrecting power in these jars of clay lives of ours.

Henri Nouwen, the beloved Catholic writer, offers a testimony to this from his own experience. He had entered into a time of great personal and professional distress. He was both broken and lost. In his diary from that time, he wrote this:

*Today, O Lord, I felt intense fear. My whole being seemed to be invaded by fear. No peace, no rest; just plain fear: fear of a mental breakdown, fear of living the wrong life, fear of rejection and condemnation, and fear of you . . . I feel so powerless to overcome this fear.*⁴

Not knowing what else to do, Nouwen entered a monastery in upstate New York. And there he found that his fears were being relieved – indeed, that his fears were baseless. Some three months later, still in the monastery, he was able to write this – these words of the treasure in jars of clay, we do not lose heart, resurrection power, God’s kintsugi working in his life:

Dear Lord, in the midst of much inner turmoil and restlessness, there is a consoling thought: maybe you are working in me in a way I cannot yet feel, experience, or understand. My mind is not able to concentrate on you, my heart is not able to remain centered, and it seems as if you are absent and have left me alone. But in faith I cling to you. I believe your Spirit reaches deeper and further than my mind or heart, and that profound movements are not the first to be noticed.

*Therefore, Lord, I promise I will not run away, not give up, not stop praying, even when it all seems useless, pointless, and a waste of time and effort.*⁵

And then, finally, six months after his entrance into the monastery, he records his exit back out into the world, back out into his life in the world – a kintsugi vessel filled with the new life, resurrection treasures of Jesus:

*Dear Lord, my heart is filled with gratitude for the time you have given me here . . . When I look back at this time, I realize that you have given me a real spiritual home.*⁶

But, understand, the spiritual home he is referring to is not so much that of the monastery, but the new life, the resurrection life, the kintsugi life He had found, He had been given, He had received from God – that foretaste of heaven God had opened up in his wounded heart. “*But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God.*” And this, too, is the Good News of Easter morning. Not just life after death, but new life – resurrection life – right now.

So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen

but to the things that are unseen . . . For we know that if the tent, which is our earthly home, is destroyed, we have a building from God eternal in the heavens.

And behold, Jesus met them and said, "Greetings!" And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, "Do not be afraid."

That is the treasure we now carry in these jars of clay lives of ours. Because our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ has risen from the dead.

¹ Tony Campolo, "Trusting in God in the Days that Lie Ahead," sermon accessed on-line on March 20, 2007 at www.csec.org/csec/sermon/Campolo_4604.htm. This link is no longer active, but you can watch a version of this story at [Tony Campolo: Good Night Clarence! - YouTube](#) .

² I Corinthians 15:54-57.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 2099.

⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, A Cry for Mercy New York: Image Books, 1983), p. 28.

⁵ Nouwen, p. 102.

⁶ Nouwen, p. 169.