

# “Come Up Higher! Come In Farther!”

John 14:15-21; Philippians 3:4b-14 <sup>1</sup>

Once upon a time, an Oriental rug merchant placed an exquisite rug for sale at the price of 100 pieces of gold. A buyer came along, recognized the value of the rug, and quickly paid the asking price. After completing the transaction, the buyer asked the merchant, “Why did you not ask more? This rug is worth far more than this!”

“What!?” replied the merchant. “*Is there any number higher than 100 !?*” On this Resurrection morning, I invite you to a new level of Christian experience – to discover that which “lies beyond 100.”

The religious leaders of Jerusalem in that long-ago April week were so caught up in a religion of ancient tradition that they were completely blind to what God was doing before their very eyes. They affirmed what God had previously done while refusing to accept what God was presently doing.

Those leaders crucified in the present the same God whom they were quite willing to praise so long as He remained conveniently “long, long ago and far, far away.” They refused to believe that faith could take any shape other than what they themselves venerated. “Nothing new *here*, thank you very much.” And before we get too uppity, we need to realize that we often have much in common with them.

It happened once upon a time that a conventionally-minded dervish, from an austere and pious school, was walking along the riverbank. He was absorbed in concentration on the nuances of various moral problems, for this was the form that Sufi teaching had taken in the community to which he belonged. He and his comrades had come to equate proper religious form and ritual with the attainment of ultimate Truth.

Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by a shout from an island out in the river, where someone was loudly praying. “There is no point in that,” he said to himself, “because the man is mispronouncing the syllables. Instead of saying YA HU, he is saying U YA HU.”

Then he realized that he had a duty, as a more careful student, to correct this unfortunate person, who might have had no opportunity to be rightly guided, and was therefore probably only doing his best to attune himself to the idea behind the sounds.

So this virtuous dervish hired a boat and made his way to the island in midstream from which the sound appeared to come. There he found a man sitting in a reed hut, dressed in a dervish robe, moving in time to his own repetition of the problematic phrase. “My friend,” said the first dervish, “you are mispronouncing the phrase. It is incumbent on me to tell you this, because there is merit for him who gives and for him who takes advice. This is the way in which you speak it,” and he told him.

“Thank you,” said the other dervish humbly.

The first dervish entered his boat again, full of satisfaction at having done a good deed. After all, it was said that a man who could repeat the sacred formula correctly could even walk on the water: something that he had never seen, but had always hoped, for some reason, to be able to achieve.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 1, 2018. SonRise baptismal service.

For a while he heard nothing from the reed hut, but he was sure that his lesson had been well taken. Then he heard a faltering U YA as the second dervish started to repeat the phrase in his old way.

While the first dervish was thinking about this, reflecting on the perversity of humanity and its persistence in error, he suddenly saw a strange sight. From the island, the other dervish was coming toward him, *walking on the water*.

Amazed, he stopped rowing. The second dervish walked up to him, and said, “Brother, I am sorry to trouble you, but I have come out to ask you again the standard method of making the repetition you were telling me, because I find it difficult to remember it.”<sup>2</sup>

My, oh my. For this dervish, as for the leaders of the Jews, and for us today, there are other, higher numbers than the ones we know.

Think of it this way: on the high, steep places on a mountain, torrents of water flow swiftly along, cutting their own courses. But below, on the plains and level ground, canals must be painfully cut so that water may flow.

In a similar way, with those who live on the spiritual heights with God, the Holy Spirit moves easily this way and that, whereas those who devote little time to prayer and communion with God have to organize painfully just to keep up the form of religion . . . though still without its power.

And so, on this Resurrection morning, I invite you to come up higher . . . beyond 100, beyond “the way we always did it,” up to the high mountain with God. I invite you to experience the transformation from a caterpillar to a butterfly, from crawling to flying, from sleeping to waking – to a level of Christian experience beyond what you have known up until now.

As Paul indicated in our text, conversion, being “born again,” is a *starting* place, not a *stopping* place. So long as we view conversion as the end of the journey, we will never move beyond square one. As Martin Luther said long ago, “The nature of the Christian life does not lie in what the person *has become*, but in what the person *is becoming*.”

So let me ask you a difficult question on this Resurrection morning: **What do you really want from God?**

If **Life’s Most Important Question** is “*Who do you say that I am?*” (Matthew 16:15), I submit to you that *Life’s Second Most Important Question* is “**What do you want me to do for you?**” (Matthew 20:32).

Jesus asked this question several times, and in 1 Kings 3, God said to Solomon, “*Ask for whatever you want me to give you.*” Were God to ask you that this morning, what would you ask for? Money? Power? Fame? Health? Achievement? Try to be honest with yourself.

Paul said, “I consider all these things, which I used to think so important, to be no more than rubbish,<sup>3</sup> that I may gain Christ!” (Philippians 3:7). Most of the things Paul had sought and achieved were not evil in themselves. But they were wrong in the sense that they shut Christ out of his life. As substitutes for Jesus, Paul’s previous priorities were not only worthless, they were loss.

<sup>2</sup> <http://idriesshah.tumblr.com/post/135359970095/the-man-who-walked-on-water-a>

<sup>3</sup> The word he used was actually a lot more like “sewage.”

The rich young ruler had not been willing to count his riches as loss (Mark 10:22); but Paul was. Paul had a longing, a hungering, a deep thirst for God. So what do *you* want? God's promise still stands that "*You will seek me and find me when you search for me with all your heart*" (Jeremiah 29:13).

Spiritual growth as a Christian is a process of being transformed, little by little, into the image of Christ. But such transformation brings major changes in our lives. Full transformation involves letting go of "all the numbers below 100."

I'm afraid that sometimes you and I don't really, *really* want to know God, as Paul did. Like ancient Israel at the foot of Sinai, we're not sure we want to meet God face-to-face, and we're really not sure that we want to let go of our old, before-Jesus, ways.

One of the ways you and I avoid transformation is to do what Pharaoh did. When Moses asked Pharaoh when he wanted the plague of frogs to end, Pharaoh amazingly said, "Tomorrow" (Exodus 8:10). Like Pharaoh, you and I frequently ask—by our actions, if not by our words—for "one more night with the frogs."

Another way we avoid transformation is to push God's Kingdom into the distant future, giving ourselves a little more time with those frogs. But while God's Kingdom has not yet come in its fullness, God's Kingdom has already begun, here and now, and we are invited to participate in it. Our sticking point is "the price of admission." My friend, Harold Wainscott, liked to tell a parable that helps to illustrate this point:

Once upon a time, Nitrogen, a very useful and plentiful element in the earth, began to notice the greater freedom that the Grass seemed to enjoy to blow in the wind and to change with the seasons. Nitrogen said to the Grass, "How can I enjoy such freedom?" The Grass replied, "**You may indeed enjoy it, but in order to do so, you must let me consume you.**" After considering this for a time, Nitrogen agreed to this somewhat frightening arrangement, and discovered that, in the Grass, there was a whole new dimension to life.

After a while, the Grass began to notice the greater freedom that the Cow seemed to enjoy to move about the pasture and to give birth to young. The Grass said to the Cow, "How can I enjoy such freedom?" The Cow replied, "**You may indeed enjoy it, but in order to do so, you must let me consume you.**" After considering this for a time, the Grass agreed to this somewhat frightening arrangement, and discovered that, in the Cow, there was a whole new dimension to life.

Time passed, as time will do, and the Cow began to notice the greater freedom that the Farmer seemed to enjoy to leave the farm, to read, to enjoy music, and many other things. The Cow said to the Farmer, "How can I enjoy such freedom?" The Farmer replied, "**You may indeed enjoy it, but in order to do so, you must let me consume you.**" After considering this for a time, the Cow agreed to this somewhat frightening arrangement, and discovered that, in the Farmer, there was a whole new dimension to life.

After a while, the Farmer began to discover the new and wonderful realm of the eternal Spirit, and he yearned for the joy that seemed to be possible in the Spirit Life. So the Farmer said to the Spirit, "How can I enjoy such freedom?" The Spirit replied, "**You may indeed enjoy it, but in order to do so, you must let me consume you.**" After considering this for a time, the Farmer agreed to this somewhat frightening arrangement, and discovered that, in the Spirit, there was an unbelievably new dimension to life.

Even so, my friends, the lower cannot of itself, grow into the higher. **To go to a higher level, the lower must allow the higher to consume it and draw it up.** To rise to a new spiritual level in Christ—to the “numbers past 100,” all the way to Infinity, and beyond—we must die to the old to gain the new. And in so doing, we are transformed into an entirely New Realm.

For us, as persons made in the image of God, this necessary death, the death essential to Life, is always voluntary, which is what makes it so hard. Other created beings, though they die, have no need to make it an act of the will. Death simply comes, in the dive of a hawk, the pounce of a wolf, the thud of a bullet, or the wheel of a car.

Not many persons want to learn about dying. To be sure, we live in terrified times, when Sodom and Gomorrah, incinerated and smoking on the plain, are only scale models of our fears about the future. Our world is understandably more interested in images of reassurance and rebirth than it is in death. But we CANNOT be BORN AGAIN without DYING FIRST. This is one of the central realities described by Good Friday and Resurrection Morning.

Death is that narrow, straight, gate through which we struggle toward the Light. There is no other way. She or he who enters there leaves everything behind. This is the pearl of great price, for which we offer all that we have and all that we are.

The message of Easter is that death cannot be conquered by keeping clear of it. The Eternal Victory was accomplished at the Cross; as Light confronted darkness, Order entered chaos, Love met hatred face-to-face and was not overcome; but we forget that we, too, are called to that place. We, too, find Life only by losing it. We, too, must experience the Cross before we can taste the power of the Resurrection.

And so, my friend, what is there in your life that needs to die today? What burden needs to be left at the Cross? Are you afraid to let it go? Are you afraid you can't do it? Are you afraid of what might lie ahead?

In 1939, just before World War II, King George VI of England, in a radio address to the nation, quoted these lines from Louise Haskins: *“I said to the man who stood by the gate of the year, ‘Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’”*

In just this way, those who know Jesus at all well come to give Him a blind trust. They do not know what He will feel it right to do, nor what they themselves ought to ask from Him; but they are entirely sure of His love for them, His compassion toward them, and His power to bring about what no one else could do for them. And they leave it at that, with the inner peace that only He can give.

There's a line that is drawn through the ages,  
On that line stands an old rugged cross;  
On that cross a battle is raging  
For the gain of man's soul or its loss.

The earth shakes with the force of the conflict.  
The sun refuses to shine;  
For there hangs God's Son in the balance,  
And then through the darkness He cries:  
**“It is finished!”** The battle is over!  
“It is finished!” There'll be no more war!  
“It is finished!” The end of all conflict!

And Jesus . . . is Lord!

Yet in my heart the battle was raging,  
Not all prisoners of war have come home;  
There were battlefields of my own making,  
I didn't know that the war had been won.

Then I heard that the King of all ages  
Had fought all the battles for me,  
And victory was mine for the claiming—  
And now, Praise His Name, I am free!

**"It is finished!"** The battle is over!  
"It is finished!" There'll be no more war!  
"It is finished!" The end of all conflict!  
**And Jesus . . . is Lord!**  
He is Lord!<sup>4</sup>

Oh, my friend, is Jesus Lord of your life on this Resurrection morning? Will you choose to let your old self die so that you may come up higher, so you can come in farther?

Are you hungry? Come to the table! Are you thirsty? Come to the well!

Come up higher my friend! Come in farther!

**What does Jesus require of you today? Will you follow Him?**

"Wherever He leads I'll go"

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<sup>4</sup> Bill and Gloria Gaither, "It Is Finished!"