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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
The Resurrection of Our Lord
Sunday, April 1st, 2018

Sermon: The Last Enemy

Text: Isaiah 25:6-9; 1 Corinthians 15:12-26

Focus: Jesus saves us from death by the power of his resurrection.

Function: That they would believe in the resurrection of the Son of God.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: “Just as He is risen from the dead, lives, and reigns for all eternity...” (SC, 2nd Article of Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Today we celebrate the resurrection of the Son of God, not as a myth, fairytale, or legend, not as a metaphor of springtime or *The Lion King*'s “Circle of Life”—but as a real fact and the turning point of all of human history. Easter really happened. Jesus really rose from the dead, not just as a spirit or ghost, but as a fully human being with a body—with flesh and blood, breath and bone. And because the tomb was empty on Easter, we have the confident hope that on the Last Day, when Christ returns, he will raise us all from the dead. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!*

But why was it necessary for Jesus to rise from the dead? Why wasn't it enough for him to die on the cross for our sins? What's the big deal? Did Jesus really have to rise again? To which we answer a resounding YES! For, as the apostle Paul writes in our epistle, “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14, ESV).¹ If Christ did not rise from the dead, then the entire Gospel is a sham, and we are still stuck in the pit of sin and death—“your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (15:17). For the goal of

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

the Christian life is not simply to believe in Jesus so that, when we die, our souls will go to live in heaven for eternity. The Christian hope is the resurrection of the dead on the Last Day—“the redemption of our bodies” (Rom. 8:23)—and the new creation when Christ returns.

We forget what the ancients knew all too well: that death is our enemy. The Canaanites envisioned death as a giant monster that swallowed up all living things, destroying them in an ignominious end. The Canaanites called this god of death “Mot,” which became the Hebrew word for “death” in the Old Testament. Indeed, St. Paul writes, “The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:26).

Death is not our friend. Death cannot be controlled or managed. Death is a force to be reckoned with, a foe to confront. Dylan Thomas was right when he wrote:

*“Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”*

Death is defeat in battle, the proof that sin and the devil have overpowered us.

In the modern West, however, we like to pretend that “death is just a natural part of life.” Evolutionists rely on death as the mechanism for natural selection, or “survival of the fittest.” For the fit to survive and adapt, the “unfit” must first die out. Buddhists and Hindus believe that death is the gateway to the next life, when we are reincarnated and reborn as a new lifeform on this planet. We even try to play God by legalizing physician assisted suicide, or “euthanasia,” which literally means “good death.”

We live in a world that is too accepting of death. As Joseph Stalin once quipped, “One death is a tragedy, but a million deaths are just a statistic.” American entertainment is a culture of death. The higher the body count, the better the ratings—and sales. The plots of many

science fiction novels and movies turn on the idea that eternal life is evil. As Charlize Theron says in *Aeon Flux* (2005), “We’re meant to die. It’s what makes everything about us matter.”

But nothing could be further from the truth. And despite Hamlet’s insistence that “there is nothing good or bad, but thinking makes it so” (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act II, scene 2), that doesn’t change the fact that death is a bad thing. Death is *not* good, and we’re fools for thinking so. In our foolish attempt to make a covenant with Death (Isa. 28:15), we subvert God’s promise and empty the Gospel of its impact. We are like Isaiah’s enemies, who called “evil good and good evil” (Isa. 5:20).

The fact is: Death wasn’t part of God’s original design for creation. When God created Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he made them immortal—able *not* to die (like the Elves in Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*). Death was the result of Adam and Eve’s rebellion against God (Gen. 3:17-19). “The wages of sin is death...” (Rom. 6:23). “Sin came into the world through one man”—Adam—“and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned” (Rom. 5:12). Death is the most un-natural thing in the world, the unholy separation of body and soul. And so the Bible rightly calls death our enemy (1 Cor. 15:26).

But the Good News is that by dying on the cross and rising again on the third day, Jesus Christ destroyed the power of death (Heb. 2:14). Because he died as the sinless sacrifice for the sins of the whole world, God did not abandon him to Sheol (Ps. 16:10). He raised him from the dead because the grave could not contain him. Death cannot swallow the Creator of life. And so Jesus rose victorious, saving us from the power of sin, death, and the devil. “‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives *us* the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor.

15:55-57). Death could not defeat Jesus, so Jesus defeated death. The grave could not contain him, so now it cannot hold those who belong to Christ.

That is why Isaiah's prophecy is so wonderful on Easter Sunday:

“On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
 A feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
 Of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
 And he will swallow up on this mountain
 The cover that is cast over all peoples,
 The veil that is spread over all nations.
 He will swallow up death forever;
 And the LORD GOD will wipe away tears from all faces
 And the reproach of his people he will take away from the earth,
 For the LORD has spoken” (Isa. 25:6-8).

On the Last Day, God promises that he will swallow up death forever. He will destroy death! He will defeat Mot! The “last enemy to be destroyed” *will* be destroyed (cf. 1 Cor. 15:26). Or, as Reed Lessing, put it so swell: “The swallower has been swallowed forever” (Lectionary at Lunch). “Death is swallowed up in victory” because Jesus conquered the cross and grave and rose victoriously on the third day (1 Cor. 15:54). And so the funeral pall, what Isaiah calls “the cover... cast over all peoples” will be rolled up and thrown away forever!

“Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us” (Isa. 25:9a). And so he has saved us, having been “delivered up for our trespasses” on the cross “and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* And because Jesus lives, we will live also. “Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed” (1 Cor. 15:51-52). The Lord will raise us from the dead, and just as he called Lazarus to come out of the tomb, so he will call us to come out. And out we'll go, rejoicing and ready to meet—at last!—our Savior face to face.

So whether we are willing to admit it or not, “our entire life depends on Easter,” as Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out.² Jesus *had* to rise again. If the resurrection never happened, then Christ is just another failed, would-be messiah—a phony, a fraud. Then nothing he said or did can be trusted or believed. “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain” (1 Cor. 15:14). If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then all that awaits us is rot and ruin and the yawning mouth of the grave. “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). For what is the point of suffering persecution and self-denial for the sake of Christ if he is nothing but a crucified corpse?

“But in fact Christ *has* been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor. 15:20). And if Jesus is the *first* fruits, then that means others necessarily must follow. “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then *at his coming* those who belong to Christ” (1 Cor. 15:22-23). See, the Christian hope is not just about dying and going to heaven. The Christian hope is about living again—truly living—forever with Christ in a new heaven and new earth. For, as Christ declares, “Behold, I am making all things new” (Rev. 21:5). The Second Coming of Jesus will be the renewal of all things, including a new you and a new me, if we believe in the name of the crucified and risen Lord Jesus.

Let me close with quotation from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran pastor who gave his life for the Gospel:

“Easter is not about immortality but about resurrection from a death that is a real death with all its frightfulness and horrors, resurrection from a death of the body and of the

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, sermon in Barcelona for Easter Sunday, 8 April 1928, quoted in *God Is on the Cross: Reflections on Lent and Easter*, trans. O.C. Dean, Jr., ed. Jana Riess (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 98.

soul, of the whole person, resurrection by the power of God's mighty act. This is the Easter message."³

And this is the hope of all who believe and die in Christ, for whoever dies in Christ will live forever when he comes again. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed! Alleluia!* Amen.

³ Bonhoeffer, *God Is on the Cross*, 106.