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Men's Day, Sunday, April 18, 2010

Sermon Texts: Psalm 30: 2, 4-6, 11-13
John 21: 1-19
Acts 5: 27-32, 40-41
Revelation 5: 11-14

Sermon Title: "It's a Wonderful Life"

Sermon Topic: Resurrection

Sermon Purpose: To teach that believing in the Resurrection is not conforming to the cultural norms.

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Sermon Prayer: Eternal God, Who gives us breath to praise You, eyes to behold Your mercy, and words to proclaim Your abiding love; breathe upon us Your promised Holy Spirit; that our minds may be opened to Your wisdom and our tongues boldly declare Your sovereignty; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Without making anyone too nervous, this morning, I want you to consider the following situation: like the servants in one of Jesus' parables, the Master has called you to come and make an accounting of the stewardship of your life. You are asked, "What are the top three things that have made it a wonderful life for you? What would you answer? [Let the congregation answer.]

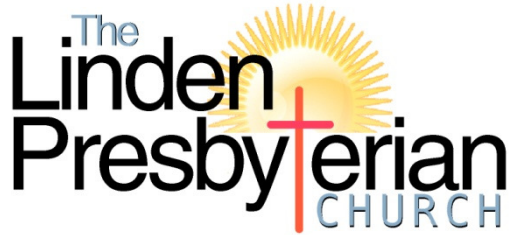
First on our lists might possibly be the day I met my spouse, my wedding day, the birth(s) of my child/ren, the birth(s) of my grandchild/ren, the day I survived such and so surgery or accident, and so on. Believe it or not, someone might actually say, "the day I became a member of The Linden Presbyterian Church!"

All of those might be fine and true answers, but did you notice what they're **not** saying? Not one person mentioned Christ Jesus' Resurrection! Nobody mentioned the day I realized Christ died on the cross so I might have a life without the pain of worrying about **my** sins, or the sins of my previous **generations**.

Have you ever noticed how we seldom recognize the value of what we **have** until we have **lost** it? The disciples were experiencing the same situation. Oh, they knew Jesus was a wonderful **teacher**, a rabbi par excellence! But they didn't realize how much their lives had changed – **because** of Him – until after He was taken **from** them. **Then**, they were in such deep and painful grief they couldn't even think clearly enough to determine what it was He wanted them to do after He was gone; **even though He had told them** – in **plain language**, just **before** the events of **Good Friday!**

They decided to do something that makes them feel comfortable, so they went fishing. And, when Christ appeared to them on the shore – and they knew they have that Precious Life **restored** to





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them, they raced to the shore to share in a meal and to spend as much time as possible learning from Him.

After they had eaten, and had a little conversation, Jesus gave their new leader (Peter) his “marching orders.” Peter and the rest of the disciples were to teach the love of God and to what extent our Creator has gone to make it “a wonderful life” for us.

Not long afterward, in the fifth chapter of Acts, Luke tells us what happened to Peter and the Apostles when they appeared before the Sanhedrin to answer various charges, including that of **jail breaking**. (Remember, now: the Sanhedrin – or Senate – was the highest governing body of the Jewish people. If we were to make some type of comparison, it would be like appearing before General Assembly. It had authority to rule on **religious** questions, and – in some instances – it was allowed by the Roman authority to rule in **civil** matters.) In this particular case, the Sanhedrin’s **main** concern was to stop the Apostles from preaching the Gospel of the Risen Christ. Jesus’ disciples were **organizing**. Who **knows** where all this talk about new life in a new Kingdom might **lead**? And what about their total insistence on “**repentance**,” or taking on a whole new set of **values**? Anyone can see the danger in **that** kind of talk. I mean, gee whiz! That might actually lead to people caring about the **reality** of God’s **will** in our lives! That might lead to such things as **peace** (for God’s sake!), or compassion for your neighbor, or fidelity to the Scriptures, or maybe even ... love! This was the mood of the Sanhedrin as the Apostles stood before them.

The high priest (or President of the Senate) demanded an **explanation**. “We gave you a formal **warning** not to preach in His name,” he said, “and what have you **done**? You’ve **filled** Jerusalem with your teaching.”

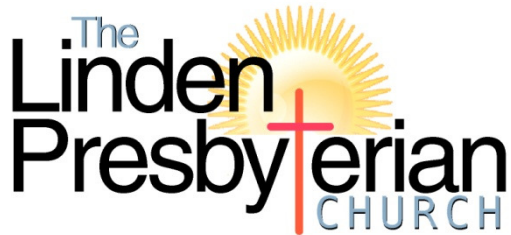
In reply, Peter said, “Obedience to **God** comes before obedience to **men**.” And, for this they might have been immediately **executed**. But a cool-headed Senator intervened, saying, “If this enterprise, if this **movement** of theirs is of **human** origin, it will break up of its own accord; but if it does – in fact – come from **God** you won’t **only not** be able to **destroy** them, but you just **might** find yourselves fighting against **God**.” Consequently, the Apostles were dismissed with a mere **flogging**, and a warning to keep their mouths **shut** about Jesus.

Both the Sanhedrin **and** the Apostles clearly understood that Jesus’ Gospel **did not conform** to society. There was a clear **conflict** of loyalties.

Now, in certain circumstances, it’s possible (of course) to obey man **and** God at the same time. God says, “Thou shalt not kill,” and man posts **speed** limits on the highways, makes laws regarding the use of privately owned **firearms**, and makes **punishments** for broken laws that would incarcerate, rather than terminate, the life of the offender. The **trouble** begins when **humans** command us to do **one** thing and **God** tells us to do **another**. This was the position Peter and the Apostles found themselves sitting in. Men said, “Keep **still!**” God said, “**Speak!**” Men said, “**Conform!**” God said, “Do **not** conform, but rather be an element of **change!**”

In this respect, there is absolutely no difference whatsoever between **our** position, today, and **Peter’s** as he stood before the Sanhedrin. Our ultimate loyalty is constantly being **tested**. God says, “**Speak!**” And mankind’s society tells us to “**Be still!**” And we have to **choose!**





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I know many of our congregation have repeatedly enjoyed – or have been **bored** to tears by – the 1946 Jimmy Stewart film entitled, “It’s a Wonderful Life.” There have even been times I’ve entered into debate with some of you as to whether the **colorized** version is **better** than the black-and-white. This is the story of an **ordinary** man named George, a “**conforming**” man ...

He doesn’t invent things or get elected to office. He doesn’t make big money, or win contests, or sail around the world. He’s not a composer or opera singer or even a baseball great. But the thing about George is that he **hates** being ordinary ... he detests his **conformity**. He feels something grand and brilliant and **heroic** deep inside himself, and he longs for a chance to **express** it.

Without getting deep into the **details** of the story seen so often at Christmas time, suffice it to say that George becomes so **depressed** over his drab existence that he contemplates **suicide**. But, as he leans over the bridge railing, preparing to take that “big plunge” into the icy waters below, a **body** hurtles past him and lands in the water with a loud **splash**. A **voice** comes up from the river, “Help! Help!” George is **horrified**. A man is **drowning** down there. Instinctively, George dives into the river and **saves** the man.

As it turns out, the “man” George saves is **Clarence** – an **angel**, sent down to earth to supposedly earn his **wings** – through **George**. He proceeds to do this by allowing George to see what things would have been like if George had never been **born**. In one event after another, George sees the **terrible** things that would have happened to those who were nearest and dearest to him; had he **not** been there. Finally, he can’t bear it any more, and he sobs to Clarence, “**Clarence**, I want to **live** again. Get me back. Get me back to my wife and kids.”

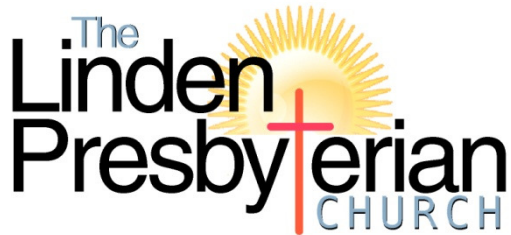
In the final scene that takes place – of course – right at **Christmas**, George is back again, along with his **self-esteem**. And the viewer is reminded that there is **indeed** something **good** and **brilliant** and **heroic** about being a good husband, a good father, a good uncle, a good friend, and a “good Samaritan.”

At the very end, a little bell on one of the Christmas tree branches next to George’s head begins to **tinkle** as it swings to and fro. “**Look** Daddy,” says George’s little girl, as she points to the bell, “Teacher says every time a **bell** rings, some angel gets his **wings**.”

Do you know someone whose chief accomplishments are to be a loyal and caring husband or wife, or perhaps a loyal and caring parent, or maybe a loyal and caring son or daughter, or possibly a loyal and caring friend to all; someone who is willing to jump into a situation in which someone is calling for help?

Think about it! Is such a person considered a **conformist** or a **non-conformist** these days? Is it possible that we’ve strayed so **far** from what had **once** been considered **traditional** values that the **person** who remains **loyal** to them is considered something of a **screwball**?





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Let's go back to today's Gospel Lesson for just a moment. It recounts the incident that transformed Peter into a new man. John tells us it took place by the Sea of Tiberius. Peter and several of the Apostles were idling away the time on the lake shore. It was all very **depressing**. Jesus was **gone** and they didn't know what to do **next**. It's even possible that they were avoiding further **ridicule** by the townspeople: "There go some of His **disciples**. It looks like the adventure is **over** for **them**. What's happened to all your big **dreams**, fellows? Where's your Master **now**?"

The taunts had begun to have their effect: How long can we wait **around**? As a matter of fact, what is it that we're waiting **for**? Finally, with typical impetuosity, Peter blurted out his big decision: "I'm going **fishing**." And the others decided, "We'll come **with** you." It must have seemed like the **end**. Back to the **old** life: back to the boat, the nets, the old routine. The big dream was all but gone. Worse **yet**, they fished all night and caught **nothing**. Then, in the gray, orange, and purple light of dawn, a **stranger** appeared on the shore shouting to them "throw your net out to starboard." They did as the stranger commanded and "there were so **many** fish in the net they couldn't haul it in."

Then it **happened**! John said to Peter, "It's the **Lord**" and, in that moment, Peter became a **new** man. There was no holding him, now; he had to get to Jesus at once: "Simon Peter **jumped** into the water" and outraced the boat to the shore. Peter's conversion was **complete**. The Gospel then records Jesus' final words to Peter: "**Follow** me!" And, Peter **followed**.

Suppose we all agreed to read all over again what Jesus says in the Gospels about what we are to do with our lives as His loyal followers! And suppose each time we come to a place where He tells us to do something **specific**, we **go out and do it**! Should this ever happen, don't be surprised if the majority of the observing society around us decides to think that we've lost our **minds**, or – at the very least – that we're a bit **peculiar** – **non-conformists**, perhaps.

The next time you jump into a situation, in which someone in need is crying for **help**, listen carefully for the tinkling of a **bell**. Your **angel** might have just earned his **wings**!

Let us pray:

Creator and Providing God, You have given us life with which to worship, Your beauty with which we are to adore Your world, Your Son Who made it possible for us to be redeemed from sin, and His ministry with which to bring glory to Your name and understanding of Your love. We offer our gratitude for all your many blessings and pledge our lives to the service of Your Kingdom throughout the earth. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

