

*I'm only going to read part of the scripture now. Now after the Sabbath, as it began to dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see the tomb. Behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from the sky, and came and rolled away the stone from the door, and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning, and his clothing white as snow. For fear of him, the guards shook, and became like dead men. The angel answered the women, "Don't be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus, who has been crucified. He is not here, for he has risen, just like he said. Come, see the place where the Lord was lying. Go quickly and tell his disciples, 'He has risen from the dead, and behold, he goes before you into Galilee; there you will see him.' Behold, I have told you." They departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy, and ran to bring his disciples word. As they went to tell his disciples, behold, Jesus met them, saying, "Rejoice!" They came and took hold of his feet, and worshiped him.*

We are told that the Disciples ran and hid like cowards after Jesus was arrested and yet after Jesus rose, they were changed—they were empowered and bold and brave. We owe our faith to the work they did in spite of danger and persecution and death.

Christmas is a wonderful time for Christians but I think you could argue that Easter is the pivotal holiday--that the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ is the pivotal event in Christianity. Maybe that is why so many of us will drag ourselves out of bed next Sunday and manage to get ourselves to church--often to the delight of our mothers, by the way.

This Easter and this resurrection thing is a big deal, not only for our faith but for us personally.

We are told that Jesus was the first-fruits--that as believers and as followers, we can hope for the same resurrection and the same new life. Victory over the grave! ETERNAL life! No wonder we Christians celebrate the season of Easter.

I wonder, though, as we spend this season in awe of God's plan; in awe of the Son's willingness to be born of a woman, persecuted, and ultimately crucified--forsaken by the Father as he was taking the darkest sins of the world on his own shoulders; and awed by his being raised and glorified by God the Father—I wonder, will we be changed, as the disciples were, or will we get up in the morning, facing another Monday the same way as last Monday--the same way as all those around us?

It wasn't long after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus that his followers began to be called Christians. Who knows what the word Christian means? (Little Christs). Because of their transformation and of their power and their willingness to continue the work of Jesus the Christ, it made sense, then, to call them Christians.

I grew up in the mid-south. One of the things you notice, especially in south Arkansas, north Louisiana, and south-west Mississippi is that there are thousands and thousands of acres of timberland. Between the US Forestry Service and the paper companies, there are huge blocks of mature pine forests. One of the common landmarks that area is the fire-tower. These are often manned during the day and the person in the tower literally watches for smoke that would indicate the beginnings of a forest fire. Back before GPS's and satellites, they would mark the direction of the smoke from three different towers (triangulation) and that would give an exact location to the fire-fighters.

My dad loved those towers and loved to go to the top, visit with the attendant, and look out over all the trees. I went, but I didn't love it so much--because my knees can't stand such heights. The rest of me is fine, but my knees buckle after just a few flights of steps.

Once we stopped at a brand new tower in Mississippi and climbed to the top. The spotter was a nice man in his 50's who had just come back to work after being hurt.

It seems he had taken his 4yo grandson to work with him and had spent the day startling him and pretending to push him out the window. Late in the day, he was leaning out and cleaning a window--and the boy sneaked up on him, shoved hard and yelled "boo!" He was too off balance to recover and found himself staring at the ground as he began to fall.

In one last attempt to make a bad thing better, he kicked hard at the window frame so that he wouldn't hit the steel legs of the tower. He landed flat on his back in the newly-tilled ground and lay still, taking stock of his body. Even though he was injured, he was able to sit up and then stand and then yell up to his grandson to stay put for a few minutes. He was able to hobble to the nearest house and they called for assistance. He was only in the hospital for a few days--seems he fell over 150 feet and managed to survive well enough to come back to work.

You might wonder if anyone has ever fallen further and lived--and the answer is yes.

When the Son of God agreed to step from glory and come to the earth, he took a plunge that had no precedent. There never was before and never will be again such a plunge.

When he stepped from the pinnacle of heaven and all its glory and plunged to earth with all its sin and corruption, he fell further than anyone before or since. AND he did it on purpose. He willingly gave up the highest place and position there is to come here. AND he, being in the likeness of God--being God, he knew exactly what he was getting into.

Humiliation and pain and rejection and hunger and thirst and temptation and hatred and betrayal--even the wrath of and separation from the Father also awaited the eternal Son of God.

Let me read the other passage, from Phillipians 2—the passage we are going to focus on today.

*Have this in your mind, which was also in Christ Jesus, who, existing in the form of God, didn't consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death, yes, the death of the cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him, and gave to him the name which is above every name; that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, those on earth, and those under the earth, 1 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Oh man! Talk about a plunge--talk about moving to the poor side of town!

I'm going to challenge you today to be transformed by the life, death, and new life of Jesus the Christ. As we celebrate Easter, I challenge each of us to do just ONE thing--to take on one attribute of Christ.

I honestly believe that one of the reasons the Christ came to walk with us was to show us the true nature of God and how we should act and react as his people. That said, lets look at the verses and see what Paul calls for us to do and to be today.

First, he says that our attitudes should be the same as the attitude of Christ. Literally the verse reads, "let this mind be in you which was also in Christ." We are encourage to use Christ as our example--not only "what would Jesus do?" but what would Jesus think?

Verse 5 tells us that Jesus was literally God. Some translations say, "in the image of God" or "the appearance of God" but that is not strong enough. The Greek carries with it the idea of essential elements as well as qualities. He was the essence, the nature, the equal of God.

Did you ever dream of what you would do if you won the lottery? What if a distant relative died and left you a few million dollars? When I was a kid, we had those "what if's" but they were things like what if I had a car or what if I had a hundred dollars or something. But what if you could be God--what power (forget the presidency)--what wisdom (forget Solomon and Nostradamus) and what wealth--you would own everything.

Does it make you uncomfortable even thinking about thinking about being God? It may not be right, but making ourselves God is a favorite human passtime. That's the thing that got Adam and Even in trouble--wanting to be like God. Where you and I spend our tithe on ourselves and where we break God's law because we don't like it and when we want our way so much that we make ourselves our own idle before God--we are not able to become God, but that is what we want.

But God is SO much greater. The Son of God was willing to put aside his equality with God--his Godness. He didn't consider it something to be grasped--to be gripped and held on-to.

I've mentioned before that Arkansas has the only diamond mine in the United States. You can actually pay a small fee and dig for diamonds. There have been some huge ones discovered there.

Can you imagine going with a group and digging one up that was half the size of your hand and running back to the group and you would be gripping so hard that if you tripped and fell and even if your fac was skidding on the rocks, you would never let go because of the value of your prize? Jesus' prize--being God--was SO much more than a fist-sized diamond and yet Paul tells us that he chose not to grip it with all his might. He willingly turned loose of heaven and glory and honor and riches and his power.

The NIV translation says that he made himself nothing, but the Greek says that he poured himself out--emptying himself of all he possessed. It was a long fall from God to humanity. I don't understand how he did it. He was still God but most of those powers and charecteristics were veiled or put aside. Let me remind you that when it says he took on the appearance of man--it means essence, just as it meant when talking about God. He was really God and he was really man.

So--what did this God-man do after he purposely emptied himself, becoming literally and fully human and taking that fall from the glory of Godness and heaven to the pain and imperfection of this world?

He went further--as if he had not already done enough, he took on the role of servant.

The very reason he did what he did was to serve humankind--by living here on this earth and by dying--by giving up his life for ours. Even being totally separated from God the Father at his crucifixion.

All that said--what is that characteristic I was talking about? What am I challenging you and me to do tomorrow and the next day and the next?

To walk in humility—to empty ourselves of pride and self—becoming a servant to others.

Christians, we often love to climb to the top of our self-righteousness and survey all that is less than us--all that is beneath us. We love to point our fingers of judgement at all of those who don't live up to our lofty standards.

Paul says to take on the mind of Christ—his attributes. Once we do that, there are the two attributes that stand out in our passage today: Emptying ourselves of pride and self—not grasping but pouring out. And making ourselves servants of others—all others, even those who don't meet our standards.

We can take a lesson from the Son. He could have stayed in the highest place and pointed his hand of judgement here--to the lowest place--ending it all. But instead he chose to come and stand in the pit with us, up to his knees in muck and mire--pressing and pushing and carrying us to higher ground. As “little Christs,” do you think we can justify our pride and our demands to be served and our self-righteousness when the Son of God himself chose to be a servant?

Christians, I pray today that we might examine ourselves through the eye of the the Holy Spirit of God as we consider these questions--and that we might leave this Easter season transformed and changed and revitalized as those charged with transforming our world.

If you have not come to a place where you can honestly call Jesus Christ Lord and Savior--I ask you to consider the reason he chose to take that plunge--to leave glory and power and equality with God. He chose to step from the highest and come to the lowest to serve us—to serve you.

Not one of us is hopeless.

There was one long ago who found himself at the very bottom, at the end, with no hope at all.

From Luke 23: *One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at him. “Aren't you the Messiah? Save yourself and save us.” But the other criminal rebuked him, saying, “Don't you fear God since you are under the same sentence?” “We are being punished justly for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.” Then he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus answered, “Truly, today you will be with me in paradise.”*

He was without hope--and yet hope revealed itself in the person and form of Jesus, the Christ. It is still the same today--the Son of God has seen to it that there is no such thing as absolute hopelessness.