



***The Park Road Pulpit***  
***Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church***  
***Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors***

***Living a Lost and Found Life***  
***Psalm 23 and Luke 15.1-10***  
Russ Dean, September 12, 2004

Some of you may have watched Tom Brokaw's Friday night interview with Aron Ralston, the talented engineering graduate and accomplished outdoorsman and mountaineer who spent six harrowing days last year in the Utah desert. Hiking alone, Ralston was trapped in a narrow crevice of Blue John Canyon when an 800-pound boulder dislodged and pinned his right hand to the sandstone wall of that canyon. For five days he waited without food for the help, which never came. The last three days he struggled to survive without water, collecting his own urine to consume in desperation. He chipped away, fruitlessly, at the boulder with a small knife, he recorded messages to his family on a camcorder, he etched his own epitaph on the wall beside him, but on the sixth day, when he recognized from the odor coming from behind that rock that his still-attached hand was decomposing, he steeled himself in resolve and determined his fate.

Amy and I listened to his story in utter amazement, as Ralston, who had returned to the canyon with Brokaw for this interview, showed how he braced his body in a chilling determination and in two separate actions, brought on by the desperation of his condition, broke the two bones of his lower right arm, the sound echoing through the steep walls above him. And in even more gruesome detail (which I will spare you) he recalled how he used the two small, and now very dull, knife blades and a pair of pliers to sever the hand from his arm. Documenting the entire saga with his camera, when the

amputation was completed, he photographed the blood-stained boulder, and looking at that picture, Brokaw commented, “You were reborn.”

After an emotional silence, Ralston replied, “It was the happiest moment of my life... the power of knowing that I was not going to die right here was astonishing.” But Ralston’s incredible story was far from over. Though he lost 25% of his body’s blood supply in the ordeal, a make-shift tourniquet saved enough of his body fluids for him to begin the slow trek out of the canyon. At one point he had to rappel a 75-foot drop, a challenge so great that he and Brokaw both struggled to repeat it for the interview. Finally reaching the desert floor, Ralston was still far from saved, for the seven-mile hike to his vehicle would end with an 800-foot climb up a steep trail. His body, drained of energy and on the verge of shock, Ralston was again reconciling his own mortality when three hikers appeared, as if from nowhere. Their presence, he said, was “every cliché” I can recall, “my deliverance... my angel from heaven... my life...” When the rescue helicopter lifted him above the rim of the canyon, the horizon of the world beyond his *valley of the shadow of death* (Psalm 23) came into view, and that view was, he said, “the salvation I needed.”

In one way or another, we all need it. For the despair of being lost, and the ecstasy of being found are the poles of the inescapable reality of our living – when we finally recognize, sometimes stubbornly, reluctantly, that we cannot go it alone, just in that moment when the trauma of life’s experience would overwhelm us... someone comes along to save us. “I once was lost, but now I’m found.” Thanks be to God!

Some within the hearing of my voice will, no doubt, bristle at the language woven through our worship today, of being “lost and found,” of our “sin and salvation.” And I empathize with you! Yet the abuse of such language over the centuries, which has twisted “sin” into a bludgeon to be turned again and again on the backs of good people, does not change the reality that confronts us in the mirror each morning. And being “lost” as I use the word today, is not the result of being born wicked, but it is our psychological and emotional and spiritual reality: in the pain of divorce and the grief of death, in the unsettling transition of career changes and the syndrome of the empty nest, in the changes that occur within our physical bodies (whether through aging or disease), in addictions of all kinds which grip us, and in moments of unexplained spiritual drought, human beings experience an isolation, a loneliness, a fear which cries out for... salvation. Choose some other word if you must, but I believe this ancient biblical metaphor still has relevant, contemporary meaning.

Maybe given the frenzied pace of successful, American living and the anxieties of terror without and depression within that so characterize our anxious times, the word is even more appropriate than ever. We don’t just need a little self-help, a little feel-good Oprah-ology or a burst of helpful advice from Dr. Phil, we need to know, to acknowledge to the depths of our souls, the joy of our salvation. Stated in the words of one ancient mystic, “All is well. And all will be well.”<sup>1</sup> Stated in the words of a less-ancient disciple, we need to “become in character what we already are in relationship (to God).”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “In a near-death vision filled with violent and bloody images of suffering, the mystic Julian of Norwich heard God’s assuring words that “all will be well in the end.” In her book, *Showings*, Julian describes her visions, offering them for the comfort and instruction of God’s people” (from: [www.theocentric.com/theoarchives/000093.html](http://www.theocentric.com/theoarchives/000093.html)).

<sup>2</sup> This is the often-stated theology of Charlie Milford, Park Road Baptist Church’s founding pastor, though Charlie would not allow this as a definition of “salvation.” Charlie now views salvation as unnecessary, because of the truly unconditional love of God.

Jesus describes the joy of that salvation from the perspective of the finder. *Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep...* The expressions of possession are striking: My sheep... my joy... my discovery... and in the second parable, we see that the loss is expressed in the first-person as well, *Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost...* According to the parable, we belong to God, in fact, we are one of God's prized possessions, and our despair, our frustration, our anxiety, our loneliness, our fear, if we are to believe Jesus, registers deep within the heart of that "Hound of Heaven," who pursues us until we are found.<sup>3</sup> And when we are found, what then?

The famous story is told of Archimedes, the great Greek engineer, intensely immersed in a problem involving the density of various materials. What seems like common sense to us, that any object when placed in water displaces an equal amount of water, was a great discovery for Archimedes. When the proverbial "light went on," and he recognized the gravity of his find, he is said to have run naked through the streets shouting, "Eureka!" ("I've found it!")<sup>4</sup>

Such is the joy of heaven, says Jesus, *over one sinner who repents.*

...repentance (says William Sappenfield) begins the ministry of Christ and the work of the church. Every hungry person fed, undeserved dollar given, well-loved hymn sung, thankful prayer prayed, new idea considered, and boring person listened to is the joyful work of a sinner who has heard the call to repent and know that sin is too profound, life is too precious, and the work of the church is too important to do anything else.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> From the poem by Francis Thompson: "I fled Him, down the nights and down the days; / I fled Him, down the arches of the years; / I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways / Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears / I hid from Him, and under running laughter. / Up vistaed hopes I sped; / And shot, precipitated, / Adown Titanic glooms of chasmed fears, / From those strong Feet that followed, followed after. / But with unhurrying chase, / And unperturbèd pace, / Deliberate speed, majestic instancy, / They beat - and a Voice beat / More instant than the Feet - / 'All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.' ..."

<sup>4</sup> As told by Dan Berger, [www.madsci.org/posts/archives/sep99/938455548.Sh.r.html](http://www.madsci.org/posts/archives/sep99/938455548.Sh.r.html).

<sup>5</sup> William J. Sappenfield, "Direction for a Brood of Vipers with No Place to Go" in "The Living Pulpit," July-September 2004 -- "Repentance."

Today, Josh Eidson, Edie Reardin, and Colin Smith have begun, by visible symbol of their baptism, a life of “repentance and faith.” Our hope for you, young people, is that in the water and in all the many days of your life that lie ahead, you will experience the “*joy of your salvation*” (Psalm 51.12). Appropriately, I think, we also celebrate on this Senior Adult Sunday the joy of maturity. The Christian journey begins in decision, it continues through ritual (the water of baptism), but it is made real in the crucible of lived experience, over and again recognizing our need, and knowing the joy our salvation.

It comes from God, this salvation. It is known by that “still, small voice” (Psalm 46.10), in that “peace that passes understanding” (Philippians 4.7) when our souls are at rest within. But this salvation is also communal and tangible. It comes when we as a community of faith care for one another, and when we reach out to the world with hands and hammers and hearts and healing and home.

Which brings us back to where we ended two weeks ago, that is, with table fellowship. We who are called into the Way of Jesus are called, as was he, to welcome “sinners” into our midst. (There is a delicious irony in that word.) The word for welcome means not just a willingness to sit together, but it implies the initiative of the host. Fred Craddock asks, “...does not forgiveness look very much like condoning when viewed from a distance?” Perhaps it does. But so be it, for such accusations did not hinder Jesus when he made out his guest list, and it should not for us, the young and the old, called by his name. We who are lost have been welcomed to his table. Whom will he find sitting at ours?