

Easter Sunday

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26 (NIV)

¹⁹If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. ²⁰But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²²For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Theme: Christ Is the Firstfruits

When I went to see the Dead Sea scrolls exhibit earlier this year, one of the things that interested me was the many ossuaries at the beginning of the exhibit. The way that the Jews buried people at the time was that they dug a small cave out of a hillside. That cave would have a small entrance, which you had to bend down to enter. Once you were inside there were three benches on which the deceased were placed. They were wrapped in linen clothes and anointed with perfumes. A large stone was placed in front of the entrance after the body was placed in the tomb.

After the body had decomposed, someone would go into the grave to gather the bones. They would be placed in a small limestone box, called an ossuary. The box would bear the name of the person and would generally identify the person by who their parents were. The ossuaries of many people would then be kept inside of the tomb.

The most important ossuary that was ever found was from Caiaphas, who was the High Priest who condemned Jesus to death. The biggest fraud ever was an ossuary that was said to be of James, the brother of Jesus and the pastor of the church in Jerusalem. It made a lot of headlines until it was revealed to be fake. The most interesting one at the exhibit was from Rufus, the son of Simon of Cyrene. Both Rufus and Simon are mentioned in the Bible. Simon was the man who carried Jesus cross.

There are a couple of locations where people think that Jesus' tomb might have been. One of them is the garden tomb, and the other is the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. But something that no one has ever found is an ossuary bearing Jesus' name because His body didn't decay. He rose after only three days in the grave. His resurrection is the assurance of our eternal life. As Paul writes, He is the firstfruits of all of those who have fallen asleep.

I. Paul makes it clear in these verses that death is our enemy.

There are people who try to make death into our friend. It is sometimes looked at as a release from suffering. Some people look at it as a way to get to a better place. The suicide terrorists look at it as something that brings glory and honor. But death is never our friend.

That was never more apparent than on Good Friday. The entire story is full of mourning, weeping, pain, and suffering. When Jesus was on the way to the cross, the women of Jerusalem wept for Him.

He suffered great agony as He hung on the cross. He was mocked and beaten. When He died, those who saw what took place beat their breasts as they went home. The sun even stopped shining, and the earth quaked. All of the events of that day make it clear that death is not a friend. It is our enemy.

It has also been that way throughout history. Many of the pastors who wrote our most beautiful Lutheran hymns experienced such times of pain. I have often shared stories about the hymnwriter Paul Gerhardt. He and his wife lost their first daughter after less than a year. There is still plaque that hangs in the church today which they put up in memory of her. Two years later He wrote a poem to a friend who lost a child. You can see the grief that was still in his heart when he wrote,¹ that it is a bitter sorrow and a breaking of the heart that words can never express when you lose one of your children. Martin Rinckhardt, the man who wrote, “Now Thank we all our God,” served in a town called, Eilenburg during both the 30 Years Wars and times of plague. There were times when he buried up to 70 people a day. Philip Nicolai, who wrote “How Lovely Shines the Morning Star” buried 1400 people from his congregation in a period of 7 months. Even with a strong Christian faith, these experiences left their scars on each of these men.

Death is still our enemy today. Like the three men that I just mentioned, we have all grieved and mourned over loved ones who have been called from this life. We struggle with sin and temptation. There are all kinds of evils in this world that trouble us. As we get older, we see how our own bodies are in bondage to decay. There are things that we used to do that we can’t do as well anymore. There are even some things that we have to give up. One day there will be others who will grieve and mourn over us.

II. But on Easter Christ declared victory.

The angel told the women, “*Why do you seek the living among the dead. He is not here. He is risen!*” By His innocent death for us on the cross, Christ conquered death. He proved it by His resurrection. There is no ossuary with Jesus’ bones, and none will ever be found because His body never decayed. It rose from the dead. He would come to His disciples with the words, “Peace be with you.”

His victory belongs to us. Paul writes, “*As by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead.*” Adam’s sin brought death into the world. Jesus’ perfect sacrifice for our sins brings life and salvation. Through Baptism and faith in His name we die to sin. They are all forgiven, and we are clothed with His righteousness. God makes us into His beloved children and heirs of everlasting life. There is nothing that can separate us from God’s love in Jesus Christ. We have the peace of knowing that God is our dear Father, the friend that loves us most. He really will work all things for our good. Christ’s victory belongs to all who know Him as their Savior. The victory is ours already. In Christ we have been born again to a new life in Christ.

**¹Ach, es ist ein bittres Leiden und ein rechter Myrrhentrank,
sich von seinen Kindern scheiden durch den schweren Todesgang,
Hier geschieht ein Herzensbrechen, das kein Mund recht kann aussprechen.**

III. The day that He returns He will destroy death once and for all.

It says that Christ is the firstfruits of all who have fallen asleep. The firstfruits is a reference to an Old Testament law in which God required that the first part of the crop be dedicated to the Lord. First came the firstfruits, and then came the rest of the harvest. Christ is like that first part of the crop, and on the last day the rest of us will follow. He will raise all people and take those who knew Him as their Savior to eternal glory with Him in heaven.

Those three hymnwriters that I mentioned earlier, gave us some of the greatest hymns of peace and comfort in our eternal life in Christ. That poem that Gerhardt wrote to his friend, expresses his deep sympathy for that family, but it also brings comfort that their child is with the Lord and that He will turn their joy into singing at the resurrection.² It was during the period when they were experiencing so much sorrow in their congregation that Rinhardt wrote, “Now Thank We all our God” and Nicolai wrote his hymns praising God for our eternal life in Christ.

As Christians our hope is not what a lot of people have today, that there is some kind of afterlife after a person dies. We don't talk ourselves into a wish that there is something better after this life. We believe in the resurrection of the dead because Christ is risen from the dead! There is a basis for our sure hope. It is Christ's resurrection. His resurrection is the assurance that God will raise us with glorified bodies. The book of Revelation tells us that when Christ raises us there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, and that these words are trustworthy and true. Christ will destroy death once and for all on that day. He will raise us to live and reign with Him in all of His glory for all of eternity.

A lot of times people think that things are hopeless in this world, but Easter brings hope to a hopeless world. Christ is risen! His resurrection is the assurance of our forgiveness, our deliverance from every evil, and our eternal life. By His death Christ has conquered death. By His resurrection He assures us of our eternal life with Him. May His Spirit fill our hearts with faith in that eternal victory that He has won for us. Amen.

²The poem is entitled, “Leid ist mir in meinem Herzen”