

“I Say to You, Rise!”
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Menifee United Church of Christ

Three men died and went to heaven. St. Peter met them at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter said, “I can let you into heaven, or I can send you back to Earth smarter than you were before. The first man said, “I want you to send me back to Earth a hundred times smarter than I was before.” Poof! He went back to Earth a hundred times smarter than he was before. The second man said, “I want you to send me back to Earth a thousand times smarter than I was before.” Poof! The man went back to Earth a thousand times smarter than he was before. The third man said, “I want you to send me back to Earth a million times smarter than I was before.” Poof! He went back to Earth as a woman.

We all want to go to heaven...but not yet. Kenny Chesney sings a country song about that. “Everybody wanna get to heaven; nobody wanna go now.”

And that’s true. But hopefully it’s true because we want to enjoy every moment on Earth. We want to be a part of life, a part of friends and family and loved ones. And we can see heaven on earth if we look close enough.

Henry David Thoreau, the great writer, said, “Heaven is under our feet as well as over our heads.”

And that’s so true. We just have to have eyes to see it and ears to hear it. We can see it in our Peace Garden. We can see it in the flowers and trees. We can see it in loved ones. We can see heaven on earth in the giggles and laughter of children. We can see heaven on earth, and maybe that’s one reason we want to stay on earth: to see heaven and not to die just yet.

Jesus raised a young man from the dead. Jesus is entering a town, a town called Nain, and he sees a funeral procession coming out of the town. He sees a widow weeping for the death of her only son. Jesus has compassion for her and goes up to the bier, or casket, and says to the young man, “I say to you, rise!” and the young man rose. And Jesus gave him to his mother.

How many of us has Jesus raised from the dead? Not physically, but spiritually? We were spiritually dead. We were dead to life. We weren’t living life fully alive. We were maybe half-dead. Not living life spiritually alive, not seeing heaven on earth, not seeing joy and happiness in our loved ones. Then Jesus essentially said to us, “I say to you, rise!” and it was as if we were born again. It was as if we were raised from the dead and started living life fully alive, started living life to the fullest.

I went for a walk years ago and was walking toward a glorious sunrise. It was spectacular, a big orange ball in the sky. And I was rejoicing inside. But there were some high school kids walking on the other side of the street, away from the sunrise, not paying attention to it, and I wanted to say, but I didn’t, “Look, look at that glorious sunrise! You’re missing out!” But I didn’t say it. I wish I had.

I remember what it’s like being in high school, missing heaven on earth most of the time, worrying about, what I look back on now as silly things, sports and what have you, and I wish somebody had said to me, “Rise! Rise! Let your spirit come alive! See the glory all around you!” And I think that’s what we’re supposed to do now that we’re even smarter than we were in high school. We’re to help other people see heaven on earth, to rise, to see the beauty of the earth, to love others, and to not die spiritually.

Elijah raised a boy from the dead. This is in I Kings. Elijah was staying with a woman whose young son died. She complained to Elijah. She thought he had cursed her. So Elijah took the young boy up to his chamber and prayed over the young boy three times, asking God to restore the boy to life. After the third time, God did bring the boy back to life and Elijah gave him back to his mother.

It’s so horrible to see young people, children, ill. It’s especially horrible to see them die. You probably saw that young boy at the zoo in Cincinnati being dragged by that gorilla, terrible to see, terrible that they had to shoot the gorilla to make sure the young boy wasn’t killed. It would have been even more tragic to see that boy die. It’s hard to watch children who have their whole lives ahead of them get injured or die.

I got called to a home several years ago. A sixteen-year-old boy had killed himself. He put a rifle in his mouth. You can figure out the rest. I did his funeral. I think I cried as much as his family.

I wish I would have been able to say to that young man, “I say to you, rise!” but of course I couldn’t. I wish I could have talked to him the day before he killed himself. I would have told him that life gets better. Whatever it is that

makes you contemplate suicide, life gets better. I never did hear why he wanted to kill himself. I know his parents were divorced, and there was bitterness there, so that may have had something to do with it. I don't know what his school life was like or how he was treated at school, but I would have said to him, "Regardless of what it is, there's life beyond your front door. Whatever it is you're going through at home, life gets better. Whatever it is you're going through at school, there's life beyond high school, there's life beyond college, there's life that you have left to live for another fifty, sixty, seventy years. Life gets better. I say to you, rise!"

The apostle Paul was brought back to life. In his letter to the Galatians, and elsewhere, Paul tells about how he was Saul. He was persecuting Christians. Sometimes to the point of death, as with Stephen, who was martyred right in front of him. Saul was on the road to Damascus, to persecute some more Christians. All of a sudden he saw a blinding light. He heard a voice saying: Saul, Saul. Why are you persecuting me? Saul said: Who are you lord? The voice said: I am Jesus, who you're persecuting. And Saul was blind for three days. After three days, he regained his site. He was immediately baptized and became a Christian. Perhaps the most evangelical Christian ever. He changed his name to Paul. He started many churches. He wrote more than half the Christian New Testament. Paul went from being on the wrong road to being on the correct road.

How many of us have been on the wrong road? And then Jesus comes along and says essentially: I say to you rise! And we stop our bad habit, whatever that was, thanks to Jesus. Or we start treating people better, thanks to Jesus. Or we start treating ourselves better, thanks Jesus.

A man came to see me the other day. He needed counseling. He said that he had made mistakes in his life. He told me he had those mistakes under control. But he felt profound guilt about whatever it is he did. He never told me. Could I help him? I said: Yes. Then I said, first of all, remember that you are a child of God. You were made in the image of God. You were blessed by God. You are loved by God. Unconditionally. I said: Jesus was asked which is the greatest commandment. Jesus said: the greatest commandment is to love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind. That is the first and greatest commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Then I told the man that hidden within that second great commandment is a third great commandment. Love yourself. I told him you have to love yourself before you can love your neighbor or God. And when you love yourself, you can forgive yourself. I told him he has to forgive himself.

How many of us have made a mistake in life that makes us wish we were dead? I say to you, forgive yourself. And I say to you, rise! How many of us have seemingly been beaten to death by the trials and tribulations of life? I say to you, rise! How many of us have lost a loved one that has left us feeling spiritually dead? I say to you, rise!

God wants us to enjoy life. God restores our life. In Psalm 30, God lifts up our life, our soul, from Sheol, from hell, from living in hell on earth, as I have to believe that sixteen-year-old boy was. God lifts us up from that. God restores our life, the Psalmist writes. God loves us and wants what's best for us.

How many of us need to remember that God loves us and that God only asks in return that we say thanks. Meister Eckert said, "If the only prayer you ever pray is 'Thanks,' that would be sufficient." God just wants us to be grateful, to sing praises to God, the Psalmist says. God wants us to enjoy life, to restore our life, to restore our soul.

This church began in 1962. At one time there were hundreds of members in this church. But like many Christian churches these days, our numbers have fallen. And the question is; Will our numbers continue to fall or will they rise? I believe the answer is up to each one of us.

So Menifee United Church of Christ, I say to you, "Rise!" Rise to continue to be the church that helps the hurting. Rise to continue to be the church that helps the helpless. Rise to continue to be the church that helps the hopeless. Rise to continue to be a beacon of light in the darkness. Rise to continue to be the church that welcomes everyone. Every. One. Rise to continue to be the church that brings good news to the city of Menifee. Menifee United Church of Christ, I say to you, "Rise!"

Let us pray:
God of love,
Help us to help young people to rise.
Help us to help older people to rise.
And help us to help Menifee United Church of Christ to rise.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.