

I know its early in the morning and we're outside and some of you are sitting right there on the grass ... but you don't mind if I talk about tarantulas, do you? Good!

Because if you've never seen a tarantula shed its skin, you've missed out. I watched it online twice last week after reading a guy's story about the first time his pet tarantula shed its skin. He thought it was dead, actually. He woke up one morning to find his spider flat on its back with its little legs sticking straight up in the air. So ... dead was a pretty good guess. But it didn't make sense. After all, he fed his spider frequently. He gave him water. What else does a spider need?

About mid-morning he came back to his aquarium to find that his spider's head and main body had popped open like the hatch on a submarine. And it was pulsing. (This doesn't bother you, does it?) That's when he decided to go online to figure out what was going on. What he discovered was that, before a tarantula sheds his skin, he turns himself over onto his back and appears to be dead. The blood leaves the outer layer of skin and pulses through his body, pushing the skin away from him. And eventually, he will crawl out of his old skin just as a diver would come out of his wet suit.

And here's the coolest part. When a tarantula sheds, he sheds every part of his old self ... including his fangs. Now, there are all kinds of sermons in this, and I hope you hear the "Easter" in it. It begins with Christ laying his life down, looking for all the world like dead, while he sheds the limits of human life and is resurrected ... even saying to Mary that early Easter morning, "Don't touch me yet. I'm a little tender."

And then of course, the story extends to us. Because Jesus conquered death and sin for all time, we are all invited to join him. Through his death on the cross, our sins are forgiven. And when we trust him to take over our lives, we go through a sort of death. We die to ourselves, shedding our old life completely. Paul says, “If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away and the new comes in.”

And here’s the coolest part to me about the tarantula story: A tarantula doesn’t shed its skin just once in a lifetime. It actually happens a couple of times a year. And I’m thinking about just how like life with Jesus that is ... that even after we shed the spiritually dead skin of our old life, we still may find that beneath it there are other layers that also have to go. The way Paul actually words that line about new creation is, “The old has passed away. Behold, the new is coming.” And so, maybe there is room in that translation for the layers.

Which puts a new spin on the fact that we celebrate Easter every year. Maybe this is a grace ... one more reason for us to come again to the cross and lay down before Jesus so we can shed the dead stuff one more time. That’s the only good reason to celebrate Easter. It is good for one thing and one thing only: to harness the power of the resurrection so we can shed the old life and bring on the new. Paul said (Philippians 3:10-11) – *I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 so that somehow, I also can find resurrection from the dead.*

I’m with Paul on that. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection. And that is basically a three-step process. Jesus describes it in the first chapter of Mark. He says, “The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!” And then he goes on

from there to call his first disciples, saying, “Come ... follow me.” So there it is ... the power of the resurrection in three simple words. Repent. Believe. Follow.

Repent. A few years ago during Master’s Week, a team from our church went to the New Bethlehem Center downtown and hosted a children’s week for the kids in that neighborhood. We were a bit naïve, I think. We thought a half-dozen adults could control a couple-dozen kids. We were mostly wrong about that. But we learned so much from those children, including how to love them, and actually we’ve been back every year since. I think the take-away image for me from that first year was opening the door one night to the room in which I’d been working to find my husband, Steve, carrying little D’Marcus by his armpits. Little D’Marcus had one foot on one door jam and the other foot on the other door jam, and he was screaming, “I don’t want to go in there!” And Steve was so patiently smiling and saying, “That’s fine ... But we *are* going in there!” And you’d think that a kid being shoved into the art room by his armpits would not bounce back, but five minutes later, little D’Marcus was inside the room with the other kids, having the time of his life ...

And I think of Steve holding that little fella by the armpits and I think of the passage in Isaiah that says, “In his love and mercy he redeems us. He lifts us up and carries us through all the years.” And I wonder if God might have meant *that kind* of lifting sometimes? Because sometimes I think the way we get “in there” ... into that place of repentance where the mercy and love of God is ... happens less like the gentle lifting of a baby and more like the way Steve lifted little D’Marcus. Are you with me on that? Have you ever been there?

You know ... I happen to think there is a little of the spirit of D’Marcus inside each of us ... do you sense that inside yourself, or is it just me? ... a fight going on inside ... and it seems to

come alive especially when we reach the threshold of a new spiritual room ... when we need to shed another layer of old, dead skin. We get right up to it, but then something within us resists and we end up with one foot on one door jam, and the other foot on the other door jam, screaming, "I don't want to go in there!"

And we fight *not* because we know what's best for ourselves, but precisely because we don't. We fight because we are afraid of death. We don't want to die to our comforts or to our place at the center of our universe or to the right to choose our own way. But here's the thing, folks ... and here's what I really want to say to you this morning ... That fighting spirit inside of me and inside of you needs to hear that inside that room ... only you know the name of it, but its the one God is calling you to walk into next ... inside *that* room you will die, but you will also be met by the mercy and love of God. So its okay.

We fight because something is broken inside of us. And what's broken inside of us ... what makes us fight that push to the next level ... is trust. We could call it sin, but what's really broken is trust. We want to trust God, but we don't. So we wrap ourselves in this thick layer of skin in some kind of attempt to protect ourselves. We put our trust in things that promise security ... like high achievement or alcohol or money or possessions or power or position. Things that promise security, but really only mask insecurity. They create the appearance of a reality that is not real.

And we can name the sin, call out the behavior and work hard to change. But sometimes it is not as simple as saying, "Okay, I won't do that any more." That doesn't shed the old skin. That's not really repentance. **To repent is to change the direction of your whole life so**

you're following Jesus. Have you done *that* yet? Because repentance is the first step before belief takes root. Repent and believe.

It would seem that all we have to do is agree to a set of facts. I can tell you all the facts around the worldview of Jesus. 1. You are a sinful member of Adam's helpless race. 2. You need forgiveness and reconciliation with God. 3. Jesus Christ offered his own life on the Cross as the atonement for your sin. 4. You can enter into a personal relationship with God by confessing your sins and placing your trust in Jesus Christ. 5. He will give you eternal life, saving you from sin and death.

Those are all true statements. They are Truth with a capital "T." But repenting and believing is not just about assenting to a set of facts. Repenting and believing is an active decision to trust Jesus. So its not a mental thing but a decision to lean into Jesus. Everyone who trusts that Jesus is who he is ... gets redeemed. And you know you trust when you're leaning, not on your own understanding ... not on the stuff you can see, touch, feel, accumulate ... but on Jesus. So here's the question: Are you trusting in your own strength, in the best *you* can do? Or are you placing your trust in Jesus, leaning into him to become your Savior, your Lord, your security, your way, your truth, your life, your hope, your center, your reason, your Teacher, your Wisdom, your God, your all in all? And if that's what you want, then the next step is to follow.

Repent. Believe. Follow. After the resurrection, Jesus met up with some of his old friends. They were fishing. Peter, of course, had sort of fallen apart in those last hours before Jesus was crucified ... pretending he didn't even know the man. Then the resurrected Jesus shows up on the shore near where they were fishing, and Peter gets all excited. I'm not sure he has allowed

the fact of the resurrection to really change him yet. After all, he's gone back to fishing which is where Jesus found him the first time he said, "Come ... follow me."

But even so, Peter is glad to see Jesus. Jesus cooks up some fish on the beach and they talk. And he turns to Peter and in an interesting little exchange, he comes back to those words they first met on. "Follow me."

And the clear implication is that maybe Peter hasn't been doing that exactly. Definitely not since the crucifixion. He may have had some serious moments of faith with Jesus while they were preaching good news all over the middle east, but when Monday morning rolled around, Peter went back to the office ... went back to what he knew ... went back to fishing. That's what happens when you refuse to allow the fact of the resurrection to change you. And I think to myself ... how often have I experienced a moving worship service, or said a real prayer, or heard somebody or read something profoundly moving, and in that moment of being open to God's spirit, I've made a new commitment to God to go deeper, to surrender more of myself to him, to be a better follower. But Monday morning rolls around, and I head to the office and try to do things like I've always done them. I take hold of the controls, compromising my integrity – and I toss in my fishing net the way I've always done it. And over time, my skin grows thick and life feels empty again and nothing really changes.

Do you see? It is not that you will go back to work tomorrow morning after celebrating Easter here today and fill your usual place in the world. Its *how* you go. Will you go as a fisherman or as a follower? Will you allow the fact of the resurrection to change the way you live, the way you do business, the way you treat other people? Are you willing to let something die, so something greater can come to life in you? Can I ask that question again? Because it's the only

one that really matters. Are you willing to let something die, so something greater can come to life in you? Dallas Willard says, “Come on in. It's going to be okay to die first. You have to do it, and you can do it. Not even Jesus got a resurrection without a death, and he'll be at your side when you surrender your old life. Trust me on this. If you die with Jesus Christ, God will (lift you up) and walk you out of your old skin into a life of incomparable joy and purpose inside his boundless and competent love.”

This is the most loving thing we can offer this morning, this invitation to repent and believe. It is the most important decision you will ever make and one that stands in constant need of renewal. The gift of the Gospel is free, though it will cost you every competing allegiance.