

Text: Romans 8:31-39

March 23, 2008 (Easter Sunday)

Theme: We have confidence to call out for God's help because of the Resurrection of Jesus.

Title: *Help Me*

Again, welcome to Easter at Centenary this morning. It's great to see each and every one of you here to worship Jesus Christ, the Son of God who died and was brought back to life for us.

Maybe it's been a while since you've been able to be here, and we're just thrilled to have you back. It could be you're here visiting with friends or relatives. Perhaps you're here as a step in your spiritual quest. Or maybe you're one of our dependable regulars.

But whatever has gotten us all here this Easter morning, it's just good to be here and good to see you.

In these weeks leading up to Easter, we have been studying prayer, as you can tell from the cover of your bulletin: something that everybody does to some extent, something that most people feel they probably don't do enough of.

And that's because, if we're honest, we'd really rather not have to pray. Something in us would rather try to take care of things ourselves.

It's ironic, in a way, that prayer—this spiritual impulse for connection with God, what a *Newsweek* poll showed that four out of five Americans do weekly—prayer doesn't come naturally to us. Prayer is foreign to our proud human nature.

From birth, we have been learning the rules of self-reliance and autonomy. We can fix it ourselves.

Most of you know that Karen and I have three little kids who, in addition to being our greatest joy and challenge, also happen to be my best source of sermon material.

When he was three, John Paul, our middle child, had a Bob-the-Builder-theme birthday.

And parents of toddlers here this morning will know the mantra of Bob the Builder:

“Can we fix it? Yes we can!” [PLAY TOY]

From the very beginning, as little kids we start growing up, straining toward our self-sufficiency: that we can fix it ourselves.

In 2006, Yoko Ono placed a full-page ad in *The New York Times* calling for December 8—the anniversary of her husband, John Lennon's, death—to be made a global day of healing.

“One day,” the ad read, “we will be able to say that we healed ourselves, and by healing ourselves, we healed the world.”

On *60 Minutes*, Dan Rather interviewed Jack Welch, the legendary former CEO of General Electric.

And this is how their conversation ended. Rather: “What's the toughest question you've ever been asked?”

Welch: “Do you think you'll go to heaven?” Rather: “And your answer was?”

And I'm quoting directly: Welch: “It's a long answer, but I said, that if caring about people, if giving it your all, if being a great friend counts—despite the fact that I've been divorced a couple of times, and no one's proud of that. I haven't done everything right all the time. I think I got a shot. I'm in no hurry to get there and find out any time soon.”

As long as my best effort is all it takes, as long as I can stay in control of the situation, as long as life remains somewhat manageable, something in us would rather try to take care of it all ourselves.

Until somewhere, someplace, we have come to that point of falling to our knees, and bowing our heads, and praying to the God who has the capacity to “graciously give us all things,” Paul wrote the Romans—the help we need. (8:31-34)

We may look both ways to be sure no one is watching. We may blush. It may feel embarrassing and humbling—this core impulse of prayer, the simple words: “Help me.”

But in spite of how foreign it feels and all our mixed motives, God hears. God accepts that simple prayer—“Help me.”

The prayer we never outgrow. The honest God never ignores. The heart of prayer Jesus taught us.

You’re probably familiar with The Lord’s Prayer, which opens and closes with praise. But the main body of this model prayer Jesus gave us is made up of requests, calls for help, asking God to give us the things we need.

The words translated “prayer” in both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible carry the more literal meaning of simply “to request.”

“Help me”: the heart of prayer we can lift up to God mainly because of today.

This is why Easter is so important to Christianity and really to all the world. The Resurrection of Jesus is proof that God is able to deal with anything. We can bring it to God in prayer, and He can help us. The Resurrection is proof that God’s promises can be trusted, God’s help is reliable.

In Matthew’s record of Jesus’ rising, an angel says to the women who were the first at the empty tomb: “He has come back to life again, just as he said he would.” (Matthew 28:5-6 [LB])

“Just as He said he would”: the Resurrection was the fulfillment of Jesus’ promise. And if Jesus has risen as He promised, then He can do all that He has promised.

“Christ Jesus, who died,” we heard Paul say to the Romans, and “more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God...interceding for us.” (Romans 8:34)

That means that the risen Christ Himself, the power of the Resurrection, is available to our prayers. Easter is the basis for the help we all really need.

It would be good for us to park here for one moment, on this key point of the importance of the Resurrection of Jesus. The Bible can’t seem to say enough about how crucial this fact is.

And it is fact, historically undeniable, that Jesus was seen alive, after His death by crucifixion, in more than fifteen different occurrences by more than 500 people over a forty day period.

We say on The Alpha Course, that if the facts had been shaky, the gospel writers would not have recorded that the first witnesses to the Resurrection were women, whose status was regrettably very low in that culture.

If the body had been stolen, the opponents of Jesus would have produced it to dispense with the hoax, but they didn’t, because they couldn’t.

No deception or conspiracy could have motivated the disciples to stand by their story of Resurrection even in the face of torture and death. You don’t sacrifice for

something you know is untrue.

No hallucination could have transformed a panicked group of weak-kneed disciples into a world-changing fellowship of teachers and leaders.

To have said anything publicly back then would have been to invite mockery at best. Yet despite all that governments did to try to stop them, they went about preaching that their Teacher had risen—initially within a few minutes walk from the tomb where He had been laid, and within twenty years taking that message as far as Caesar’s palace in Rome, overcoming skeptics and competing ideologies and the threat of death.

We can’t say enough about how crucial the Resurrection is. “If Christ has not been raised,” Paul writes the Corinthians, “your faith is futile.” (I Corinthians 15:17) We’re trusting a fallacy. We’re playing mind games.

You know when the FDA does their research, they run tests with two groups of people: one using the new medication, and the other group taking an identical looking pill that is a placebo.

And they do this for one reason: the mind is powerful. Some people think that because they’ve taken a tablet they are better, when it’s all in their minds.

If Christ is not risen, Paul says, Christians are like people who say they feel better on a dummy pill.

Faith doesn’t save us. If the Resurrection didn’t happen, faith has no content.

Unless Christ is risen, Paul goes on, “we have nothing to preach and you have nothing to believe” (15:17 [GN]). And then he turns everything on this hinge of history, declaring, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.” (15:20)

Without Easter, Christianity is a lost-cause faith in a dead man. But because Jesus is alive, we have a basis for solid hope in life; we can be sure Jesus is who He claimed to be; we can be confident that the job of lifting the burden of our sins was completed on the cross; we can be sure that there is a such a thing as life beyond death, and that Jesus alone is equipped to lead us there.

And this is best of all: because Jesus conquered death—and what adversity is greater than that?—because of the Resurrection, we can bring Him anything in prayer.

The power of the Resurrection is available to our prayers.

Our Lord can help us with everything. All His promises are true. Easter is the basis for the help we all really need.

About a month ago, ABC aired it’s hit TV show, *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, right here from Kentucky as the family of Patrick Henry Hughes received their new house.

You probably know Patrick’s story of having been born without eyes and with a rare condition in which his joints will not straighten out.

But at the age of only nine months, Patrick began to exhibit musical talent. By the age of two, he was playing simple songs. His dad, Patrick John Hughes, was ecstatic, he said, over this discovery, because music gave the two a common bond. “We’re not going to play baseball, but we’re going to play music together.”

Later, when Patrick headed to the University of Louisville, Greg Byrne, the

university's Associate Director of Bands, invited him to join the marching band. Confined to a wheelchair, Patrick asked "How in the heck am I supposed to march?"

But Patrick's father was committed to making it work. And the two-man team became full participants in the school's 214-member marching band: Patrick plays the trumpet while his dad hurries him in his wheelchair across the field in formation.

Mr. Hughes' help comes at an extraordinary cost. Present at every band practice and all of Patrick's classes, Mr. Hughes works the graveyard shift for UPS.

"What he goes through—it's taught me that I don't really have any complaints," Patrick's dad said to ABC News. "I guess a father couldn't ask for anything more than the relationship I have with Patrick."

There's a picture of what we talking about this morning: what prayer really is, this help our Father God gives to those who will receive it, people with the humility to ask and to keep asking, people with the faith to believe there is no part of life that is beyond or bigger than the power of the Resurrection.

If a human dad can do what Mr. Hughes does, then nothing is too big for our heavenly Father who helps us out "of his mighty strength," the Bible says, "which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead." (Ephesians 1:18-20)

We can pray with real hope. Not just optimism that circumstances may get better. But a trust in the love and power of a life-giving God, regardless of how things are at the moment.

This is a faith that goes on living with words and actions that say, "I will," because of a kind of praying that believes "God can."

We've said it many times: God is doing in your life exactly what you're expecting Him to do.

Skeptics may argue that answered prayers are only coincidences. But it is amazing how many coincidences start to occur when we begin to pray.

And I frame Easter and prayer in this illustration of a parent and child—the relationship of a needy son and the generous help of a Father—that's it.

A spring holiday doesn't give us the help we need. A church service can't fill us with confidence in this life, and certainly not for the life to come. Caring about people and being a friend are good things, but only enough to make us wonder if we've got a shot at heaven, Jack Welch acknowledged. You don't get that security from your sincerity or your service or your heritage.

You get that in a relationship with God, which is what prayer is: appealing to the invincible love of God.

It's interesting that in all four of the Gospels, the four narrative accounts we have of Jesus, the Resurrection is revealed only to those who loved Him.

He didn't go to those who had crucified Him to prove them wrong.

He didn't go to the rulers of His time to impress them or force anyone to believe.

No, the Resurrection of Jesus was about love—proving that nothing, even death, can "separate us from the love of God" Romans goes on.

"So Jesus showed Himself to those who knew about this love," Henri Nouwen wrote. "He made himself known as the risen Lord only to his close

friends. There is probably no event in human history that has such importance, while remaining, at the same time, so unspectacular.”

The tomb was empty that first Easter because of God’s love for you. Do you think this love could help you? Do you think a prayer could help? Anyone here willing to say to God, “Help me.”

Or will this simply be another Easter passing by, dressed up, eggs hidden and found, baskets for the kids, family lunch, and back to the routine tomorrow?

It’s the easiest thing in the world to keep on believing “I can fix it, yes I can.” It’s safer to keep on thinking that I don’t have my act together enough to talk to God about helping me. I don’t have enough faith. I don’t know enough yet about prayer.

Maybe life’s pain will have to increase a bit until it has become greater than our doubt and pride and fear of prayer and we come to the point of opening up the very heart of relationship with God to say, “Help me.”

Whenever that happens, regardless of how unnatural it may feel and all our mixed motives, God hears. God accepts that simple prayer.

And it may be that someone would feel ready to pray today, someone who would say, “I’m done trying to take care of it all by myself. I would like to believe in Jesus today.”

Which is very simple to do, and I’d like to help you. You may not be ready. And there’s no pressure. But if there is anyone here who would like to believe that the love of God can help you, if you believe a prayer could help, I’m going to offer that.

You don’t have to pray out loud. We’re not here to embarrass you. But if you’d like, you can echo these words in the silence of your heart.

Jesus died and rose from the dead. He is alive and here today. You can speak to Him.

Prayer:

Lord, Jesus Christ, thank You that You loved me so much that you gave up Your life for me.

I’m sorry for the things in my life that have been wrong. I’m sorry that I have tried to live so much of life without Your help.

I turn from that now, from all that I know that is wrong. And I turn to You.

I trust in Your power and love. Thank You for showing that to me in the Resurrection.

Thank You for helping me. I now receive that gift. I believe in You.

I ask You to come and fill me with Your Holy Spirit, to be with me forever.

Thank You, Jesus.

Amen.

Sources:

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