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Philippians 3:12-4:1
Pressing On Through Change
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I have a small problem when it comes to bookbags. They are never big enough, and so they break because I overstuff them with books. Then I get a bigger one only to discover that it's limited as well. I might also have a small problem with buying books.

While I was on the West Coast this summer I took a huge bookbag along. I clearly picked up a few too many things along the way because by the time I got back to the airport, the zipper on my bag was blown, and the seams were hanging on for dear life. So I took off my belt and wrapped it around it. The bag appreciated it, but it came at some peril to my pants. A man in line who saw me doing this said, "I don't want to walk behind you." When I got on the plane and saw this pitiful overstuffed bag at my feet, it occurred to me that it could be a metaphor for contemporary life.

We have way too many things and responsibilities crammed inside. We try every way we can to keep it all taped together but to no avail. Some days it feels like life is coming apart at the seams. The amazing thing about this is that we still live with guilt over the things we have not accomplished. There is always one more phone call to make, errand to run, project to complete, or goal to achieve. So we try the impossible thing of cramming still more in our stressed lives.

There is another way to live. It isn't complicated, but it is hard. You simply have to pull things out of the baggage that you don't really need. You have to travel light, and to discover the sufficiency of the One Thing.

If you study the lives of the best people in history, you'll notice that the older they got, the more focused their lives became. They are less distracted by the agendas others have for them and even less distracted by the many unrelated interests of their youth. In time, they became centered on one idea or vision. They possessed it. Or more to the point, the One Thing possessed them. Everything else had to either integrate into this passion or they let it go like discarded baggage. For St. Augustine, the One Thing was the confession that the heart is restless until it rests in God. For Luther, it was the doctrine of justification by faith. For Martin Luther King Jr., it was the great dream of a colorblind society. For Mother Theresa, it was giving dignity to the dying. And according to our text today, for the Apostle Paul, it was knowing Christ Jesus our Lord.

The third chapter of Philippians gives us Paul's personal testimony. I grew up in a wing of the church that stressed the telling of testimonies. A testimony is a description of someone's life before and after meeting Jesus. It didn't take me long, even as a kid, to figure out the basic pattern behind these stories. First, the person described how bad he or she was. (Even if you weren't all that bad, you had to make it sound like you were.) Second, comes the part about encountering the forgiving grace of God. Third, the person talks about how much better life is now. There are some minor variations on this, but most testimonies follow that outline. A bad person meets Jesus and becomes a good person.

In today's text we receive Paul's testimony, which is substantively different. Paul begins by describing how good he was *before* he knew Jesus. He had a good pedigree: a circumcised member of the people of Israel and the tribe of Benjamin. He was a Hebrew born of Hebrews. He also had a good resume as a Pharisee. He had good ambition and was zealous. He even had good spirituality: as to righteousness under the law, blameless. In the second part of his testimony, he describes the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. Everything that was good is rubbish by comparison. Then in the third part, he says he wants to be "found in him."

So whereas our typical testimony is about a bad person meeting Jesus to become a good person, Paul's testimony is about a good person meeting Jesus to become like him, ". . . like him in death, if somehow I may obtain the resurrection from the dead."

The difference here is extremely important. Paul doesn't think Jesus gave him a second chance to get his life together. This is often the way we talk about Jesus, as if the cross and resurrection were nothing more than an opportunity to atone for our own sins by living a better life. Paul has already lived a good life, and his point is that it was rubbish compared to knowing Jesus. As his life testifies, it doesn't matter how good you are, you're never going to be good enough. It doesn't matter how much you achieve, you'll never achieve enough. It doesn't matter how hard you work, you'll never work hard enough. What matters is One Thing—knowing Christ Jesus on the cross and in the resurrection to a new life.

How do we know Christ experientially, on the cross and in the resurrection? Well, Paul goes on with his testimony in our text: "Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on for the goal of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

The cross is behind you. The call to a new risen life in Christ is before you. And the heavenly call is to leave the past on the cross, and strain forward to the new life Christ is giving you.

We all are tempted by regret over the past. We regret things we have done and left undone, things we wished we could do over. But we cannot. We regret choices we have made, commitments we cannot break, and decisions about careers that we wish we had never made. We regret not taking better care of our health. Parents regret mistakes they made with their children. Spouses and friends regret the words they said to each other in anger, words that cannot be taken back.

We apologize and try to make amends. Maybe we even try to forgive ourselves. But the regret lingers. It's the heaviest baggage we carry, and it has the power to tear life apart. It isn't really the busyness of life that is our greatest threat. It's the regret that makes us try so hard to get it right this time. But you cannot improve the past no matter how hard you work.

Maybe we nurture these regrets because they make us feel virtuous. But guilt is not a virtue. For virtue you have to look to the cross. Only the nailed, scared hands can hold our past failures, and that is where we have to leave them. Then, according to the Apostle, we have to forget them.

Paul did some awful things before he met Jesus, dragging men and women to jail and participating in the stoning of Stephen. He never mentions that. Apparently he has forgotten what lies in his past. He does remember the wonderful things of his past: his pedigree, his good job as a Pharisee, and his righteousness under the law. But that is also in the past, and it lies behind him. The good and the bad were all interrupted by the heavenly call of Christ.

Paul doesn't want to be remembered as an old ball player talking about the good old days in the show. He wants his testimony to end as one who was straining everyday to receive the new life that comes from knowing Jesus. That is the call of the resurrection on your life.

This new life may not look like the life you had planned. Remember that Paul was probably in jail when he wrote these words about straining for what lies ahead, so he understands waking up to a day that is not easy. Your new life may not be as full or healthy as the life you used to have. Or if you are young, the new life may be filled with questions and challenging demands. It doesn't really matter. The thing that makes the new life worth living is that it is Jesus Christ's gift to you. But you have to say yes to this call to live today.

Through every interruption of your plans, every unwanted change, and every necessary passage life takes that always involves loss, the question keeps returning—will you still say yes to life? The Apostle was straining at shackles to affirm this new life, and you may have to strain at grief, heartbreak, sickness, confusion, or exhaustion. But still you have the opportunity to say yes to life.

Dag Hammarskjold, the famed Secretary General of the UN and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, wrote the following in his journal *Markings*: “I don't know who – or what – put the question, I don't know when it was put. I don't even remember answering. But at some moment I did answer *yes* to Someone – or Something – and from that hour I was certain existence is meaningful and that, therefore, my life, in self surrender had a goal. From that moment I have known what it means not to look back”¹

No one makes any distance toward the heavenly call by looking back. The only thing you need to see back there is the cross. That is what frees you to answer “yes” to the call of new life. It's the One Thing that makes every other thing possible. Amen.