

Easter Means...Death Is Dead!

A sermon based on 1 Corinthians 15:19-26.

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

It's not Easter unless...how would you finish that statement? It's not Easter unless Mom and Dad hid our Easter baskets and we found them and have already eaten a couple pounds of jelly beans and now we're wired. It's not Easter unless I'm eating ham and deviled eggs or whatever your traditional Easter grub is. It's not Easter unless I've got my girls wearing the poofy spring dresses or the boys have on they cute three piece suits. It's not Easter unless I'm at church...unless we sing *I Know that My Redeemer Lives* or another of your favorite Easter hymns (that would be a good one!). For me, it used to be it wasn't Easter unless I could see the grass and the tulips peeking out of the ground. I've learned to temper my expectations up here!

But, again, what is it for you? How about this one? It's not Easter unless there's death. Maybe not quite what you were expecting to hear today, of all days. You know, it's fun to think about what Easter means to you. But it's more than egg dishes and bunny cartoons. It's more than spring's arrival and snow melting. It's more than one day of new dresses and a big brunch.

Today, as well as over the next 6 weeks of Easter (notice the parallelism to the 6 weeks of Lent), God's going to tell us what Easter means **for** us...that's far more important. And today, the greatest Sunday of the church year, God tells us this: Easter means death is dead!

Now, this isn't one of the ironies of the passion we'd been looking at over the past six weeks of Lent. But it certainly sounds like it, though, doesn't it? I mean, Jesus' death is done. We meditated on it and sorrowed over it on Friday. Today is Easter. We're here to celebrate Jesus' resurrection. He's alive! He's risen! He's risen indeed!

But we can't imagine there being that celebratory and positive attitude among Jesus' disciples and followers on the first Easter morning...because, as far as they knew, Jesus was dead. And had they not seen events as they progressed throughout the day, with Jesus appearing to the women, Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene, Jesus appearing to Peter, Jesus appearing to the Emmaus disciples, Jesus appearing to almost all of his disciples (sans Thomas), then they would have been where Paul begins our verses today, ***"If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."*** As much as they had enjoyed Christ and his teaching and his displays of power during his life, had he not risen...had he stayed dead, all hope was lost. They would have had nothing to live for but to die...with their faith in vain.

But you know the rest. Jesus is not dead. He's alive. And because he's alive, death is dead. Death is defeated. Death has no power.

But try telling that to a young mother in Wisconsin, who came home from work one day a couple of weeks ago to find her husband (no prior health conditions) dead on the floor...who now wants nothing more than to hear his voice again but knows she won't. Tell that to the grieving wife of a former pastor down in Anchorage, as she watched her husband fight off the terminal effects of brain cancer for over two years, but also watched his body beaten and bruised and weakened until life gave out. Tell that to

your friend, who just found out they have a terminal illness (it seems too often these days we're hearing that about someone we know). Try telling that to yourself and convincing yourself of that.

It doesn't matter how many times you encounter it, death never feels natural, never feels right, never feels good. Death always feels wrong. Something inside us does not accept that we will not hear that voice, see that face, touch that hand, experience that laughter ever again. The grief counselors can talk till they're blue in the face about how death is simply a part of life and how we must accept it as inevitable and natural. But we never do. We never will. We hate death...because it does hold power over us.

And over more than just our emotions. Doesn't death hold power over our lives? Benjamin Franklin famously said, "Nothing is certain (in life) except death and taxes." Here, Paul writes, "In Adam all die." Because of Adam, because of his sin, inherited by us, we all die. Because of our own sins, in thought and word and deed, we all die.

And ***"if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men."*** If death was all that we had to look forward to, then we would be miserable indeed. We would have reason to fear our whole life was in vain and the endurance of every struggle or temptation a wasted effort. And, if death is the end, why struggle, why sacrifice, why endure opposition and persecution especially from our own flesh in its fight with sins and temptations?

If Christ had not been raised from the dead, then we have no proof, no guarantee that he did pay for all our sins. Then we have nothing to believe in, no faith, no hope. Then human beings who die stay dead forever and are lost forever! And death wins.

Except it doesn't. Not today. Not ever. You see, it's not Easter unless...death is dead. We have no hope unless death is dead. We have no eternal life unless death is dead.

And it is. And how we know death is dead? Two words here in our verse (which you probably glossed over) – "indeed" in verse 20 and "must" in verse 25.

It's all because of one man. Adam brought death to us all. Jesus brought life. "Indeed" he did. Easter is a fact not to be denied. Jesus' resurrection is a reality on which we rest a sure and certain hope. Nothing is certain in this life except death and taxes...and Jesus' resurrection.

We know death is dead because Jesus ***"must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death."*** You might notice there's a little contrast there with what Paul writes in the previous verse, how Jesus would hand the kingdom over to the Father after he ***"destroyed all dominion, authority, and power."*** And, friends, today, that's as good as done because he "must." Jesus has to put his enemies under his feet and destroy our enemies. He already has.

Death is dead, crushed under Jesus' feet...feet that were pierced. Feet that prevailed. This is our Easter hope, today and forever. Jesus' feet, those precious, perfect feet that walked the path of God's commands and never strayed...those feet were ***"pierced for our transgressions."*** And in death, those feet...Jesus was carried off to a grave...dead. But with his death on the cross came death to our sins...our every sin! And death did not win. Those precious feet prevailed as Jesus walked out of that tomb, alive.

Death, feared by all, has now fallen victim to Christ in his resurrection; he has conquered it *for us!*

How we know death is dead for us? Because Jesus is the “firstfruits” of those who **“will be made alive.”** That word, firstfruits, was in reference to a Jew’s first harvest of the season. They would give the entire thing to God, trusting him to bring them more harvest. Jesus is the first to rise and conquer death, and he’s the guarantee we, too, will rise and have already conquered death.

You see, our hearts were dead in our trespasses and sins, but his resurrection is more powerful than sin or death. It creates new life. It changes who and what we are. We have him every time we come to Communion and every time we remember the gift he gave us in Baptism. We have him every time we hear the gospel. To strengthen your faith in His resurrection victory, Jesus continues to put into your dying bodies His body that was on the tree, atoning for all your sin; that was in the tomb, sanctifying your grave; and that Mary held in the garden that first Easter Day. He pours down your throat the blood that He shed to wipe out the sin of the world, and He reminds you that it is all for you. He whispers to each of you, “As death could not hold Me, so it will not hold you, My child. Baptized into My undying life, I will bring you out of death just as I came out of it—alive, never to die again. And then the celebration will really begin!”

Death will not be the end of you. Jesus has changed forever how we live, how we grieve, and how we die. Oh, we still feel in our bones how wrong death is, how unnatural, and we hate it with a passion. But Jesus has made it something we never have to fear—not ever again. For by His death and resurrection, Jesus has wounded death itself, dealt it a mortal blow from which it will never recover. He came out of death’s stomach alive again, never to die again, and His promise to Mary, to His apostles, and to all His baptized children is He will bring each and every one of us through the hole He punched in death into the home He has prepared for us with His Father.

Easter means death itself is defeated. And if death is defeated, what else do we have to fear? What’s the worst case scenario in any situation? A slow, painful, lonely, agonizing death for us or our loved ones? That certainly wouldn’t be fun, but if we know that paradise is on the other side, we could endure it, like, how you’ll put up with all the extra work the week before vacation because you know how relaxing that’ll be.

Death will be destroyed forever. It’s the last enemy to be destroyed, but it has already lost. Jesus must. Jesus did. His feet were pierced. His feet prevailed. He is risen indeed!

And we will rise. We will see him as he is. We will spend eternity not in the dust of death but in adoration. That’s why Jesus came. That’s why he died. That’s why we are so glad on this most glorious and joyous day. And we are not afraid of life. We can fear death even less. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! His life is our life, our death is his death, his resurrection and his heaven are our future! And death is powerless...just one final step to eternal glory!

What does Easter mean to you? When the candy’s all gone, when the dress doesn’t fit anymore...when the snow melts and I get my tulips and then the snow comes and covers them/kills them off again, Jesus is still alive. Even when this life comes to a close, when death is at the door, Jesus is still alive.

And here’s what Easter means for you. Death is dead. Jesus is alive. And you will live! Amen.