

June 25, 2023– Romans 6:12-23

When I was a kid, there was a radio show I enjoyed listening to. It was on a talk radio station that my mom liked, but I absolutely hated. I thought it was ridiculously boring. But every once in a while, a voice would come on that would get my attention. It was a distinctive male voice. Deep and slow and methodical. In a way that you might expect would put you to sleep. Except that it was somehow captivating too, even for a child.

It was the voice of Paul Harvey. And he was telling a story. And the story was different every time. Usually some great moment in American or world history. And he would talk about the people involved in this event, whatever it was. And there was always some name that he was withholding. And you could tell he was holding it back. But the secrecy only drew you further into the tale.

Until finally, the details would fall into place. And the name he was holding back might even be on the tip of your tongue right as he said it. And then it would be revealed as some celebrity or politician or great historical figure. And as you realized just how little you actually knew about this famous person, Paul Harvey would end the tale with his famous tag line: “And now you know the rest of the story.”

Today, in our Epistle lesson, we have another man named Paul telling us “the rest of the story.” The rest of God's story. Because that's really what the book of Romans is all about.

Romans is a really unique letter of St Paul's. Most of Paul's epistles are letters addressing a particular problem in the church. A particular sin that's not being condemned, a particular teaching that they're getting wrong, a particular sort of guidance that they need. But his letter to the Romans isn't really like that.

The Roman church was a fledgling congregation at this point. And Paul desperately wants to go out and give them some good, solid teaching to help get them off the ground. But he can't. He needs to go to Jerusalem and he can't travel to Rome for some time.

So instead, he writes them a letter. A letter introducing himself and his plans to meet them. But also a letter laying out his entire understanding of justification by God's grace. A sort of catechism for them to follow, to help them sort out true teaching from false teaching during these early days.

Because they really need some help. They don't see how they fit into the rest of God's story. They don't see how Gentiles fit in to a Jewish Old Testament. They don't see how righteous living, and resisting all the sin and debauchery that Rome tempts them with every day, fits in to their life of grace through Jesus Christ. They don't see how the persecution they face every day fits in to the promise of God's love and protection.

They see themselves and their own faith in Christ, but they don't see the rest of the story. The rest of God's story. And truth be told, quite often, neither do we. Their perspective is very often our perspective. A limited perspective that doesn't see how we fit in to the big picture of God's grace and redemption.

Romans chapter 6 begins with a rather well-known passage for Lutherans. “*We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life.*” It's well-known because we hear it at the beginning of just about every Lutheran funeral.

And Paul reiterates this idea of dying and being raised to new life through baptism in verse 11, just prior to our reading for today: “*So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*” We are dead in our sins. And apart from an act of God, that's all we would ever be. But because of Christ's work on the cross - because he has promised to work in and through the simple water of Holy Baptism - we are now alive. That old Adam is dead and drowned. A new man has been raised up.

But what does that mean? How can we possibly just forget about all that sin? How can we possibly just ignore it all? If our sin is so important that God would send us to hell for it, that He would send His Son to the cross and grave to forgive it, how can we possibly just brush it aside and say, “Oh well, I'm dead to that now.”

It's like... a museum. I remember, years ago, I went on a high school trip to Washington D.C. And we went around to memorial after memorial and museum after museum.

We went to the Library of Congress. And we saw the Declaration of Independence. And we learned never to forget the fight against tyranny. We went to the Holocaust Museum. And we saw all the horrors that happened during WWII. And we learned never to forget the fight against injustice. We went to Arlington National Cemetery. And we sat the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. And we learned never to forget the fight for freedom.

As different as all those museums and monuments were, they had one thing in common: they were designed to make us remember the sins of the past. The sins of Great Britain against the colonists. The sins of Hitler against the Jews. The sins of countless enemies over the centuries against our own soldiers. If you see a sin, you remember it, so that you don't repeat it. That's our story. Not just our story as Americans, but our story as sinful human beings.

But God says, no. Don't remember your sins. Don't make your life a museum of sins that have been forgiven. You're dead to those sins. They aren't a part of you anymore. You're a new man now. That's not your story. Paul spells it out this way: *"Sin has no dominion over you, because you are no longer under the law."* You are not sin's slave. It doesn't own you. You've been redeemed – bought back – by the blood of Jesus Christ.

But he doesn't say that so that we go back and do them all over again. *"Are we to sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!"* Sin is bad. You shouldn't do it. But you don't avoid sin by dwelling on sin. That's exactly what makes you a slave to it.

No, you avoid sin by dwelling on Jesus Christ. You avoid sin by becoming a slave to His righteousness. *"You have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God,"* Paul says. You're a branch grafted onto a new tree. The tree of sin only produced fruit that leads to death. But to be part of the tree of God means that *"the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end eternal life."*

That's what it means to be baptized into Christ's death and resurrection. It means that every sin you commit is nailed to the cross with Christ. It means that old, sinful person inside of you that constantly tempts you to do wrong is buried in the tomb. So that by the power of God a new man rises from the dead and walks out into a new life.

And you can look back into that tomb all you want, but it's empty. That old man is gone. And all the sins he committed are gone. And you can stand in the tomb staring at the place where you left all your sins behind. Like Peter and John did staring at the place where Jesus lay.

Or, like Mary Magdalene, you can walk out and hear Christ call you by name and cry out, "Teacher!" You can look at his face. Look to His resurrection. Look to His righteousness.

You can learn from Him what it means to walk in newness of life. You were buried with Him. You were raised with Him. Now walk with Him. Don't try to learn from sin how not to sin. Instead, learn from Christ how to live for God. Learn the height and the depth and the breadth of His love for you. And so learn how to love your neighbor. And how to love yourself, not in a sinful, prideful way, but in the way that God loves you.

The wages of sin is death. It's not a trifling matter. God takes it seriously. We take it seriously. But what Paul teaches us is that there's more to the story than our own futile, pointless, endless fight to master our sinfulness. We are not alone in this battle. Because the fight is not ours to wage.

It has been fought and won for us by Jesus Christ on the cross. It's his victory that he gives to us through baptism into His death and resurrection. So that now the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. And that, my friends, is the rest of God's story for you. Amen.