

“Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)”
Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia
Season of Eastertide, Sunday, April 3, 2016
James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Choral Anthem:

*“Amazing Grace (My Chains Are Gone)” By: John Newton and
Chris Tomlin*

*Amazing grace
How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now I'm found
Was blind, but now I see*

*'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed*

*My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace*

*The Lord has promised good to me
His word my hope secures
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures*

*My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace*

*The earth shall soon dissolve like snow
The sun forbear to shine
But God, Who called me here below,*

Will be forever mine.

*My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Savior has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace*

Sermon

Today, my friends, we state the obvious and rejoice.

Christian singer songwriter Chris Tomlin
reflected on the amazing grace of the resurrection of Jesus
Christ

and then put it this way:

*My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Savior, has ransomed me
And like a flood His mercy reigns
Unending love, amazing grace*

The Good News is that death does not have the last word.
Thanks be to the grace of God,
our last breath on earth is followed by our first breath in
heaven.

***My chains are gone, I've been set free
My God, my Savior, has ransomed me***

A Sunday School teacher had a class of 4 and 5 year olds.
She asked, *"If I sold everything I owned
and gave away everything I had, would that get me into heaven?"*
"No!" the children shouted in unison.
*"If I cleaned my house every day,
mowed my lawn and planted pretty flowers, would that get me into
heaven?"*
"No!" they answered again.
"If I was kind to animals and polite to my friends, would that get me

into heaven?"

"No!" came their enthusiastic reply.

"Well," asked the Sunday School teacher, "*how can I get into heaven?"*

A little boy shouted, "*You have to be DEAD!*"

On this blessed morning our presence and prayers proclaim the obvious:

Your mother who passed away *lives again*.

Your father who died *lives again*.

Your loved ones, whether they be sons, daughters, sisters or brothers, or friends whose burial you witnessed *lives again*.

Your beloved kinfolks, your friends, your neighbors near and far,

and the great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before us *live again*.

Our chains are gone, we've been set free

Our God, our Savior has ransomed you and me

If the amazing grace of God is true,

then any chains that bind and hold us back or down or apart are gone.

If the amazing grace of God is true,

then death does not get the privilege of the last word.

If the amazing grace of God is true,

then all will be saved.

The Good Lord is always at work and play on behalf of the whole people of God,

rolling away stones,

breaking chains that bind,

forgiving confessed sins,

building bridges of healing and reconciliation.

The Holy Scriptures inform us and our experiences confirm

that God is always

setting up ladders from earth to heaven,

letting light into windows of the soul,

cracking open doorways of opportunity,
sending the Church to be a
movement of wholeness

for a broken and
fragmented world.

Into our fragmented
world, into our grief and
despair, our suffering and loss

Jesus Christ enters in and manifests the Good News.

*“...God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in him should not perish but eternal life.
For God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world,
but that the world might be saved through him.”* (John 3:16-17)

***Our chains are gone, we’ve been set free
Our God, our Savior has ransomed you and me***

We put so much emphasis on what comes last.

Last respects.

Last memories.

Last words.

How many times have we contemplated the last words of Jesus?

“Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

“Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother.”

“I thirst.”

“It is finished.”

Then Jesus offered his last breath on earth,

which was followed immediately by his next breath in heaven.

However, these were not his last words!

You see, Jesus returned from the dead.

You see, He had something more to say.

Jesus spoke with Mary in the garden, calling her by name.

Jesus spoke with the disciples and Thomas who were in
hiding,

offering God’s shalom, God’s peace and wholeness.

Jesus broke bread and spoke with Peter and the disciples on
the beach,

calling them and us to love God’s sheep and tend God’s lambs.

Jesus returned to give to the whole people of God the Great Commission,
saying, *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...”*

His last words were after His death,
each word spoken upon his return an introduction, an invitation, a prelude,
a foretaste and a forecast of what is yet to come.
Jesus’ last words were new beginnings.
They opened windows and our minds to see the grace of God in operation,
renewing and resurrecting,
reconciling and reclaiming our souls for mighty works of grace.

***Our chains are gone, we’ve been set free
Our God, our Savior has ransomed thee***

Life is not over when we die;
we are only changed, transformed, transcending and moving forward.

In the same way, by the amazing grace of God,
life is not over when our dearly beloved pass on.
We are changed as well,
transformed and empowered to move on and move forward.

Barbara Johnson said that
*“Remembering I’ve got a one-way ticket to heaven for my eternal life,
I find the strength to handle anything this life can throw at me.
It is all a matter of perspective.”*

Our Easter faith in eternal life gives us the strength
to survive, thrive, and strive in this life.

Each new day brings reminders of the Good News
in the midst of tragedies and suffering,
especially suffering caused by human hands and
minds.
You are a sign of God’s hope,

to be an engaging and empowering source of divine love in such a time as this.

What did I read in the newspaper?

677 of our beloved neighbors in Chicago have been shot in 2016, all since the year began.[i] And when we testify that one victim of senseless violence is one too

many,

this tragic fact is mind boggling.

While watching the evening news

each night handsome anchors fill our senses

with reports of terrorist bombings and repressive regimes,

traffic congestion and human trafficking in our fair city.

and state legislators who present and vote for legislations

that raise hype but not hopes, neglecting communal issues that truly matter.

There are more human beings enslaved today than ever before;

and it is happening here in Atlanta.

The gap between the rich and poor has never been greater;

and it is happening here in Atlanta.

The racial divide is widening and fear of natural human orientation is ever-expanding;

and it is happening here in Atlanta.

Do you think folks in the surrounding neighborhoods would understand

if *We the People* and *We the Church*

closed our eyes and buried our heads in the sand,

if we avoided standing up for peace with justice?

We certainly could choose to preach a pie in the sky religion.

Or we might only sing songs that harmonize about getting ours in the great by and by.

Or teach in Sunday school that baptism is a
one-way ticket to heaven,
when it's also an ordination by the Holy Spirit
to minister alongside the last, the lost, and the least.
Or simply practice a Sunday morning faith while
denying a 24/7 world.

Yes indeed, we could easily choose to ignore
the harsh chains that bind and oppress, the shackles that hold
back,
our culpabilities in their very existence
and our God-given social responsibilities to
break them.

Or, my friends, we can choose this fine Sunday
morning
to live into an Easter faith.

Our Easter faith in eternal life gives us the strength
to survive, thrive, and strive in this life.

Jesus returned from the beyond
to call us to be and share the Good News.

He is planting us deep in the soil of Mother Earth in the here
and now,
where He hopes to find us serving God and living out the
Golden Rule
wherever we are.

Our Easter faith is in the shape of a Cross.

A Cross points both up and down, connecting earth to
heaven,
and points horizontally, outward, arms outstretched toward
the city,

toward being catalysts for positive change in the
human context,

toward a resurrecting faith that is incarnate,
made manifest in us,

grounded in creativity and compassion
and community.

When we live out our Easter faith
then death and sin, senseless violence

and oppression, bigotry and fear
shall not and must not and cannot
have the last word!
When we live out our Easter faith
the Living Word of Jesus Christ
speaks in and through you!

Our chains are gone...

Adrienne Haslet-Davis, a dancer who lost her left foot
in the attack at the Boston Marathon three short years ago,
spoke at an interfaith memorial to commemorate the
bombing there.

Adrienne Haslet-Davis said:

*“Our survivor community is not something any of us has chosen to
be a part of.*

*But there are many moments we could have not made it through
if not for one another.*

*If anyone is wondering what they can do, what you can do, I would
answer:*

Look around. People in your community need your support.

They need your patience and they need your time.

...work together to make this world a better place.”

The Apostle Paul put it this way when he communicated with the
Church in Colossae:

*“So if you’re serious about living this new resurrection life with
Christ,*

act like it.

Pursue the things over which Christ presides.

*Don’t shuffle along, eyes to the ground,
absorbed with the things right in front of you.*

Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ

—that’s where the action is.

See things from his perspective.

Your old life is dead.

*Your new life, which is your real life —even though invisible to
spectators—*

is with Christ in God. He is your life.

When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this

*earth,
you'll show up, too — the real you, the glorious you.
Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ.” -- Colossians 3:
1-4 (The Message)*

***Our chains are gone...
Our chains are gone, we've been set free***

“Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are
free at last!”

Let God break the chains and set you free

and then, before your soul soars into heaven, use you up!
You know, we should not arrive at death's door all prim and
proper
in a pretty and well-preserved body.
Instead we ought to arrive breathlessly,
skidding broadside through the pearly gates,
thoroughly used up, totally worn out,
and loudly proclaiming, “*Wow! What a ride!*”

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!

[i] “USA TODAY”, April 1, 2016. “[Chicago] has seen 141 murders this year, compared with 82 murders at the same point last year. Police reported 677 shootings this year compared with 359 at the same point last year. The grim rise in violence comes after the Chicago Police Department reported 468 murders in 2015, a 12.5% increase from the year before. There were 2,900 shootings in 2015, 13% more than the year before, according to Police Department records.”