

Sunday, April 26, 2020 – 1st Corinthians 15:3-8, 20-22

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance^[a]: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas,^[b] and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

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.

This is the Word of God for the people of God, and all God's people said, Amen.

We're continuing the series that we started on Easter. And we're talking today about "This is Love." This is love, a love that conquers death. Last week we talked about love, being the love that changed everything. This week, we talk about love that conquers death.

Because of the resurrection we know what the cross is all about. Because of Easter we understand Good Friday. I want to talk today about the resurrection of Jesus, and how that conquers death. It gives us hope. Death is really the great tragedy of the human experience.

When I was a kid, I used to read those drama in real life stories in Reader's Digest. They were interesting or exciting, but sometimes they were pretty terrifying. And in hind sight, maybe I shouldn't have read as many of those as I did. It took my already tentative nature and it kind of filled my active imagination with all the possibilities, of all the crazy things that could happen to us.

Whether we were involved in leisure activities, or how a trip might turn deadly. A walk by the sea could turn into a bite by a crab or a sting from a jellyfish. On a hike in the mountains could be shrouded by a fast-moving storm that would make it impossible for us to get out of the mountains and it would be very cold and we might freeze to death. A road trip for a friend's wedding could become a nightmare when a semi-truck gets a flat tire, and on and on it went.

Whether or not you have ever been involved in a catastrophe, we can imagine catastrophes around the corner. And reading some of those stories kind of helped me imagine more catastrophes that could ever happen in my life. But as the saying goes, neither does anyone ever get out of here alive. Even the avoidance of aging has becoming a huge industry. We do everything we can to feel forever young and that is a little bit difficult for us in this season when we can't get to the beauty shop or a barber, and our favorite store doesn't have our favorite makeup on the shelf.

All kidding aside, all the fears of death, they're real. Sociologists have told us that just about every society has its own version of immortality symbols. Things that give us the assurance of living forever. In ancient times, it was about being properly enshrined, so that people would always remember you. It was about being buried among the Gods. In the time of the pharaohs in Egypt, or the Taj Mahal, in India, the whole idea behind that was keeping someone's memory forever in other people's hearts, so that they would stay alive.

For Americans it's become about big houses and big cars, big trust funds and big retirement accounts. Things that we think will live on long after us and bless our families. We want to make a name for ourselves, we want to leave our mark on society.

Those are decent motivations, but they are also part of the fear of death and the fear of being forgotten. We want to turn the world into a better place for other people. As far as immortality symbols, something that makes us live on after death, all of those things fall woefully short of becoming that. Death is the great ending. The great finality. The inescapable curtain call.

So, when Jesus went to the cross on Friday, it was anything but good in the eyes of his followers that were there. His followers were devastated, the dream that they had was over. Like the disciples on the road to Amas, they had hoped that he would be the Messiah, but now that hope had ended. Their heads hung low, their bodies felt lifeless, their hearts felt hollow and their eyes were swollen from crying. Just how could this be.

Well if you have ever seen *Les Misérables*, the Broadway play or the movie, I think that the scene where Fantine sings *I Dream A Dream That Cannot Be*, captures that kind of heartbroken despair that the disciples must have felt on Friday. It's not good to rush past that moment either.

You see the darkness and the tragedy of Good Friday; capture how we often feel in life. Overwhelmed by the brokenness of the world, filled with the discouragement of despair and aware of the darkness and the fear in our own hearts. Death is the end of all possibilities. And if there's no answer for death, then all the other answers don't really matter.

So, what lifts our heavy hearts, what can ease our broken spirits when we start to struggle. The public sang in the song of Solomon that Love is as strong as death. No, said Father God on Easter morning, Love is stronger.

On that first Easter morning, the Father God showed the world that there was a love that is stronger than death. The preaching in the New Testament, particularly the Book of Acts and Paul's writings, makes a point to say that God the Father raised Jesus from the dead. That matters because we're not meant to see Jesus as some sort of Superman, some superhuman figure, some hero brought to the brink of death by some evil villain, somehow musters up the last bit of life to burst free from bonds and never dies. That's not what the Gospel says.

The Gospel writers, and the first preachers of Jesus, want us to know that Jesus really did die. He was buried and he was fully dead. We know that, because on the cross when the Roman Centurion speared his side, blood and water fell from his separately and that is the proof of death. That blood and water separate. So, Jesus did truly die. But God the Father did not abandon his son to the grave. He vindicated his faithful obedience and sacrificial death. And he did so by raising him up.

So here are a few ways the New Testament says it. Peter says in Acts 5, the God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God has exalted Jesus to his right side as leader and Savior so that he can enable Israel to change his heart, and life, and to find a forgiveness for sin.

And then Paul expanded on that in Acts chapter 13 when he said, we proclaim to you the good news, what God promised to our ancestors he fulfilled for us. He fulfilled for their children by raising up Jesus. He raised him from the dead never again to be subject to death's decay. Therefore, God said I will give to you the holy and firm promises that I made to David.

And in another place, it said, you will not let your holy one experience death's decay. David served God's purpose in his own generation and then he died and was buried with his ancestors. He experienced death's decay. But the one whom God raised up will never experience death's decay. Paul developed it even further. The resurrection of Jesus is not just good news. It's good news for the whole world.

But some Christians in Corinth weren't really sure about that. They wondered about if all of this was really necessary to believe. Couldn't we just say Jesus was a good teacher, and was still here in the spiritual sense. Why it didn't matter if he actually raised from the dead.

Well, those questions brought out some of Paul's clearest teachings on the resurrection. He said, in fact Christ has been raised from the dead the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man also came resurrection of the dead. For as all day, but also in Christ all shall be made alive. That each in his own order, Christ, the first fruit, that is coming to those who belong to him.

It comes in the end when he delivers the kingdom of God to the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and every power. For he must reign until he has put all of his enemies under his feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Paul says at least three things to us in this. First of all, the restoration is the defeat of death. He calls death the enemy. So, let's be clear about this. Death is not a friend, it is a doorway into eternity, but, it's also a beast. It is an enemy, but it's an enemy that will be destroyed because of Jesus' victory over death.

Can you imagine being free from fear, how much fear is related to the fear of death and its finality. What if we could look the monster in the face, imagine the worst scenario of all and say that even that, even death, will not be the end. When power is abused, the weapon that is

wielded is the fear of death. Tyrants and thieves, dictators and despots, all resort to the ultimate threat. The threat of death. But when death no longer holds its sane, tyrants no longer have any power.

That's what happened in the earliest centuries. When Caesar after Caesar would threaten to kill Christians if they did not renounce Christ and worship them instead. And yet those Christians were free from the fear of death. They knew that they belonged to the one conquered it. The one who had been raised up.

That's why it's so important that we understand what really happened to Jesus. He did not have a near death experience, and get resuscitated. He did hang on the cross only to be revived in the cool air of the tomb. He died. The piercing of his side that caused that blood and water to flow out is a message on the finality of his death.

The disciples were also not hallucinating when they saw Jesus. Writers recount story after story of the disciples not recognizing Jesus, and then having their eyes opened. There's something familiar but very different about him. His body seemed to have a new spiritual kind of life, probably to allow him to appear in a room with locked doors and yet seem to be the same. He still was hungry, able to eat, he still could talk, they could still touch him.

The disciples weren't using the word resurrection to describe Jesus going to heaven after he died. They had other ways of talking about something like that. When they said he was alive, they didn't mean in their hearts the way that we sometimes speak at funerals when we say that a person will live on in our hearts.

The ancient world had categories for spiritual journeys in the afterlife. And hallucinations or visions of ghosts. What happened to Jesus shattered every single one of those categories. They had no words to describe this. That's why the four gospels give somewhat differing accounts of the resurrection. So many stories, so much breathless recounting of something that they had no words to describe.

So, by the time Paul writes to the Corinthians he can say to them, that he is simply last in a long line of witnesses to the resurrection. And that, it is absolutely the truth. That's the second thing that we can note from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the meaning and the significance of the resurrection is a new beginning. It's God's new beginning when every possibility has ended.

Resurrection is not resuscitation like what Lazarus may have experienced. Resurrection is not hallucination; resurrection is not a spiritual realization of the afterlife. Resurrection is what only God can bring about when all other possibilities are gone. Do you need resurrection?

When things are dead, when the possibilities have ended, where does the story go? When the story has gone off the rails and there is no hope. Then what brings you hope? Maybe you don't want to think about those places in life where we really need a resurrection because really, what's the point. How could you possibly change your story? It's over, right.

Well that leads me to the last thing about the resurrection, the thing that we learn from Paul. The resurrection is a gift. Paul wrote, for as by one man came death, by one man has also come the resurrection of the dead. Just as death entered the world through one man, Adam, so has resurrection life, entered the world through the resurrection of one man. Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is not just good news for one person, for his family, for the disciples. It's good news for the whole world.

And we did nothing to deserve that good news. What we can do to earn it, is nothing. The resurrection does not emerge because of potential, resurrection does not come to us because of achievement. No one can raise themselves up from the dead but Jesus Christ. Through him, all can be made alive again. Are you catching why it's such good news?

One day, all who are in Christ will be raised up with glorious new bodies. It's promised to us in scripture. We will be like Jesus. We won't know much about those bodies, but we know they will seem familiar and be radically different. Using the same materials, God gives it new properties, and all that is wonderful. And it leads Christians to say, for many thousands of years now, in the words of the Nicene Creed, that we look for the resurrection of the dead and life to grow of the world to come. But you know what? That's not the only resurrection. Because of that resurrection, resurrection life can begin today. Right?

Paul, after writing to the Corinthians about the significant meaning of the resurrection, wrote this. If the spirit of him, raised Jesus from the dead, dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal body through His Spirit who dwells in you. That's found in Romans chapter eight verse 11.

The Holy Spirit, who with the Father raised Jesus from the dead, can bring new life to use today. The same love that did not abandon Jesus to the grave, will not let you go. He loves you with a love, that is stronger than death. And Paul finishes out of that chapter in Romans eight with this. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced, that neither death or life, or angels or rulers, nor things present or things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor death or anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the Love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Because Jesus took off and let it exhaust its power on him. Because the Father in his love, raised Jesus up from the grave, vindicating His faithfulness and demonstrating his belovedness. Now, for all who lives in Jesus, nothing, nothing, not even death, can separate us from the Love of God. And we can live, in His grace and His power.

Gracious God, you have loved us with an everlasting love. You sent your son to earth because you loved us. Jesus, you laid down your life willingly, because you loved us. You are one with the Father. His love and your love are one. In your death on the cross we see love. And in the resurrection, we see the Father's love that would not let you go. Jesus, we say yes, to you. We want you to love us with a love that will not let us go.

We want to be in you so that the Holy Spirit can dwell in us. Come Holy Spirit, breathe your resurrection life in us. Make our hearts that were dead in sin, alive again. Fill us with a new power to love you and obey you. Send us into the world with this life. Fill us with hope that one day we will know resurrection life in its fullest. And we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen