

Wesley United Methodist Church

May 25, 2014

"Because I Live..."

John 14:15-31

Actor Martin Sheen is known for his deep religious and social convictions. Some of you will remember him best for his role as President Bartlett in the television show "The West Wing."

Some time back Sheen shared an interesting story about something that happened to him while he was making the movie *Apocalypse Now*.

The cast had been filming under a grueling schedule deep in the jungles of the Philippines. After a restless night, Sheen woke up the next morning and realized he was suffering a massive heart attack. Portions of his body were numb and paralyzed. He fell to the ground and, through nothing but sheer will power, crawled to the door and managed to get help.

Through the efforts of the film crew, doctors, and even a stunt pilot, he was flown to a hospital for emergency care. His wife Janet rushed to his side. He was becoming weaker with each moment. Janet refused to accept the graveness of his condition. She knew that Martin needed strength so she smiled brightly at him and said, "It's just a movie, babe! It's only a movie."

Sheen told that at that moment, he knew he was going to make it. He couldn't laugh, but he began to smile, and with the smile, he began to heal. After all, in movies people don't really die, do they?

There are times we wish life was only a movie, don't we? Things would be so much easier. When you're young, you want a fast forward button. Fast forward to Christmas, fast forward to getting your driver's license, fast forward to getting out from under your parents' strict rules.

As an adult, when times are good, you would like a pause button. As the disciples suggested to Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, wouldn't it be nice to build three booths and just remain there? Why can't our children just remain adorable infants? Why can't our marriage remain forever like those early years of passion and discovery? If we just had a pause button...Some of us would like a rewind button and, perhaps, a delete button. If we could just go back and undo some of the things we've said and some of the things we've done. And then some of us, in later years of life, would like to hit a button that would simply slow down the film. Life is getting away from us so fast.

And then there are those times of crisis, when we would like to pretend it is not really happening at all. Wouldn't it be great if we could say, "It's only a movie, babe. It's only a movie. In a little while we'll be able to walk out of the theater and things will be alright." But life isn't a movie. It's real. And sometimes life hurts. Where then do we turn for encouragement? I believe there is no better place to turn than to our reading for the day from John's Gospel where Christ says to us, "Because I live, you shall live also."

That's it. That's the heart of Christian faith. Christ is alive and because he is alive, we can live lives that overcome every obstacle.

Some of you are familiar with the Gospel song written many years ago by Bill and Gloria Gaither. The refrain goes, "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow. Because He lives, All fear is gone. Because I know He holds the future, and life is worth the living just because He lives." The story behind that song is inspiring.

In the late 1960s, while expecting their third child, the Gaithers were going through a traumatic time. Their firstborn child, Suzanne, was four, and her sister Amy was three months old. The timing for another baby wasn't ideal. On top of that, Bill was recovering from a bout with mononucleosis. The breakup of the marriage of Bill's sister Mary Ann, had left the family devastated. What's more, a close friend had accused Bill and Gloria of using their ministry just to make a few bucks. All this plunged Bill into a deep depression. Gloria remembers this also as a time of fear and sadness in society. This was the time of the "God is dead" movement. Drug abuse and racial tension were increasing. The thought of bringing another child into such a world was taking its toll.

But after a simple prayer by one of Bill's close friends, the strength of the Holy Spirit seemed to come to their aid. Christ's resurrection, in all its power, was reaffirmed in their hearts. They were assured that the future, left in God's hands, would be just fine.

In July 1970 a healthy baby, Benjamin, was born. Inspired by the miracle of their son's birth, "Because He lives" poured out of the Gaithers' grateful hearts. The song clearly affirms the hope believers have in Christ. We can face tomorrow, with all its uncertainty, as we realize that God holds the future and makes life worth living.

"Because I live, you also will live..." said Christ to his disciples. What does that say to you and me about our lives? Christ's words remind us, first of all, that we are loved. In a world as immense as ours and as complicated, it is easy to think of ourselves as having no value.

With his words, Christ reminds us that Somebody in this universe not only notices us, but loves us and believes in us. What many people need to know is not only that they can believe in God, but God believes in them.

Not only does Christ love us, Christ is always with us. "I am in my Father," says Christ to us, "and you are in me, and I am in you." Did you hear that? Jesus Christ is within us. We don't have to go to a mountain top to find God. We don't have to peer through the Hubble telescope. All we have to do is to listen for the Divine whisper from within ourselves.

Theophan the Recluse said, "Find a place in your heart and speak there with the Lord. It is the Lord's reception room." Some people seem to find this room easily. Others have more difficulty. Pastor John Ortberg tells about some friends of his who have a daughter. When she was five years old, the girl told her parents, "I know Jesus lives in my heart, because when I put my hand on it I can feel him walking around in there." Out of the mouth of babes come words of wisdom. Christ lives within us. Do you feel him walking around in your heart? The writer of 1 John 4:4 reminds us, "Greater is he that is in you than he that is in the world."

A teenager named James Dungy committed suicide a few years ago. It was a terrible blow to his father Tony, who at the time was the much-respected coach of the Indianapolis Colts. Many prayers were lifted up as the Dungy family mourned this loss. In an interview after his return to his position as head coach, Dungy thanked the Colts organization for its support, then he said words that surprised no one who knew him. "My faith in Christ is what's gotten me through this."

How many of you parents have asked yourselves how you could ever cope if something tragic were to happen to one of your children? Here's how by faith in Christ. "Greater is he that is in you, than he that is in the world." Christ not only loves us. Christ also lives within us and Christ will help us endure any crisis if we will trust him.

Most people believe in God. But many people have only a God "out there." They have never opened themselves to the God who dwells within. To people with this problem, God seems somehow remote, unconcerned about their everyday cares and concerns. They have never seen God as a living presence in their lives. I always asked our girls "how was your day, and what did you learn?" until I heard someone else suggest to ask them "where did you meet God today?" The answers that came back were amazing. We meet Christ everywhere when Christ dwells within us and we can face tomorrow because of it.

There is one thing more. Christ says, "Because I live, you also will live. On that day you will realize that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you. Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me..." The love we have in Christ is not a sentimental, mushy feel-good experience that says we are free to do our own thing. Love for Christ is expressed through obeying his commands. We are soldiers in Christ's army in the war against every form of injustice. That is what gives our lives meaning and purpose.

Tomorrow is Memorial Day. On that day we honor those men and women who have given their lives in service to this country. The obedience that the soldier gives to those in command often puts our obedience to Christ to shame.

In 2005, Capt. James Key, US Army Chaplain, wrote some words which were carried in USA Today. "This past year," Capt. Key writes, "I served as chaplain for a 600 soldier logistics battalion in Bagdad...These soldiers had to deliver supplies along the most dangerous routes in Iraq. When bombs exploded, the reality of war forced many to do some serious soul searching...I am back home in the states now, a safe distance away from the death and

war that challenge many servicemen and women in ways most people in our country will never understand. One evening, a casualty officer and I drove down the road on our way to inform a soldier's spouse that her husband had died in Iraq. As an Army chaplain, I thought about how difficult it would be for this young mother and how empty the two children's lives would be without their dad...This year as we celebrate Memorial Day, we should pause as a nation...and think about the men and women who continue to fight and die in such places as Iraq and Afghanistan. It is true, war is hell, freedom is expensive, death is painful and faith still matters especially to those in the foxhole."

Jesus puts it like this, "Greater love has no man than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). Jesus is our friend. He lay down his life for us. Because he lives, we can face tomorrow. He loves us. He dwells within us. Can we not live for him?