

Here I Stand

Romans 3:19-28

Introduction

A few years ago our family visited an "Escape Room" in downtown Indianapolis. That was a fun experience ... one I highly recommend, by the way. Our room was called "The Dig." It is described on the business website as "a mixture of Indiana Jones and the DaVinci Code."

Now, for those of you who have never experienced an escape room, let me explain how this works.

- You and about 10 other people are locked inside a small room, just barely large enough to avoid feeling claustrophobic. You are given 60 minutes to escape.
- In order to do that you must find a key hidden somewhere inside that room. The room is filled with a number of clues and tasks to be completed, each of which leads you closer to finding key that will set you free.
- Our clues eventually opened two other rooms, also filled with clues to help us in our escape.
- We eventually found our key hidden behind a picture frame that sprung open only after a number of other steps were completed.

To complicate things, the rooms also had a myriad of other props, all of which looked like they might be important but most of which ultimately led nowhere. For example, our team spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to align a bunch of surveying equipment, all to no avail.

But as the game goes on and time winds down, and as you evaluate the clues you've been given, the pieces of the mystery begin to make sense. That base of that statue that was inside the hidden compartment fits in that hole. The cave art drawings in the archeologist's notebook match something you saw in another place. And then suddenly you get it! You have the key, and you are free! Free indeed!

Ever since Adam and Eve got themselves evicted from the Garden of Eden, people have been searching for the key that would allow them to re-establish a right relationship with God. Every day Adam and Eve walked and talked with their Creator. Every day, that is, until sin entered the picture. And in the eating of the apple, all that was lost. The relationship was damaged. From that moment on, all of humanity has been looking for the way back to a personal and meaningful relationship with God.

One of the greatest of the early church fathers, St. Augustine is credited with saying:

You have made us for Yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You. (St. Augustine)

You see, deep within every human being is the sense that our lives can never be fully complete and whole until we find our way back into a right relationship with our God.

And so we search.

- Some think they can be good enough on their own.
- Some think it is all about trying to keep the Ten Commandments or serving the poor and needy.
- Some try to find that sense of wholeness through drugs or alcohol.
- Some through pornography or other immoral actions and habits.
- Some through their appearance, or their possessions, or their titles.

People have tried everything under the sun. Read the Book of Ecclesiastes to hear about one man's search! As you do, you will discover what he discovered – that eventually all our efforts to find wholeness and completeness apart from a restored relationship with God is meaningless, a mere chasing after the wind.

I have seen all the things that are done under the sun; all of them are meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecclesiastes 1:14)

Some five hundred years ago a monk by the name of Martin Luther found himself experiencing the same struggle. He had turned away from possible careers in the law and medicine to enter the monastery and to become a professor of theology, And yet this highly devout man, despite his adherence to all the teachings of his faith, could not find the wholeness and completeness he sought in his relationship with God. Nothing worked.

He described it like this:

Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt that I was a sinner before God with an extremely disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was placated by my satisfaction. I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners, and secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God, and said, "As if, indeed, it is not enough, that miserable sinners, eternally lost through original sin, are crushed by every kind of calamity by the law of the decalogue, without having God add pain to pain by the gospel and also by the gospel threatening us with his righteousness and wrath!" Thus I raged with a fierce and troubled conscience. (Luther's Works, Volume 34, P336-337).

Luther went on:

At last, by the mercy of God, meditating day and night, I gave heed to the context of the words, namely, "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written, 'He who through faith is righteous shall live.' "

That is Romans 1:17.

There I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. And this is the meaning: the

righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, namely, the passive righteousness with which merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written, "He who through faith is righteous shall live." Here I felt that I was altogether born again ... (Luther's Works, Volume 34, P336-337).

Luther had found the key. The way to escape a life of shame and guilt was found in a faithful response to what God had done through the death of Jesus on the cross. That's what "justified" means. By the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, God reached out to all of humanity and made possible the restoration of a relationship with the Creator:

This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference between Jew and Gentile, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:22-24)

The church of Luther's day didn't teach this truth. The church taught that the way to restoration was by adherence to the teachings of the church and the paying of indulgences. Luther had done all of that, and he knew it was:

... meaningless, a chasing after the wind. (Ecclesiastes 1:14)

And so on October 31, 1517 – a day we commemorate today – Luther invited his fellow theologians to engage in a conversation about what he now understood. And the church ... eventually branded him as a heretic and excommunicated him.

But Luther remained convinced. He wrote:

This doctrine [justification by faith] is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour... Whoever departs from the article of justification does not know God and is an idolater . . . For when this article has been taken away, nothing remains but error, hypocrisy, godlessness, and idolatry, although it may seem to be the height of truth, worship of God, holiness, etc...."If the article of justification is lost, all Christian doctrine is lost at the same time.

And people of faith – including the people of this congregation – continue to believe that this is the key to it all. We are convinced:

I am convinced that my salvation comes through faith alone by grace alone through Christ alone.

Let's sum it all up in these five statements from today's three texts:

#1: We all have sinned

... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23)

Sin is a universal problem. No one is exempt from experiencing it. You are not immune because of social, economic, or educational status. Like an AA meeting, we all must confess: "Hi, my name is Tom and I am a sinner." Fill in your own name.

#2: Sin has consequences

...everyone who sins is a slave to sin. (John 8:34)

Our sin problem enslaves us to an evil master – the devil himself. And no matter how hard we try we continue to repeat the same self-destructive behaviors over and over again.

We may put up a good front but if our hearts haven't been changed it is only a front.

#3: Jesus Christ can set you free from sin and its consequences

If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. (John 8:36)

By His death, burial and resurrection, Jesus became the perfect sacrifice for our sin. We do not have to be bound by our sins any more. We can be free to live as God intended us to live and, better yet, we can live with heaven in mind.

#4: The key to it all is faith in Jesus Christ

Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law ... This righteousness is given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. (Romans 3:20, 22)

To all who believe. Not to some, but to all who believe that Jesus died for their sins and who confess Him as their Lord and Savior.

#5: Our relationship with God is restored

"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (Jeremiah 31:34)

Such wonderful truths here: "I will be their God" and "they will know me."

APPLICATION

In the spring of 1521, Luther was summoned to the city of Worms, where an assembly of princes was taking place.

Emperor Charles V was there. He demanded that Luther recant. Luther's response sealed his place in world history:

My conscience is captive to the word of God! To go against conscience is neither right nor safe. I therefore cannot, and I will not recant! Here I stand. I can do no other. (Martin Luther)

To use the words of this sermon series, he announced "I am convinced."

And so, with grateful hearts we commemorate this 508th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation:

- Honoring the faithful persistence of one man, Martin Luther, who stood firm on the teachings of Scripture despite intense pressure to do otherwise
- Affirming in our own hearts and lives once again that the key to our walk with God lies not in our own ability to make it happen ... not in the errant belief that the laws and dictates of a denomination can open the door for us ... but solely and firmly believing in our hearts that our right standing before God is the work of Jesus on our behalf. That is the key, and that is what we proclaim.

Do you believe that?

Say with me "This is most certainly true."