



Roanoke, Virginia

March 14, 2021

“Not Like Everyone Else”

Ephesians 2:1-10

Jen Brothers

It is hard to believe, but we have arrived at the fourth Sunday of Lent. Tomorrow we begin week 5 of our Lenten journey. Lent is a practice of repentance and renewal. It is a season of self-examination, of sifting through the ashes of our behaviors and choices that lead to death so we can repent and make new, life-giving choices. We dare undertake this journey because we know we walk toward the empty tomb of a God who does not define us by our mistakes, by our false steps, by our sins. As we journey toward Easter, we do so with the knowledge that we are already forgiven people.

But all too often our Easter journey ends with the assurance that because of what Christ accomplished on the cross, our mistakes will not keep us from being united with God in the hereafter. And I believe, to my very core, this is true. But I also believe Easter's claim on us is bigger, bolder, and more mind-blowing than a promise of eternal security. It is this and more. Christ's resurrection has redeemed us so that we can live a new life now, so that we can embody on earth what God has already accomplished in and through Christ. The resurrection power that reconciles the division between us and God has the potential to reconcile the division between you, and you, and you, and me. In his letter to the Ephesians, Paul claims that God has created a new humanity through the crucified and risen Christ, one in which the walls of hostility that divide us from each other cannot stand if we grasp how God has prepared us to do this work today.

A reading from Ephesians 2:1-10:



You were dead through the trespasses and sins ² in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³ All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴ But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵ even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved— ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹ not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Well, we are not like everyone else. You have heard these words before, haven't you? Perhaps your parents invoked this mantra when you wanted to follow the crowd and they did not want you to. Perhaps you have said these words to your children when they did their best to pressure you into a decision you were not ready to make. Or, perhaps, you, like me, grew up in an alcoholic family where no one dared utter these words because we were desperate to keep our dysfunction hidden. I suspect my fear of being discovered as different, as *not like everyone else*, has prompted me to take special notice of those who boldly proclaimed: *We are not like everyone else, we do things differently. We know who we are, and we do not follow the voices of those who try to call us down a different path.*

You are no longer like everyone else, Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians. *You used to do the things everyone did, but that path led to a spiritual death.* Or as Eugene Peterson translates, “You let the world, which does not know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and then exhaled disobedience. We all did it, all of us doing what we felt like doing, when we felt like doing it, all of us in the same boat” (Ephesians 2:1-3, *The Message*).

But that is no longer who you are, Paul writes. *You were dead when you followed the course of this world, but out of God's great love and mercy you have been brought to new life in Christ. You had nothing to do with it, you could not have. This is all God's doing, but this same power that resurrected Christ from the dead, this power has made us alive together in Christ. God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with Christ in the heavenly realm.*

Did you catch that? We have been raised up from spiritual death just as Christ was raised up from a physical death and we are seated with Christ in the heavenly realms. Imagine us all seated at a table with Christ in the snowy clouds. Now wipe that image away because that is not what this verse means. The *heavenly realms* describes any place and time when Christ's sacrificial love and resurrection power come together to create a new possibility. It is that moment in time **in this world** when we love as Christ loved—when we are willing to sacrifice for others as Christ sacrificed for us. It is a vision of the church when we are at our best—when we understand ourselves as beloved, forgiven, and co-raised with Christ to become co-conspirators with God's plan to restore all creation to unity.

Can you picture it? Paul's vision of creation in full harmony is cosmic, and he wants his hearers to understand that God's plan is the emergence of a new humanity united and held together



in Christ. What are we to do with this vision when what we have seen this past year is sign after sign of our division? If we never saw it before, the apocalypse of 2020—and remember, apocalypse means, not a world-ending disaster, but an unveiling—has shown us what we would rather ignore: we are a people divided, socially, politically, economically, racially, and ethnically. We look to our own self-interests, failing to understand that what is truly best for you is also best for me. We have not yet figured out how to share resources so that everyone has equal access to the things they need to thrive. How can a new united humanity emerge when we fall short, time and time again, of loving our neighbors as ourselves?

Well, the first step may be to acknowledge how vulnerable we are to following what Paul refers to as the course of this world. There are forces working against the growth of God's new creation. There are structures and systems out there, in here, and within us that separate us from God, from each other, and from the new thing God is doing. If you have watched Carter's videos on Lent in Middle-earth, you have heard him talk about these forces. We are steeped in a culture that has left its mark upon us—for better and for worse, for it is a culture that benefits the few by withholding resources from the many, a culture that breeds consumers and fosters competition. We are vulnerable to hostile stereotypes, racist behavior, and violent instincts that destroy unity and harmony. The first step in overcoming these forces begins with a willingness to own that we are all susceptible to judgements, behaviors, and values that further the division among us. This step is very much in keeping with Lent's theme of repentance. If we are willing to own our susceptibility to walking down the wrong path, we will be more open to discerning where God's path of new creation is unfolding. Walking a new path is never easy. It is scary. We are not good at it. But we can do this if we dare to believe that Christ's resurrection is ours, as well. This is what renewal looks like. One new step after another until we catch up with the cosmic redemption God has already begun in and through Christ.

I learned a new term this week that is swirling around on social media—ominous positivity. Ominous positivity is when you mash a positive statement with a bit of aggression, like—*you will be ok—you have no choice, or I refuse to die until things are better and that is a threat, and you better start loving yourself, or I will do it for you.* These memes are meant to encourage, but they include a bit of a shove to propel us past our fear.

At first glance, much of what Paul writes in his letters strikes me as ominous positivity. His claim of the new thing God has done in and through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection is not gentle—it is disruptive and disturbing. This text asks us to trust in what we cannot yet see—which is the definition of faith. If I were to frame today's passage as a set of ominous positivity memes, they would sound something like this:

Ominous positivity meme #1: You were once spiritually dead. But that is no longer true. You have been co-resurrected with Christ to do the good works God has already prepared for you to do.



Ominous positivity meme #2: You have nothing to do with your own salvation. It has already been accomplished. Accept it as God's gracious gift because God loves you.

Ominous positivity meme #3: God has raised us to sit in the heavenly realm with Christ where love, sacrifice, and resurrection power conflate. In this space anything is possible.

My friends, this is our work. This is what the church is to be about. The church is both the beachhead of God's new creation, and a colony called out for the renewal of the human community and all of creation.

We are not yet there. As long as we breathe, we will continue to stumble and struggle. God knows this, you know this, I know this. But we are God's accomplishment, created in Christ Jesus to do good things. God planned for these good things to be the way that we live our lives. These good works, they will not be easy. If we are to become a new humanity where all people are united and held together in Christ, we will have to learn to cross the boundaries of our hearts and minds, as well as those in our society and culture. We will need to develop a willingness to go against the grain of the course of this world. We will need to re-align our values and behaviors with God's priorities. And we will need to admit that perhaps we have been wrong—perhaps we have not understood what God has done for us, nor what God is asking of us. We will need to be willing to change our course.

It will not be easy, but we can do hard things trusting that in raising Christ from the dead, God has raised us to new life, as well. We have been raised to new life to do the things Jesus did—liberate the oppressed, heal the sick, set the captives free, and proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We have been raised to new life to love as Jesus did, sacrificially. We have been raised to new life to seek the welfare of others, even if it comes at our own expense, because we know who we are. Beloved. Forgiven. Set free to set others free. We are God's new creation. May we seek out those good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. For the same power that brought Christ back from the dead is at work in us, as well.

