

One of the miracles of my nearly 40 years of marriage is my wife, and I have a phrase we occasionally employ. It is not used frequently, but it is understood that, whenever it is said, it is definitive, and unquestionable.

At times one of us will make a decision without consulting the other, generally it is a decision to purchase something, usually it is something odd. It rarely is something of much expense, but it usually something the other person would never consider buying. In those moments one of us says to the other, "I made an executive decision."

The miracle is that in nearly 40 years I cannot think of a single instance when this phrase was announced, that the decision was ever questioned, or challenged. It seems that every time one of us employs the executive decision statement the response of the other is along the lines of, "Okay. That makes sense." and we continue on with our day.

That statement is not an excuse. It is a proclamation, a way of announcing that something will happen, or has happened.

This morning we have heard one of the most debated verses in the Bible. Peter writes that Jesus "went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison." There are many challenges within this verse.

Who are these spirits? Are they humans, are they angels, or other spiritual beings? Peter doesn't say.

Where are these spirits, where is this prison? Peter doesn't say.

What was this proclamation? Was it a sermon? A teaching? Peter doesn't say.

To make matters more confusing, this phrase is nestled into others that are just as puzzling. A careful reading of these verses simply brings up more questions than answers.

But of all the questions that arise from these verses the one I find most intriguing is what was the proclamation Jesus made?

The Bible offers us many passages of Jesus speaking. We have accounts of very famous sermons he gave, like the Sermon on the Mount. He spoke many, many parables like the Parable of the Good Samaritan, or that of the Prodigal Son. We also have many passages of Jesus teaching his disciples like the passage we read this morning from John. It is a part of what is known as the Farewell Discourse, a lengthy teaching to his disciples the night before Jesus died.

But we have no idea what Jesus proclaimed to the spirits in prison.

We can make some assumptions. First it was not a sermon. It was not an evangelistic message. The Greek word for *proclamation* used here is more like an announcement, or a declaration of victory.

Second, we can assume that the announcement is about Jesus' victory over death. Why else would he be speaking to those from former times?

I was thinking about this when a statement from a 17th century German Lutheran theologian came to mind, believe it or not. It is a phrase I read many, many years ago that has stuck with me, and informed many of my thoughts ever since.

It is from a man named, Rupert Meldenus, also known as Peter Meiderlin. It is from a religious tract he wrote at a time of horrible,

and violent theological conflicts during the Thirty Years War. He was trying to promote peace when he wrote,

In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty;  
in all things, charity.

One way I use that phrase is in biblical interpretation. If it is essential to our faith, if it is central to the Bible, then we should be unified. If it is not essential, then we are free to differ. But either way we are called to be governed by love.

Let's use this insight when considering what Jesus might have proclaimed in this, his most mysterious announcement.

First, we can state we simply don't know. If Peter felt it was important he would have told us. But he didn't; so we are afforded the liberty to ponder.

As I pondered this I came to some distinct conclusions. I believe the message was good news. I believe it was a message of grace, and love. I believe that because Jesus told us he came among us to announce the Good News. He also told us to love one another, just as he has loved us. I also cannot believe that Jesus, after his sacrificial death on the cross, would approach anyone with an announcement of victory that was arrogant, or egotistically triumphant.

So, I wonder what he said. During this pondering I asked myself what would I have wanted him to say? What would I want to hear Jesus say if I were one of those spirits in prison.

We are all, at least metaphorically, in some type of prison. We all carry regrets. We all have those moments we wish we could do over, or do differently.

My conviction is that Jesus' proclamation was an announcement of liberty, of freedom, of grace, of forgiveness, love, and compassion. I can see Jesus simply proclaiming to those imprisoned, whoever, or wherever they were, "C'mon, follow me. You don't belong here, you belong with me."

Yes, there are many puzzles about this passage. But I would encourage you to ponder what you would want to hear Jesus say to you? If it is a message of liberty, of freedom, of grace, of forgiveness, love, and compassion, why in the world would Jesus not make such a proclamation to you? Why in the world would Jesus not say to you, "C'mon, follow me. You don't belong here, you belong with me."