

## Sermon for April 5, 2015 – Easter Day

1 Corinthians 15:54a-57 (NIV84)

Theme: **Christ's Resurrection is our victory.**

- 1) *Over death*
- 2) *Over sin*
- 3) *Over the law*

<sup>54</sup> "Death has been swallowed up in victory." <sup>55</sup> "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" <sup>56</sup> The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. <sup>57</sup> But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

One cold day I stood over a casket in a cemetery, conducting a burial. Around me were people grieving the loss of their mother, sister, friend, etc. . . Part of the liturgy for that service was our sermon text.

Picture it for a moment – on this cold day, in the middle of a grave yard over a dead body with a group of grieving people surrounding me, I said: "*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*"

I thought to myself, "I wonder if the people here understand my words. It must have seemed like a very odd thing to say. Where is death's victory? Look, all around us are hundreds and hundreds of gravestones. Where is death's sting? All the people around me certainly feel stung – having lost their loved one. How can I honestly say these things in a graveyard?"

Yes, my words must have seemed odd to those who don't know the Christian faith. But to the believers gathered there, those words offered great comfort. Why? Because they remembered Easter. They remembered Jesus' resurrection and the promises associated with it. They knew that, even though it may have seemed like death had won again, death has been defeated. The grave cannot hold on to those who believe in Jesus. This is why they could stand defiantly in a cemetery and say: "Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

On this great day of remembrance, with St. Paul as our guide, let us celebrate the fact that **Christ's resurrection is our victory: over death, sin and the law.**

Our sermon text is a portion of what theologians lovingly call, "the great Resurrection chapter" of the Bible. St. Paul wrote it in response to some questions the Corinthians had concerning the resurrection of the dead. It seems as if some false teachers were telling them that there was no such thing.

The apostle Paul begged to differ.

First of all he, and many others, physically saw the resurrected Christ. Secondly, Christianity without the teaching of the resurrection would make our religion absolutely worthless. But we know that there will be a general resurrection because Jesus did, in fact, rise from the dead. Paul then goes on to describe what the resurrection will be like for believers and ends this great resurrection chapter with the words of our text: "*Death has been swallowed up in victory.*" "*Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?*" <sup>56</sup> *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.*

Death.

What is the sting of death? What gives it its power?

The answer is simple: the reason there is death in this world is because of sin. Sin is the sting of death because it separates us from God, who is the author of life himself. To be separated from God means to be separated from life. It means to be dead.

What is sin? Simply put: it is breaking God's holy Law – His Ten Commandments. If there were no Law, there would be no sin. But there is a Law that God established for all people, and all people have broken it. Because we have sinned, we have been separated from God. Outside of Christ we are spiritually dead and in danger of dying eternally, namely being separated from God and all of his goodness forever in hell.

Physical death, therefore, is only a symptom of a greater spiritual problem: sin. If we were not sinful, we would not die. But can any one claim to be without sin?<sup>i</sup> Absolutely not. Both our consciences and the Bible testify against us. *There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*<sup>ii</sup>

If, for some reason, you still have trouble coming to grips with the fact that you are a sinner, then let me ask you this: will you die? If the answer is yes, then you must certainly be a sinner because death is the result of sin.

Therefore, it does not matter if you consider yourself better than other people - someone who does not sin more than others. God does not compare you to other people, but to his holy law. The Bible is clear: *whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.*<sup>iii</sup> We are all sinful. We need help.

And this is where Jesus comes in. Who is He? The Bible reveals him as the Son of God, who also is true God. He came down from heaven and took on human flesh and blood in the womb of a young virgin named Mary in order to be born human. Why did Jesus do this? In order to save us.

You see, God the Father knew that we could not save ourselves. He knew that we all were going to die eternally for our sins unless He did something to prevent that from happening. God loves us. He does not want us in hell. This is exactly why He sent Jesus, His Son, to save us.

And how exactly did Jesus save us? First of all by subjecting himself to God's law in order to do what no other human being was ever able to do: keep it perfectly. From the day Jesus was born on this earth, he was tempted by the devil in every way, just as we are, but did not sin.<sup>iv</sup>

Now think about it: Sin is like a pointy stinger on a deadly scorpion: where it strikes, death follows. And where does sin get its power from? The Law of God, which we break.

But, here's the thing: Jesus did not break God's law. He kept it perfectly. And if Jesus did not break God's Law, then He had no sin. And if Jesus had no sin, there would be no death for him.

But wait a minute: didn't Jesus die? We just held a remembrance for his crucifixion two days ago on Good Friday. How could Jesus die, if He were sinless? The answer is simple: someone else's sin was attributed to him so that he could die, and that someone else's sin is ours.

The Bible says: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*<sup>v</sup> In other words Jesus took His perfect record of keeping God's Law and decided to make a trade with us. Taking our record of sins, He wrote his name on it. Then He took his perfect record of keeping God's law and wrote our name on that. So what happened when God the Father looked at Jesus

on the cross? He saw our record of sin and punished Jesus for them all – a fact we remembered on Good Friday.

However, even though Jesus carried our sins, he himself remained sinless. Because Jesus is both true God and man, he was able to suffer for the sins of all people, and bring that suffering to completion. And when the payment for sins was complete, who remained standing? Jesus, who is sinless. Now, if sin has been paid for, and Jesus is sinless, and sin is the only power of death, could Jesus remain dead? No. Jesus had to rise victorious over death because he was victorious over sin.

Therefore if all our sins were on Jesus when he died, and Jesus then rose from the grave without them – where is our record of sin? It is gone! Not only that, but Jesus also gives us his perfect record of keeping God's Law through faith. Consequently, everyone who believes in Jesus is righteous in God's sight – not because they perfectly kept the Law, but because He did. The Law can no longer accuse us of unrighteousness because its demands have been fulfilled. And if the Law has been fulfilled and sin paid for, death has no power over us.

Jesus' resurrection is the proof that this is the case! Because he lives we too shall live. This is the comfort of Easter. This is what allows us to say in full confidence at a Christian's grave: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

But wait a minute. If Jesus defeated death for us, why do believers still die?

First of all we have to understand that the death Jesus saved us from is not physical, but eternal death. The believer will never be separated from God and all his goodness forever. The Christian will never experience hell.

But God still allows us to undergo physical death. Why? Well, only God himself can answer that question; and I will not presume to answer it when I can't. But there are some promises in Scripture that give us a partial answer to the question.

First of all, not all people believe in Jesus. God is patient, and wants all people to be saved. In patience he allows this world to continue in its sin-cursed state, so that more people might be brought to faith and receive eternal life. We live in this sin-cursed world and are therefore subject to physical death – just like Jesus, the sinless son of God, was. But here's the thing: we also have God's promise that Jesus will come again to wake the dead. Yes, the dead will rise on the last day so that believers might live with God forever in the paradise He is even now preparing for us.

Secondly the death of a believer is not really death in the spiritual sense of the word. The Bible is careful to describe it as a rest. His soul, while separated from his body, is not separated from God, rather it is with Him – enjoying rest and peace, until the day of resurrection comes. Physical death is a blessing for the believer, as the LORD says through Isaiah: *The righteous perish, and no one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.*<sup>vi</sup> In other words, a believer's death is really a sleep, from which he will be awakened on the Last Day, just as Jesus woke up from his.

Do you now understand why a believer can defiantly say at a grave: "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?" He can say this because Jesus' resurrection has given us victory over sin and death, because He fulfilled the law that stood against us. Since our Redeemer lives, we know that we too will live. Our future is certain. We know that our loved ones, who fall asleep believing in the LORD, will rest securely in the grave until he wakes all of us up on the Last Day to begin our glorified life with him in the new heavens and new earth. Praise the LORD for this wonderful hope. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> 1 John 1:8 (NIV84)

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 3:22,23 (NIV84)

<sup>iii</sup> James 2:10 (NIV84)

<sup>iv</sup> Hebrews 4:15 (NIV84)

<sup>v</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:21 (NIV84)

<sup>vi</sup> Isaiah 57:1-2 (NIV84)