

My name is Mike Lynch and I once was dead, lost, ruined, and far away from God, but now, by His amazing grace, I have been made alive, found, healed, and cherished! And it's not because of anything I've done – far from it – it is solely because of what Jesus did. I'm so thankful. That's my story... maybe it's yours too... if not, it can be! Listen!

Many of us are pretty familiar with the story of Jesus – His miraculous birth, His amazing life full of healing and teaching. If you've been with us through the Garden to City series, you've heard about how Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice by dying on the cross for sins that we committed. And then how three days later, He rose from the dead... a day we celebrate as Easter.

But what then? For many of us, that's where the story of Jesus pretty much ends. We don't think about much after that. Jesus rose from the dead – Hallelujah! Death has been conquered – Hallelujah! He's alive – Hallelujah! But then what? Well, today I want to add a couple more Hallelujah's to your list! Today we are going to press into the **mystery** of what it means to go from **death to life**... what it means to be **recreated** and **made new**... aren't those great words? What it really means to be a follower of Jesus. Are you ready?

After Jesus' resurrection, He appeared to the disciples and many others, spending another 50 days with them until that day when He gave them their life mission and promised them that He would be back someday:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. And you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere—in Jerusalem, throughout Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” After saying this, he was taken up into a cloud while they were watching, and they could no longer see him. ¹⁰As they strained to see him rising into heaven, two white-robed men suddenly stood among them. ¹¹“Men of Galilee,” they said, “why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go.” (Acts 1:8-11)

So Jesus gives them, and us, our mission: “*you will be my witnesses, telling people about me everywhere*”. And then He just disappears into heaven... with the promise that He would someday return.

Well, it kind of begs the question, doesn't it? What in the world is Jesus doing in heaven? Floating on clouds? Giving harp lessons? Just lighting everything up?

No. What Jesus is doing in heaven is more powerful than anything we can imagine! Picture this for a moment, as Paul describes it earlier in this same letter:

“I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power²⁰ that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.²¹ Now he is far above any ruler or authority or power or leader or anything else—not only in this world but also in the

world to come. ²² God has put all things under the authority of Christ and has made him head over all things.” (Eph 1:19-22)

What Paul is saying is that when He ascended into heaven, Jesus ascended the **throne of the universe** at the right hand of God the Father. And from there, He reigns. He reigns as King over all things! Jesus reigns now over everything! Right now He is the **King of kings and Lord of lords!** Listen...

Amazing, isn't it?! Not only the **music...** but the **message:**

*Hallelujah! For the Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth! Hallelujah!
The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord, And of His Christ
And He shall reign forever and ever! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!*

See I told you I'd put another Hallelujah in your day! (You're going to hear a lot more of that at our Christmas Eve service!)

Imagine: Christ on the throne, ruling the universe! He is Ruler over everything! Head over everything!

- And under His amazing and benevolent rule, peace covers the earth, because He is the **Prince of Peace.**
- Under His rule, all prejudice and darkness have melted away because He is the **Light of the World!**
- All hunger and thirst have been banished because He is the Living Water and the Bread of Life!
- All hatred and animosity have been transformed into love and understanding because He is **Love Incarnate.**
- All false paths are corrected and all lost people are found because He is the Way!
- All falsehoods and lies are done away with because He is **the Truth!**
- Death has died because He is the **Resurrection** and **the Life!**
- And all the world is united as one because He is the **Good Shepherd!**

Imagine it... just imagine. But wait... **that isn't the world we live in now, is it?** Not by a long shot. So what's happening? The Bible says that Jesus is reigning now on the throne of heaven and yet this world just seems to be getting worse and worse? How can Jesus be reigning now on the throne of heaven and yet children starve and people die horrible deaths and women are devalued and racial prejudice runs deeper than anyone thought possible?

How can Jesus be reigning now on the throne of heaven and yet human beings butcher other human beings in the name of their god? How can Jesus be reigning now on the throne of heaven and yet two weeks ago a 13 year-old girl in Lawrence was **kidnapped and raped on her way to school?** Atrocities like this make our blood boil, and they cry out for justice... for **judgment!** And it will come. Because the God we know from Scriptures isn't just a God of Love... He is all of that! But He is also **Holy, Just, and Righteous** ... and He will indeed judge those who do such things. He must... for justice's sake... and He will.

But **right now** we live in the “**in-between times.**” We live **after** Jesus conquered death, but **before** His Kingship is fully revealed to the world. We live in that era between Christ’s **Resurrection** and His **Coronation**. Right now, His new life runs in our veins, His Spirit lives in our hearts, moving us to live more holy and loving lives. But the world at large still doesn’t get it... they haven’t heard yet... they don’t understand yet. When Jesus comes again, it will be unmistakable! Overwhelming! A beautiful explosion!

When the King returns there will be justice... there will be judgment for the atrocities. Wrongs will be made right and wounds will be healed, and this broken world will be made whole. Recreated! But until then, we struggle, the whole world struggles ...because we live in the **in-between times**. As Paul puts it in Romans, “*All creation groans, awaiting the final consummation.*” When Jesus Christ is fully revealed as King of kings and Lord of Lords!

This is why our mission is so critical, Harbor: to help people find their way back to God! ... to **go & tell**... to **show & tell** what it looks like when a life is totally changed by Jesus Christ. What it looks like when a life is lived under the rule and reign of Christ.

A couple of weeks ago, Katie & I had dinner with some of my old college buddies, some of whom I hadn’t seen in 40 years! 40 years... oh my! And as we talked, we told stories about all that had happened in our lives during those 40 years. The first thing I told them was that within a year after I had last seen them, my life had been totally transformed by Jesus.

It all started about 60 years ago... I was raised in a devoutly Catholic home... by parents who loved me beyond measure. In that church I learned a great and abiding awe of God, I learned that faith and life were connected, that sin dragged me down but that Jesus was full of love and forgiveness. My beliefs were unquestioned until my teenage years. Youthful rebellion began to set in and internally I began to reject the faith I had been raised with. Going off to college allowed me to live whatever life I wanted to, and I sank into a tangled mess of alcohol, sex, and drug abuse... before long my grades tanked so badly that I had to leave college for a time to get my life back together.

Back home, I worked for a local contractor and picked up a few skills and a few more bad habits... Then at school again in the fall, I met this wild and beautiful young woman named Katie who completely mesmerized me. (I do not believe I mesmerized her.) But one date led to another and soon we were in the throes of a relationship. Meanwhile, my lifestyle habits had not changed a bit. I had changed my **location**, I had changed my **school**, I had a **fresh start**... but I was running in the **same old tracks**... and I knew it. I felt trapped. The thing that really had to change was me... deep inside, and I didn’t know how to do that.

One fateful day, I met Katie in the cafeteria for dinner, and she was very quiet. If you know Katie, you know she is rarely quiet. This night she was silent. My feeble attempts at starting a conversation all fell flat. It began to dawn on me that I was about to get my walking papers... she was breaking up with me! Finally, she stopped eating, looked me in the eyes and said, “Michael, I’ve got to get right with God.” Those exact words... I will never forget... “Michael, I’ve got to get right with God.” And I remember thinking in one split second, 1) Phew! 2)

What does that mean? and 3) something deep inside me woke up and said, “hey bone-head, listen up! You need this!”

The truth was, she **was** intending to break up with me, because our relationship was hindering her from re-establishing her relationship with God. When I asked her what she meant, she told me how she used to read her Bible and talk with God every night before bed, and how her relationship with Jesus had gotten her through some tough times. So I said, well, I’d like to try that too! She didn’t believe me at first, but I convinced her that I was serious and said... “OK let’s try it for two weeks, and if nothing changes, we’ll split.”

This was right before Christmas, and within that first week, Katie had given me a Bible... the Living Bible... complete with a cool hippy cover! So I started to read it... every night before bed. I’d never read the Bible before on my own. And it spoke to me. I remember reading some passages that seemed highlighted, as if to say, “This one’s for you, Mikey, right here, right now!” I was amazed at how real it was. Then in early January on an icy cold night, Katie brought me downtown to a Church in Boston to hear this Christian speaker. What he said that night changed my life. He explained the **historical reliability** of the Bible and especially of the Resurrection. That was really important to me. Then he said that if Jesus actually did rise from the dead then **forgiveness** is real and a **new life** is possible. He invited us to bow our heads in prayer, and I did. I remember thinking, I’m not totally sure about all this stuff, but I know I need forgiveness and a new life sounds pretty good about now. So yes, Jesus, I open my heart to you.

There were no fireworks. There was no Hallelujah Chorus... although both would have been quite appropriate. But as we walked out of that auditorium that night, I knew something had changed... I knew I was forgiven... all my sins... my many, many sins... gone... wiped away! And I felt a new Presence in my heart... Jesus was there. I couldn’t explain it, but I knew. I didn’t know it then, but that night I had walked from **death into life**.

There are four key words in this passage, Eph 2:1-10 that I want you to get: **Death... Grace...Life...Masterpiece**. I know those don’t alliterate... and they don’t start with the same letter, but in our school we teach the kids to write a **one-sentence summary** of a passage of text... so here’s my one-sentence summary of Eph 2:1-10:

“We once were **dead**, but in Christ we’ve been made **alive**; and it’s all by **grace** so now we’re His **masterpieces**.”

First, let’s talk about **death**. (Always a good conversation starter!)

Verse 1 says, “*Once you were **dead** because of your disobedience and your many sins.*” But what does he mean, dead? Before you can be dead, you have to be **alive**! And we were... long ago. In the beginning it says that “*God formed man out of the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the **breath of life** and the man became a living creature.*” G 2:7 Our life came from God... and it was full and complete... not just physical life, but self-awareness, creativity, and a heart to heart connection with Him!

Then God planted a beautiful Garden named Eden – a perfect habitat for the man and the woman, whom He had created in His image **equally** (by the way). In this Garden, He saw to all their needs: they were comfortable, content, and secure in their relationships with Him, with one another, and with the earth. Work was fun, they were free and happy... life was truly good. There was only one caveat... one restriction that God put on their lives: “*do not eat of the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good & Evil, for in that day, you shall surely die.*” (First mention of death!) What did God mean, die? Immediate physical death, like from poison? Or something else?

Well, sadly, as the story unfolds, the man and the woman did exactly what God had said not to do. They disobeyed. They decided that their way was better than God’s way. They ate of that fruit. And in that instant, something inside them died. They didn’t physically die... but all of a sudden, they felt self-conscious and felt the need to cover their private parts. All of a sudden, they felt emotions they had never felt before: shame, guilt, and fear. And when God came to the Garden, seeking to hang out with them, instead of running eagerly to Him as they had in the past, now they hid from Him, fearing his judgment.

You can read the whole account in Genesis, but the Cliff notes are these: when the man & woman stepped outside the **boundaries of God’s blessing**, the results for them and all of humanity were devastating. They were cast out of the Garden – exiled into a cold and cruel world. Work became hard, painful, and frustrating. (I mean how was YOUR week? Mine was pretty hellish!) Survival became difficult. Childbirth became painful and dangerous. The husband-wife relationship took an extremely unhealthy turn where the husband now ruled over his wife, and the equality of men and women was destroyed. Emotional disorders sprang into existence based on fear and anxiety and guilt and shame. (Think of all the medications we have now for this very reason!) Physical death became a harsh reality (now we return...dust to dust). And in the very next generation, even worse evils sprang up like envy and greed, anger and murder.

In a very real sense, humanity died that day. Life had been good. But then it became: “**Life is hard, and then you die.**” God had been close... but now He seems distant & unapproachable. That’s the world we are all born into. It’s not pretty. It’s scary and it’s lonely. Awful and unjust things happen. That’s what it means that we, in the deepest part of our being, our souls, are **dead**. Can we still **love** others? Yes... to a point. Can we appreciate **beauty** – sure, and we are drawn to it! Do we crave **justice** in the world – absolutely! These deep longings are all evidence of the **goodness** with which God has created us. That we lack them & that the world lacks them... that’s evidence of our spiritual death. This doesn’t mean we’re **evil**, it just means we’re separated from God.

Fortunately, God is good. He loves us. He loves us no matter what. Even in our worst moments. He loves us... and His love gives us our second word: **Grace!**

*“But God is so rich in **mercy**, and **he loved us so much**, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead...
...(5) It is only by God’s **grace** that you have been saved!*

...(7) So God can point to us in all future ages as examples of the incredible wealth of his **grace** and kindness toward us

...(8) God saved you by his **grace** when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a **gift** from God

In NT Greek, the words grace and gift are related. Last week John mentioned that the word gift was *Carisma*. Well, in NT Greek, grace is *Caris*. *Caris* – *Carisma*. Grace and thing of grace, or gift.

And what is this thing of grace, this gift from God? It is the salvation that God provided for us when He sent His Son Jesus to be the “**Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.**”

“**Mercy**,” you see, is when we **don't get** what we **do deserve**.

“**Grace**,” is when you **do get** what you **don't deserve**. There's a difference! I'll repeat that...

Mercy is when we don't get what we do deserve.

Grace is when you do get what you don't deserve.

“**Mercy**,” is when God the Father declares that His righteous judgment for all the sins of the entire human race has already fallen on Jesus!

“**Grace**” is when He pours out His love and gives us the gift of new life!

Mercy is escaping Judgment. **Grace** is inheriting eternity!

Mercy is being forgiven. **Grace** is becoming a friend of God.

And who stands at the *nexus* of **mercy & grace**? Jesus Christ. It was through His death that our sin was taken out of the way (that's mercy) and it is through His resurrection that we inherit new life now & forever (that's grace).

“We once were **dead**, but in Christ we've been made **alive**; and it's all by **grace** so now we're His **masterpieces**.”

So what is this New Life all about?

“*God is so rich in mercy, and he loved us so much,* ⁵ *that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead.*”

You've heard my story... Is it your story too? Or something like it? Once I was dead... trapped and wallowing in sin just like the rest of the world; spiritually dead and unconscious about God ... but God is so rich in mercy... and He loved me so much... that He gave me new life in Christ! Or are you still, like I was for 21 years of my life, like a zombie out of the **Walking Dead**? Alive on the outside but decaying on the inside, enslaved by your appetites, weighed down by your guilt, unsure of your purpose here? If so, God's Word for you today is that **New Life is possible!** It's for you... freely offered...a **grace thing**.

What's this new life all about? Some have called it an awakening of the soul. Jesus compared it to being **born again**. In a conversation with Nicodemus, one of the Jewish leaders of the time, Jesus said to him...

JN 3: 5-7 "I assure you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.⁶ Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life.⁷ So don't be surprised when I say, 'You must be **born again!**'"

At the very least we can begin to see that this new life, this resurrection life that Jesus offers is not physical life – we have that already, it is a spiritual life. A life on a new level. A life that is **open to God** and **increasingly open to humanity**. Because that's the way Jesus was, A full life. And even better... a life that has no end. It's life now and life forever.

And it's **free**... a **grace thing**, offered to you by God, who yearns for you to accept it. Will you?

So many of us are under the impression that because this life often works pretty much like *karma*... you get what you pay for, you reap what you sow, and that if you want something you've got to work to get it, that this is the way God works. It's not. God's way is not *karma*... it's **grace!** That's why this is such radically good news!

This New Life is a **gift, a grace thing** offered to you from God! He couldn't stand it that you and I were separated from Him by our sin! He loved us so much that He sent His Son as a sacrifice in our place, so that when we put our trust in Him, that New Life becomes our life.

Imagine what New Life – God's life – in you would look like! You would become **more loving** because God is love. You would become **more accepting of others who are different** from you because that's the way Jesus was – think of who He hung around with and loved: lepers, whores, drunks, and ruffians! You wouldn't just pine after justice... you would wake up and do something... about the refugees from Syria... about human trafficking... about hunger... illiteracy... immigration...racism... People! If there's one thing this world has **plenty of**, it is **injustice**. Imagine what you could do... would do... if you had New Life – God's life – coursing through your veins! The possibilities are staggering!

That's why God left us here. We have a new purpose! In Christ, we become God's **masterpieces**... we get to show off for Him!

"We once were **dead**, but in Christ we've been made **alive**; and it's all by **grace** so now we're His **masterpieces**."

*"So God can point to us in all future ages as **examples** of the incredible wealth of his grace and kindness toward us, as shown in all he has done for us who are united with Christ Jesus... For we are God's **masterpiece!** He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago."*

A masterpiece shows off the amazing talent and genius of the artist.

If I were to ask you to think about the most beautiful of all God's masterpieces... you might think of something like a vivid sunset, the Northern Lights, the Grand Canyon, or Yosemite National Park, or a pristine sand beach in Fiji. But when God thinks of His masterpieces, He is thinking of **you & me**. He is thinking of how lost and beat up we were, how entangled and trapped we were, and how He set us free through Christ, how He picked us up and cleaned us up and dressed us up... and now how we are **examples** of what He can do for anyone.

Let me tell you: Mike Lynch is a most unlikely saint! Oh, if you had only known me back in the day! I am a **most unlikely masterpiece!** But God now points at me and says, "Look! Look at this one! If I can transform this one's confused & pathetic life... and make him into a beautiful masterpiece, think of what I can do for you!!!"

Ever wonder why God left you here? I have. I'm thinking that the best time to haul a person into heaven would be right after they put their faith in Christ and receive that new life... that way they're gone before they can screw up again! ('Cause you know we do!)

But God doesn't do that. He leaves us here... in the midst of the pain and stress and suffering and injustice. He leaves us here... as spiritual newborns in the midst of racial tension and socio-economic inequality and human rights atrocities and crime and drug abuse and political corruption. He leaves us here with health problems, relationship problems, money problems and more. Why?

*"He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so **we can do the good things** he planned for us long ago."*

God has given us His new life and left us here so that we can **show and tell** to others what He has done. None of us is perfect. Not one of us is the perfect example of what it means to be follower of Christ. But we are all **examples** of what God can do in a person's life and how to live by faith even through the tough times... **especially** through the tough times. And we are surrounded by people who need that same grace that has so affected us. Think of your family... any family members need the grace of God? Think of your friends and neighbors? Any of them need forgiveness? Think of your co-workers... do any of them need to know how much God loves them?

They are why God has left you here! To be an example and an agent of His grace and love.

People of God, in a few days we will be electing our next earthly President. But never forget that **Christ is King**. And when He returns, all the wonderful and idealistic notions that we hold dear such as love and equality and justice and fairness and peace and well-being, will be revealed in Him. Human government is necessary and though often good, is fatally flawed, whatever its form. No party or person can recreate society so that all are served equally and peace reigns. Only God can do this. And He will... in His time... when Jesus returns. Meanwhile, what to do?

First of all, if you haven't yet done so... open your heart to God. I know it's scary. But trust me, you will be glad you did!

If you have already, then get busy! Serve others... be a Big Sister or a Big Brother ...go on a mission trip...serve at a food pantry or homeless shelter... Love people! Be the conscience of your workplace and stand up for human rights & justice wherever you are. You feel the deep need for these things because you reflect the heart of your Creator! Love others. Work for good. And don't forget to enjoy this beautiful world!

"We once were **dead**, but in Christ we've been made **alive**; and it's all by **grace** so now we're His **masterpieces**." Let's pray...