

“Conversations on the Cross 7”

Reading: Luke 23:44-56, 24:1-12

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Who has their hands on your spirit? Who has control over your life? If you were to follow Jesus' example and say, "So-and-so, into your hands I commit my spirit," who would be your So-and-so? What if the person who has their hands on your spirit is not the person you think it is? What if life doesn't work the way you think it does? What if our understanding of how to go through life and get ahead and be happy is fundamentally flawed? Who has their hands on your spirit?

I think some of the worst times in our lives are those times when we're confronted by the fact that our spirit may not be in the hands we think it is. We might have different ideas on some of the details, but probably just about all of us like to think we have *some* measure of control over our lives. It's only natural for us to want to keep our own hands on our own spirits, because who knows better than I do what's best for me? Or maybe I'll commit my spirit into the hands of a loved one from time to time, or maybe a very close friend or comrade. But then there are those times that shake us up. We have to commit our lives into the hands of a doctor or a surgeon, and we're all too aware that even they don't *really* have our lives in their hands, because sometimes they make mistakes, and sometimes things just happen that are out of anyone's control. Or maybe you've had to go looking for a job, and your livelihood is now in the hands of someone making the decision to hire you or not. It's not just that your future is uncertain, it's also that your future is out of your hands. Some of the hardest times we go through are the times when we are all too aware of the fact that our lives are not in the hands we think they are. And then, once the crisis passes, how quickly we forget, and are lulled back into the false sense that I've got my own hands on my spirit.

As we've journeyed through Lent together over the last six weeks, we've been hearing the words Jesus spoke while He was on the cross. His last words, in a sense. Words that were not accidental or meaningless. Words that help us see how Jesus understood what He was doing there on Good Friday. And the last of the seven traditional words from the cross comes to us today: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit." The last words in Luke's telling of the gospel before Jesus dies. You might think that maybe I mixed up my schedule, and I miscounted the number of weeks in Lent. Why are we still talking about a word from the cross when it's Easter, and we've moved on to the empty tomb? It's true that there are seven traditional words from the cross and only six Sundays in Lent, but it's also true that today's word from the cross helps us understand not only the cross, but also the empty tomb. The tomb is empty precisely because Jesus said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

It's a statement of trust. It's an expression of faithfulness to God. God the Son incarnate in the human Jesus was the Messiah because He was willing to empty Himself of everything except the heart of a servant of God, and so He committed His spirit to God the Father. The cross is only the most extreme example of it; He committed His spirit to His Father all during His life. And that is why He was raised from the dead, because He committed Himself to His Father.

There's an interesting little clue to this, I think, right there in our reading from Luke's gospel for today. In 24:3, the gospel writer says that "when they entered [the tomb], they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus." There are lots of times in Luke's gospel when people address Jesus or refer to

Jesus as “Lord,” but this is the first time in Luke’s gospel, as far as I can tell, that the phrase “the Lord Jesus” is used. It’s kind of like the difference between addressing someone as “sir” out of respect — “Excuse me, sir” — and someone having the title “Sir” — Sir Lancelot, for example. People called Jesus “Lord” quite often during His ministry, but it was just a common title of respect. But on Easter, He becomes the Lord Jesus. Because He was humble, He was made the Lord. Because he became obedient unto death — even death on a cross — therefore God exalted Him to the highest place, and gave Him the name that is above every name. Because He was faithful in committing Himself into His Father’s hands, therefore He was raised from the dead.

If you’ve been reading along in your Lenten devotional for the last several weeks, you’ve been reflecting on the words spoken to the cross. The idea is that there at the foot of the cross, we see all of humanity in condensed form; we hear examples of how people will often react when they are confronted by Christ. There are those who react with scorn and mocking; “He saved others, but He can’t save Himself!” Others react with simple indifference; they’ve got better things to do, they think. Those soldiers who crucified Jesus, for example, were too busy gambling for His clothes to bother with Jesus Himself. “Just don’t tear the clothes,” they said. There are those, like Pontius Pilate, who may have some inkling of the importance of Jesus, but they’re too concerned with their own affairs to really bother with Him. “What I have written, I have written,” Pilate said when he called Jesus the King of the Jews. But it was too late; Pilate had already sentenced Him to death. There are even those who would use whatever strength they have to fight against God and keep the resurrected Jesus in the tomb, like Pilate did in futility when he commanded them to make the tomb as secure as they could. There wasn’t much that soldiers could do against the living God, though.

It’s a question of whose hands they entrust their spirits to. On the flip side, there was the convicted thief hanging on the next cross over who asked Jesus to remember him when Jesus came into His kingdom, and Jesus promised the man that he would be there that very day. There was Joseph of Arimathea, who revealed himself as a Christian somewhat late, but he still asked for Jesus’ body for burial and we trust he is with Jesus today. There was the centurion who stood in awe of Jesus, and though he probably didn’t understand everything, he still confessed that Jesus is the Son of God. Some people insist on holding onto their lives with their own hands, while others entrust themselves into the hands of God.

And that’s what makes the difference between resurrection and eternal death. Because Jesus bowed in obedience to His Father rather than bowing in fear of death, therefore Jesus defeated death. Because He was humble, now He is Lord. Because He entrusted His spirit to God His Father, God was faithful in raising Him from the dead. Who has their hands on your spirit?

We’re not just celebrating a happy ending to the story about Jesus today. Easter is not a holiday because a nice man like Jesus was so nice that He got a second chance to live. The resurrection of Jesus signals the coronation of Jesus as the Lord of a new, redeemed creation. He’s not just an example to us of how to be a good person, He’s the beginning of a new type of humanity that we are all invited to live into. You probably remember the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and how they messed things up for all of humanity because they disobeyed God. That’s not just a story, it’s a description of the whole of humanity before Christ, choosing to place their spirits in their own hands and rejecting God, clenching their fists and grasping at their own satisfaction. Jesus is a new Adam, the father of a new type of human. Rather than clenching His fists at God, He

consistently committed His spirit to God, consistently trusted that God's way of life was the best one, even up to His last moments on the cross. "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit."

It was the core of His teaching all during His ministry. The words of Jesus call us to upend our entire way of thinking, to unclench our fists and commit our spirits to God instead. "The last will be first," He said, "and the first will be last." "The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." "Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it." "Anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." It is by humbling ourselves before God that we are glorified, because the alternative is to live a life of pride that ends in death. Jesus is the example, the author, and the finisher of that life of humility. Because He was humble, now He is Lord. Because He committed His spirit to His Father, God the Father raised Him from the dead and made Him Lord of all. Who has their hands on your spirit?

Let me caution you, however, that Easter is not a fairytale ending. There is no Easter without Good Friday. There is no glory in God's kingdom without humility. There is no resurrection without death. If you commit your spirit into God's hands, that is no promise of an easy, pain-free life. Jesus' humility led Him to the cross, and in order for His sacrifice to be complete, He had to be faithful to the bitter end. But because He committed His spirit to His Father, His end was not really bitter. God does not promise us a pain-free life, but He does promise us hope on the other side of the pain. He does not promise to spare us from death, but He does promise us victory over death.

Today is the day when we see the results of a life given to God. Easter is the day we see the beginning of a new humanity, the humanity we were made for, lived under the Lordship of the risen Jesus Christ. This is the day that shows the foolishness of pride and the victory of humility. Who has their hands on your spirit? Because if you haven't entrusted your life into the hands of God, you're following the wrong Lord. You're walking in some way other than the path of humility that Jesus walked, the path that led Him to resurrection from the dead. If you are grasping onto your own life, you will lose it. It is only by giving your life up to Jesus the Lord that you will find it.

This is the extravagant love of God. He gave us this gift of an opportunity to follow Him even after our rejection and violence against Him. Even while we were His enemies, He came among us, walked humbly and lovingly, refused to resist us while we were beating Him and raging against Him, and while we were murdering Him, He forgave us. And then, today, He calls us to the empty tomb and invites us to follow Him as our Lord. He does this while we are His enemies, while we are grasping our own lives, while we are sick in our pride. Easter is not just a holiday for the holy, it is an invitation to hope for the confused, the lost, the lonely, and the broken. Wherever we are, in whatever state we find ourselves, let us open our hands and entrust our lives to God our Father.



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