

What If Death Got the Final Blow?

A sermon based on 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.

Something I learned from watching the NCAA college basketball tournament over the last few weeks (and I watched quite a bit of college basketball), it's just how true that saying "it's not how you start but how you finish," just how true that is in any sport. You see, my team, the University of Wisconsin, it dominated the championship game for 30 minutes. In the final minutes, though, they couldn't hit a bucket and lost a lost a heart breaker. Football fans, to see a team like the Packers, or the Seahawks, in the playoffs, hitting on all cylinders for 97% of the game, and then in the final few minutes, to watch as they let up on the gas, lose their aggressiveness, and ultimately, lose the game to the other team, who's hungrier, who wants it more, it's disappointing.

You see, at the end of the game, the match, the set, all that matters is who's still standing, victorious, while the defeated team is left to question, "Well, what if?" Last week, Paul answered the question for us, "What if Christ had not been raised?" Real scary thought. But not one we have to think of because Christ has INDEED been raised from the dead.

Well, today, he asks the Corinthians, and us, another "what if" question, "What if, in the bout every one of us is locked into, what if, in this death match with death, we weren't victorious?" What if death got the final blow?

Now, talking about Christ' resurrection, the topic Paul covers at length in all of 1 Corinthians 15, the great "Resurrection Chapter," it naturally leads into discussing the other side of the coin, death. You know, the one topic that still, to this day, probably makes most of us a little squeamish and uncomfortable to talk about.

But, in talking about death, there are just some things we don't know. Paul talks about some of these mysteries here. Obviously, Christ's resurrection isn't the mystery. That's a fact.

But what comes as a result of that for us is still a bit of the mystery. Questions, like, "What will our bodies look like when we're in heaven? What's the perfect body going to look like? What will an imperishable body look like? Will we have a case of the Benjamin Button's and look younger once we get to heaven? If I have a limp here or wear glasses here or have that "ugly" birthmark, will I still limp in heaven...will I have to wear glasses...will that birthmark still remain? All a mystery.

What's not a mystery? We will all die. Every one of us is in that perpetual dance with death, some of us inching closer on some days than others, but every second ticking by is one second closer to life ending here. Death is inevitable. We can try to prolong it, but we can't escape it. Every one of us has to step into the ring with death, a fight we can't win. Except for Enoch and Elijah, death has won every contest with life...and that will include us. Death gets the final blow. Are you ok with that? You don't have a choice.

Now, I'm going to let you all in on a little secret...I hate to lose. Oh...it's really not that big of a secret??? Maybe it was from my vicar/intern year, where my supervising pastor was a card shark and was more intense than I am (can you believe it?!?) in games and always seemed to win...except for one time where

I managed to beat him. Or, maybe it's having grown up as a middle child, and with five other siblings, you have to "fight" for your keep, do something to stand out. Or, maybe it's the innate feeling of elation we all get in the midst of victory, right?

The truth is, we all want to win. We all want to enjoy that sweet taste of victory. But can we get it in the fight with death? According to this section, it sure looks that way. Doesn't it almost seem as though Paul is mocking, taunting death with his pointed heckling, "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?"

But what if Paul was wrong? What if death was victorious? What if death got the final blow? What if we were the losers?

Friends, we are the losers. Step into the ring. In one corner, there's you. Or there's me. It really could be anyone. Our stats are the same. In the chase for a perfect record – in the way that we live – we're not even close. Oh, we each have our small handful of wins, times we've been able to say "no" to ungodliness, times when we've been able to turn sin and Satan away, but nowhere near perfection.

And in the other corner, the final enemy, the greatest enemy, death. It's as big of a David-Goliath matchup as there ever was. Maybe you've seen fights like that before, wrestling or boxing matches, where you just have to shake your head at the "inferior" competition, thinking, "They shouldn't even be here...this is going to be embarrassing...they are going to be crushed...they are out of their league." It's because the opponent is just that good, a cut above the rest.

That's death. He's got a crushing blow that seemingly no one can endure and survive.

And since birth, we've been sparring with this beast of an opponent. Oh, we have our own array of punches to throw and attacks to make. Physically, there's botox injections or cosmetic surgery to make you look younger. Healthy diets (so many different healthy diets), vitamins, exercise regimens make you feel great, like you can fend off death. And how many have died trying to find that fabled fountain of youth?!? It's all about what can we do to escape death.

But you know as well as I do that all that stuff...it might prolong life, but it can't prevent death. They're jabs that glance off of death's shoulders, but they can't stop him from coming after us. You know why? Do you know what our Achilles heel is, what our real weakness is? "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." "There is no one who does good, not even one." "The wages of sin is death."

It wouldn't matter if we were in peak physical shape. It doesn't matter if we're in peak spiritual shape, either. No amount of good works can save us from the oncoming assault death is building up against us. Trying our best to live according to God's Word can't make up for all the times we've failed to obey him. In this ring, there's no place to run. There's no place to hide.

We have sinned. We have fallen short of God's demand for perfection. His perfect Law condemns us imperfect sinners. And we can't do anything about our final opponent, death. It stands ready to sting us. And friends, this is not a sting like what you get from a bee or from getting caught in the path of the thorns of those wild rose plants or even pricking yourself with a pin or needle. It's a sting like the point of a spear piercing your body, cutting into your body. I've never felt that kind of pain, but I would imagine it's excruciating. And coming from death, it's lethal, physically and eternally.

Sin is what kills. Death hangs that weapon over our heads. We sin. We deserve to die. We are no match. Death gets the final blow. We lose. We're the losers.

Look into the other corner...actually, look up to the cross. There stands/hangs a worthy competitor for this match. Jesus vs. sin, Satan, and the final enemy, death. A real heavyweight fight. This is even bigger than a Joe Frazier – Muhammad Ali bout. This isn't the fight of the century. It's the fight for our eternity.

Step out of the ring. This isn't a tag-team match. It's not Jesus with you. It's Jesus for you. And guess what? Jesus became the biggest loser for us.

I mean, just walk through his life. Was there really anything that significant about being born in the lowly town of Bethlehem...having a blue-collared carpenter for a father...being just a teacher, a traveling preaching, with a motley crew of disciples...to the disgrace of being arrested, convicted in trial, mocked, scourged, crucified as the worst kind of criminal? Seemingly, no.

But even throw in the fact that he didn't just live an ordinary life, but that he lived a perfect life, never sinned...but where did that get him? To the cross, face to face with death, and he came down with a victorious shout! No.

Jesus and death stood toe to toe on that hill that Good Friday, and it sure looked like death stood triumphant, a battle that not even Jesus could win. But oh, how looks can be so deceiving. Yeah, death delivered the deadly blow to Jesus, but it wasn't the final blow.

Jesus got that honor. You see, Jesus didn't come down from the cross with a triumphant shout, but he still did have that cry of victory, "It is finished!" On the cross, Jesus defeated the sting of sin that would TKO, that would knock out every one of us. But the only way to do that was to take the sting for us, to take on death for us...to die for us. It's not that Jesus threw the match. He had to lose the match.

But again, it wasn't the final blow. That came three days later. We celebrated the final blow last week. We celebrate that final blow today. We celebrate that final blow every Sunday. On Easter, Jesus destroyed death with the overpowering uppercut of his resurrection. On Easter, the saying that is written came true, "Death has been swallowed up in victory." That opponent has been done away with for good.

Wow! What a fight! Almost seems as though we need to give Jesus his due accolades. How about this nickname for Jesus – Death-Destroyer! Because, that's exactly what he's done...in his life and his death, he took his shots from sin, death, and the devil, but in his resurrection, the Death-Destroyer stands victorious over them all, having destroyed all their power. By his resurrection, the Death-Destroyer has secured our final victory as well!

Even now, death, it still gets its punches in. Death will still hit each of us with a deadly blow. But now, what a blessing! Do you know why? Because that means we won't be "stuck" here forever. Right? Just like it was for Adam and Eve. I'm sure they were so sad to have to be leaving the Garden of Eden, their "paradise" but if they never had (and eaten from the Tree of Life), they would have lived forever, but never would have gotten to eternal Paradise.

Losing someone, leaving this world, this life, it can be sad. But, we can be glad we will lose to death as well. This life is great, but it's not heaven. But because of the Death-Destroyer...our Lord of Life, we

have paradise in our future. And losing in this life, losing our life here is a defeat we look forward to because that's not the final blow. Death is just the blow that knocks us out, puts us to "sleep," but we get to wake up in heaven, with Jesus. Doesn't sound like much of a loss to me!

"What if death got the final blow?" We lose. That would be disappointing. The way our life-match started, it sure looked like death would. But we know it's not about how you start, but rather how you finish. And because of Jesus, his life, death, and resurrection, this is how our lifelong match with death will end. It will deliver the death blow, but Jesus gets the final blow. He's destroyed death. He's won the victory for us. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." And that's an eternal victory. We win! Amen.