

Sermon for April 8, 2012 – Easter Day

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Theme: Death's Days are Numbered

1. *Because Christ rose from the dead.*
2. *Because Christ will raise the dead.*

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

It is truly sad, but there are many people who think that Christianity is not about heaven, but it is about how to make the present better. They say it is irrelevant whether or not Christ actually rose from the dead, whether or not he will come again in the future, all that matters is now - what kind of impact will Christianity make in our time to our world?

From a human perspective this "social gospel" might sound good, but it is actually quite horrible. If there is no resurrection from the dead, our faith, our preaching and even our Bible would be absolutely worthless. If there were no resurrection from the dead, then Christ would not have been raised. This would mean that we are still in our sins. This would mean that all our loved ones who died believing in Christ would be lost. If there is no resurrection from the dead, then what use is there living for Christ now? What use would there be in suffering for the sake of the Gospel? St. Paul says in the first verse of our text: ¹⁹ *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. Yes, indeed he has. Many people saw him throughout the 40 days before his ascension: all the disciples, the women who followed him. . . Paul tells us that Jesus once appeared to a group of more than 500 people. Lastly he even appeared to Paul himself - a man who once vehemently persecuted and killed Christians, and who was now ready to suffer and die for Christ. Jesus rose from the dead - this is a fact. It is a wonderful fact. It is because of this truth we have hope. It is because of this truth we strive to share the Gospel with others - fully confident that our sins are forgiven through faith in Christ Jesus. It is because of this truth we are no longer terrified of death.

Death's days numbered, because Christ indeed rose from the dead, and because Christ will raise the dead. This will be the focus of our sermon on this glorious morning.

Part One: Because Christ rose from the dead.

What is it that terrifies people the most? Death. And why? It's because, whether people acknowledge it or not, we all know deep in our hearts that the wages of sin is death. Since all people die, all people are sinful. And all people face God's wrath because of their sins. You see it is not physical death per se that terrifies people, but the threat of what happens after death, the threat of facing God's just judgment concerning sin - this is what terrifies people.

But God does not want us lost from him. This is why He promised to send His Son Jesus to save us. And how would he do this? First of all by living a life that was perfectly obedient to God's law in our place. By doing this Jesus won the righteousness we need to stand before God. And then righteous Jesus did something else: he took all our sins upon himself and marched to the cross to be sacrificed in our stead. He went to the cross to suffer the punishment, the hell, that we deserved. Jesus went to the cross to die.

If Jesus had remained dead, our hope would have remained dead with him. If Jesus had remained dead, how would that be any different than anyone else who died before or after him? But Jesus didn't remain dead. He rose from the grave!

This is why we are here this morning, Jesus rose from the grave. And what does that mean for us? It means that God accepted his payment for our sins. It means that we, who believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of our sins, will also rise from the dead, as St. Paul says: *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

Gardeners: when you see the very first tomato appear on your tomato plant, what do you know is going to happen? You know your plant succeeded in producing fruit and many more tomatoes are going to follow in the future. Jesus resurrection is like the first fruit of a harvest - because he rose, we know that many more will rise too. Because he rose, we know that death has been defeated.

And Paul goes on to explain why: *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.* ²² *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.*

We Christians inherited sin and death from Adam and Eve. We sin every day, and there is nothing we can do to save ourselves from it. But just as we inherited sin and death from Adam, so also have we inherited forgiveness and life from Christ. Through baptism God has given spiritual birth to us. Through faith in Christ's work of saving us, we inherit from him eternal life with God and the right to be called his dearly loved children. We are connected with Christ. Just as he rose from the dead, so will all of us who believe in him. Yes, death's days are numbered. Death's rule of terror over us is coming to an end. The sadness we experience at the passing of a Christian brother or sister will end in joy. Death will soon be destroyed.

Part Two: Because Christ will raise the dead.

Those who hold on to Christ in repentance and faith will rise from the dead, *but each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.*

When you see the first ripe fruit on a plant, it does not mean the harvest has come, but that the harvest is near. Christ is the first fruit of the resurrection harvest. His resurrection shows that the rest will follow, and follow soon - just not right now. Not yet. The time of the harvest hasn't come.

When will it come? *When he comes* - when Jesus comes again on the Last Day. St. Paul explains this in greater detail in 1 Thessalonians 4:14-17, where he writes: *We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air.*

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ *For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. (1 Corinthians 15:24-25).* When you see in Scripture the descriptions "dominion, authority and power," understand that the evil spiritual world is being described - the devil and all his angels. When Jesus has subdued everyone of his enemies (who happen to be our enemies as well) then Christ will hand over his Kingdom to his Father. We will all be under him - his children, citizens of the eternal paradise He will create for us on that day. We, in our very own body and soul, will be alive to see this glorious day - truly alive. All of our enemies will be utterly destroyed, never to bother us again, and *the last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

Yes, death's days are numbered because Christ rose from the dead and Christ will raise us from the dead. At the end of time, God will destroy death forever. Never again will there be a child who dies in the womb, or shortly after birth. Never again will a Christian parent have to bury their son or daughter, or a Christian child see their parent slowly suffer and waste away. Never again will war claim the life of a Christian father, or cancer a Christian spouse. Never again will car accidents or crime rip those we love away from us. And why? Because death will be destroyed, as God promised in our first lesson: *On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation." (Isaiah 25:7-9)*

This truth makes us cry out with St. Paul: *“Death has been swallowed up in victory.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.* (1 Corinthians 15:54b-57)

Yes, thanks be to God for giving us this glorious day - a day that proves beyond any doubt that our sins have been paid for. A day that proclaims that even death's days are numbered, because Christ rose from the dead and Christ most certainly will raise the dead at his reappearing. Amen.