

MESSAGES from LIBERTY

“MORE THAN WE CAN HANDLE”
(Romans 6:3-11)

Easter Sunday

Pastor John Hart

April 12, 2020

“That is more than I can handle.”

It’s a phrase we’re all familiar with. Most of us, at some point in our lives, have thought, or maybe even said out loud, “That’s more than I can handle.”

“That’s more than I can handle” is a phrase we typically associate with bad things:

- Our company lays off some employees and redistributes the workload among the remaining workers, and we think, “My boss is giving me more than I can handle.”
- We’ve signed up for a college course that’s a prerequisite for our major, and from week one it’s clear we’re in over our heads, and we confide to our roommate “This course is more than I can handle.”
- Or we live in a time of pandemic, where our patterns of life have been completely disrupted, where we live with the anxiety of catching or spreading disease, not to mention the financial concerns that are looming, and we think “This is more than I can handle.”

I remember very clearly the evening of September 11, 2001, as the scope of the 9/11 tragedy was just starting to be comprehended. A news reporter asked New York City Mayor Rudi Giuliani if he had a count of how many people had died in the twin towers, to which Giuliani responded, “I’m afraid that when the total is counted, it will be more than we can handle.”

“It’s more than I can handle.” Although it’s hardly ever used in this way, “It’s more than I can handle” can also be used in a positive sense.

- You see it all the time in sports, when hard-core, dedicated, fierce athletes win the World Series or the Super Bowl or the Masters, and they are overwhelmed with joy and tears because finally achieving their life-long goal is more than they can handle.
- Or better – attend the 4:00 Christmas Eve service at Liberty. The Barn packed full with 900 people, many of whom are aged 4 to 10 – and it will be entirely clear that the anticipation of Christmas morning is more than they can handle.

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Today's sermon is inspired by a quote from Craig Barnes, an exceptional Presbyterian preacher and, since 2013, the president of Princeton Theological Seminary. Becky quoted Barnes last year in her Easter sermon, and I haven't been able to get his quote out of my head. Barnes says this: "Easter gives us more hope than we can handle."

"Easter gives us more hope than we can handle." Certainly, many of us would say that Easter gives us a lot to handle, a lot to believe. Because it's not easy believing that a dead man came back to life – that's not something we've experienced very often. So, it's hard to know how to handle this central claim of the Gospel.

But when Craig Barnes says that "Easter gives us more than we can handle", he's not talking about dealing with the claim that Jesus rose from the dead. No. Barnes says that "Easter gives us more hope than we can handle" because Easter proclaims that the new life that Jesus explodes into on Easter morning – this same new life is given to us, right here, right now. Yeah, that's right – Easter gives us more hope than we can handle.

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Listen to God's word from Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, chapter 6:

Don't you know that when we were baptized into union with Christ Jesus, we were baptized into union with his death? By our baptism, we were buried with Christ and shared his death, in order that – just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father – so we also might live new life.

Since we have become one with him in dying as he did, in the same way we shall be one with him by being raised to life as he was. Our old self was put to death on the cross with Christ in order that we should no longer be slaves of sin – because dead people can't sin.

And since we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. Since Christ has been raised from death, death no longer rules over him – he lives his life in fellowship with God. So we should also consider ourselves to be dead to the power of sin but alive to God through Christ Jesus.

Paul is describing, as clearly as he can, what it means, what it looks like, to live as a Christian. Here's what he *doesn't* say:

- He doesn't say living as a Christian means to follow in the steps of Jesus.
- He also doesn't say that living as a Christian means figuring out "What would Jesus do?"
- And he certainly doesn't say that living as a Christian means believing there's a God and doing your best.

What Paul says is this: living as a Christian is the ongoing, everyday reality of experiencing Easter for ourselves.

Paul is talking to believers in this passage, baptized converts to Christianity. And so, when he references their faith, he doesn't mean faith as affirming some truths about Jesus – that's Jesus is my savior, that he's the Lord, that he rose from the dead. No. When Paul talks about faith, he says that believing in Jesus Christ means we are united to the living Jesus. That faith creates a union, a joining, a deep and real spiritual connection. A connection that is so deep and so real that we become united into Jesus' life.

Which means, first: through this faith-union with Jesus, we are connected – truly, really, deeply – with Jesus' crucifixion. “Jesus died for the sins of the world” – we know that, we believe that. But faith is not simply “belief that.” Since our faith joins us to Jesus, it means we are also joined with Jesus in his death. Because Jesus died on the cross – stone, cold dead. And uniting ourselves to Christ in faith means, therefore, we also have died – stone, cold dead.

- Dead to life on our own terms.
- Dead to a “selfie life” that's all focused on me.
- Dead to life trying to do our best but always coming up short.

That life is over – it's stone, cold dead. Our faith in Jesus unites us with him so deeply and so effectively that life snared in sin and shadowed by death is over and done with.

And having a faith-union with Jesus that is so deep and so real that we become united into Jesus' life means, second, that we are connected – truly, really, deeply – with Jesus' resurrection. “Jesus rose from the dead” – we know that, we believe that. But faith is not simply “belief that”. Since our faith unites us with the living Jesus, we are united with Jesus in his resurrection. Jesus rose from the dead – exploding into life, new life, a transformed existence. And uniting ourselves to Christ in faith means, therefore, that we have also been raised to life – new life, a transformed existence, life on a whole new plane altogether.

That's what we mean when we sing the great spiritual, “Were You There?”

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they laid him in the tomb?
Were you there when he rose up from the grave?

Paul is saying, Yes, we *were* there. Not figuratively as observers to an event, but really, spiritually as participants in salvation. Our faith in Jesus unites us with him such that we, along with Jesus, enter into resurrection life.

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Now – that’s simply more hope than we can handle.

It’s more than we can handle because Paul can *say* that we’re dead to sin and risen with Christ – but which one of us experiences *that* reality? I don’t know about you, but it would be hard to substantiate from my life – my actions, my words, my attitudes – that I have “died” to sin. And it would be equally hard to demonstrate that my life shows much sign of “resurrection life.” At the most, *at the best*, it’s more like what the theologian Paul Tillich wrote: “Here and there, now and then, there is a new creation.”

But Paul is no Pollyanna. If you’ve read any of his letters to the early churches, it’s clear that Paul is fully aware that sin infiltrates their life, and that “new creation” is more of a prayer than a reality. But in spite of the facts on the ground – the experience in his churches, his own experience, our experience – Paul wants us to hear the message of Easter in all its power. And what it proclaims is that Easter gives us more hope than we can handle.

You see, we are able handle our hopes for our Christian lives, but only because our hopes are too small, too shallow, not much more than “believe in God and do your best”. *That’s* something we *can* handle, that’s something we can manage, that’s something we can get our arms around and deal with in a manageable little package.

But here’s the thing:

- Being a Christian isn’t about being a good person who hopes for life after death.
- Being a Christian isn’t about being a Boy Scout with a merit badge in prayer.

Being a Christian, says Paul, means becoming a “new creation”¹ – because that’s the promise and power of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Paul writes that we should “consider ourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ”, and the word “consider” is better translated “reckon”. “Reckon” – it’s a bookkeeping term that means “to calculate”, “to count up”. As bluntly as he can, Paul says to us, “Reckon yourselves” – in other words, do the math!

- *If* you’re united to Christ in faith, and
- *If* Christ has died and is risen:
- *Then* so have you.

¹ 1 Corinthians 5:17

Paul charges us to see our Christian life with Easter eyes – God has re-created us, we are new creatures in Christ, we’ve been filled with the power of the same Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead.

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In all four Gospels, the Easter story begins with women heading out to Jesus’ tomb early that morning – they’re going to finish preparing Jesus’ dead body for burial. They’re going to do that because they loved Jesus and because they had placed their hope in him. What they are doing is completely the right and faithful thing to do.

But when they get to the tomb, it’s empty – Jesus isn’t there. Because Easter is about what happens when you show up, expecting to do the right thing, but the game has changed. Easter proclaims a truth that blows through our religious expectations. Easter gives us more hope than we can handle.

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By our baptism, we were buried with Christ and shared his death, in order that – just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glorious power of the Father – so we also might live new life.

Since we have become one with him in dying as he did, in the same way we shall be one with him by being raised to life as he was.

Therefore, we should reckon ourselves to be dead to the power of sin and alive to God through Christ Jesus.

Because Easter isn’t just about Jesus. Easter is also about us. As the New Testament scholar N.T. Wright puts it:

Christ’s resurrection means that those who are ‘in Christ’ now stand, and must walk, on resurrection ground.”²

Now, that’s a lot to believe. But on this Easter Sunday, we are commanded, we are invited, we are empowered to live on resurrection ground. It *is* more hope than we can handle, because it’s the good news. AMEN

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² N.T. Wright, “The Letter to the Romans”, in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol X (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 395-770 (p. 538).