

Christ Has Indeed Been Raised from the Dead!

(1 Corinthians 15:19-26) If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. 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. ²³ But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

In Christ Jesus our crucified and risen Savior, dear fellow redeemed,

In 1962 Essie Dunbar, age 70, passed away in Blackville, S.C. Her obituary notice contained the usual information – the names of her family members, both those who preceded her in death as well as her survivors. Listed there were the jobs she had held and the hobbies she had enjoyed – as I say, all the usual information until you got to this sentence: Miss Dunbar passed away on Tuesday, May 22nd, 47 years after her first funeral.

That's right, 47 years earlier, when she was only 23, Essie suffered an epileptic seizure that seemed to leave her for dead. The attending doctor found no signs of life whatsoever. Funeral arrangements were made for the next day at 11 a.m. Despite the fact that the graveside service was quite lengthy, Miss Dunbar's sister, a resident of a nearby town, was not able to make it to the funeral until the casket had already been lowered into the ground. The grieving woman wanted an opportunity to see her sister one last time. The funeral director did as she asked. The casket was raised and the lid removed. Just then, Essie Dunbar opened her eyes, sat up and smiled.

By all accounts, this was an amazing, unforgettable turn of events. And yet, it pales in comparison on so many levels to the event we celebrate this day. After all, Essie hadn't really died and therefore hadn't really been raised from the dead. But even if she had been raised, raised to what end? Yes, her family and friends rejoiced for a time until that day 47 years later when she died again. Not so with Jesus. He is risen once and for all! His resurrection matters, not just to a few people, but to all of us believers, not just for a time, but forever! Here is the truth we Christians celebrate today and always: Christ Has Indeed Been Raised from the Dead! 1) He lives to fill our lives with hope – not wishful thinking, but Christian hope, the confident anticipation of God's blessings. Without this hope, our lives as Christians are miserable.

Think of that first Easter. As the women made their way to the Savior's tomb, they were fresh out of hope. In fact, you might say all their hope had died with Jesus on Friday. That was true of so many who had followed Jesus. Hope was gone. Fear and confusion took its place. While the reason for this might seem obvious, no small amount of the disciples' distress was found in the fact that they had been hoping for the wrong things and, therefore, hoping for the wrong kind of Savior. Many hoped that the Christ would fix what was wrong with this world – wipe out hunger and disease and establish world peace, things like that. But Jesus' death on Friday dashed all such hope to pieces. A Savior who allowed himself to be caught and crucified was part of the problem, not the solution. All of this might also help to explain why those same disciples seemed so oblivious to what Jesus had said about his upcoming resurrection. It didn't fit their way of thinking, so it wasn't important. It just didn't register with them. For that you must pity them, but not them alone.

Paul explains why when he writes: **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”** (1 Corinthians 15:19). The Easter Gospel has now been proclaimed

for more than two thousand years and yet each generation of Christians seems to fall into the same trap, present company included. We are no better than our Lord's first disciples. Like them, how sinfully short-sighted we are. We tend to make life all about the here and now. If it instantly gratifies one of my five senses, it's important. If it produces wealth, success, or long life, that's what matters most. Am I exaggerating? Tell me, what sorts of things do you pray about? Do your prayers tend to focus on physical or spiritual blessings? Please understand, our Lord invites us to pray for both. But pity the person whose prayers are all about this earthly life. Why? Because Satan will use our misplaced priorities to rob us of the peace and joy God wants for us in Christ.

If you're like me, you struggle to see God's plan for your life, especially when we face trials and troubles. We imagine God should take them all away – of course he should if this life is all that matters. But it's not. The troubles I have each day are the result of life's biggest problem, my biggest problem – sin and its deadly curse. Without sin in the world, there would be no hurt, no pain, no worries, no tears, and no death. That's the elephant in the room, isn't it – the subject we don't care to talk about? But Paul talks about it. He cuts right to the chase saying things like: “**...death came through a man...**” and “**...in Adam all die...**” (1 Corinthians 15:21,22). Death has a way of sneaking up on us. We put off thinking about it until we can't anymore, and then suddenly it's all we can think about. I've seen it in my ministry. I've experienced it in my personal life. One day we're talking about paying bills, watching our favorite sports teams, or celebrating an upcoming anniversary, and then, the news of a terminal illness or a life-threatening accident changes the conversation completely. What seemed so important yesterday, matters nothing today. Forget about the bills, the anniversary, even the Packers. What's going to happen to me?

That all-important question finds its answer at Christ's empty tomb. “**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.**” (1 Corinthians 15:20). We may not want to talk about it, but God does. He wants to put our greatest fears to rest by assuring us that Christ has defeated our greatest enemy – sin. Sin put you and me under its curse before we drew our first breath. As Paul has reminded us, we inherited our sinful state from father Adam. There can be no denying it. Long before we walked or talked, our sin was evident in the selfish tantrums we threw when our needs were not instantly met. As we grew, so grew the many ways our inherited sin shows itself in every facet of our life and in every relationship we form until at last comes the final proof of our sin, the collection of sin's wages paid with the sinner's death. There is no escaping the fact that from the time sin entered our world, the death rate has remained always constant – exactly one per person.

As I say, we can't escape the fact, but we have escaped the curse. Thanks to Jesus, death no longer means our eternal destruction. That's because Jesus took our place in death. After living a perfect life of love as our Substitute, Jesus' last and lasting sacrifice was to take all our sins to the altar of the cross where he suffered God's wrath in our place. There he endured our eternal punishment until there was nothing left for him or us to suffer. How do we know? He said so: “It is finished.” How can we be sure? God raised Jesus from the dead, proving that death no longer had any claim on Jesus and no longer has a lasting claim on us. In other words, those who die trusting in Jesus are not going to stay dead.

This is what Paul means when he describes our risen Jesus as the “firstfruits.” “Firstfruits” is a harvest term. When the Israelites gathered the first crops during the first days of the harvest season, they presented those crops to God as an expression of trust in the Lord's mercy. It was their way of saying, “Gracious God, we pledge these firstfruits to you, confident that there is plenty more where these came from. You will supply us with all that we need and more.” So it is with the resurrection. Except now it is God making the pledge, assuring us that Jesus is just the first of many. All God's sons and daughters will rise from the dead.

There's more good news! Thanks to Jesus, death really isn't death anymore. It no longer claims souls for hell – not the souls of believers. Their souls, in the moment of death, go straight to heaven to be with Jesus while the bodies of these same believers rest in the grave. Rest is the right word to describe the state of those, who as Paul says, have fallen asleep in Jesus. This isn't just a nice way to talk about a difficult subject. This is God's truth. When we bury believers, we are doing nothing more than tucking them in to bed for a good night's rest. In the same way we shake off sleep in the morning, so the believer will shake off the sleep of death. This is what Easter means to us. Do not doubt it. **“For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.” (2 Corinthians 5:22).** Christ has indeed been raised from the dead to fill our lives with this sure and certain hope – because he lives, we too shall live!

But how will we live? How long will we live? Essie Dunbar lived 47 years after her first funeral. You have to think that her near death experience brought some changes to her life. She came face-to-face with the fragile nature of our earthly existence. That has to change you in some way, and yet by and large, her life was the same. She couldn't slow the hands of time anymore than she could avoid the hurts and heartaches of life in this sin-ruined world. It all had its way with her until at last she was buried and remains so to this day. This is not the life to which we believers will awaken when Christ returns. Christ Has Indeed Been Raised from the Dead to give us life without end – life to the fullest – life as God intended.

By calling Christ the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep, Paul has assured us that all who die believing in Christ will experience a physical resurrection. Christ has had his turn to rise. When he comes on the last day it will be our turn as believers belonging to Christ. **“Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.” (1 Corinthians 15:24).** With these words Paul assures us that the life to come will not be like the life we have now. Here Satan has used sin and its consequences to make life so miserable. But when Jesus returns, he will destroy Satan's ability to come after us. Never again will we face or fall to sin's temptations. We will be perfect and live in a perfect world forever. You heard me. Never again will we die. Jesus will see to it. **“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:26).**

Do you realize what this means? Here and now we live by faith in Jesus and his promise that what death does to us believers is nothing compared to what Jesus has done to death for us. Our victorious Lord has taken the sting out of death. He has swallowed up death forever! When our fellow believers die, we are comforted by the Savior's promise: **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies.” (John 11:25).** Comforted, yes, but still the tears of sadness come because for a time we are separated from the ones we love. But never again – not once Jesus returns. **“He will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things [will have] passed away.” (Revelation 21:4).**

Until then, we just have to make the best of it, right? Wrong. Jesus is making the best of it for us. Remember, Christ has indeed been raised from the dead! The One who loves us died for us and lives again to keep loving us all the way to heaven. **“For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” (1 Corinthians 15:25).** After rising from the grave, Jesus didn't go on vacation. He's ruling our world and our lives to make sure that every good thing that happens to us as well as every setback we experience all serve the same purpose. These are all part of his plan to preserve us as his people until the dawn of heaven's eternal day when we will join our voices with all the saints to praising Christ and saying: **“Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us.” (Isaiah 25:9).** To this glorious end our God with bless and keep us for Jesus' sake. Amen.