

Jesus Reigns!

(1 Corinthians 15:20-28) 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 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. ²⁷ For he “has put everything under his feet.” Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸ When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

In Christ Jesus, the King of kings and Lord of lords, dear fellow redeemed,

The other day, just for giggles, I googled the year 2020. You can probably imagine what the search produced – a series of memes most of which I’d be too embarrassed to show you. But a few popped up that seemed to more appropriately capture the way many of us are feeling. For example, I saw some “before and after” pictures of famous actors suffering the effects of 2020. One meme said that if 2020 were a swing set, it would be the one built in front of a brick wall. Another likened it to the movie “Groundhog’s Day.” And finally, there was a meme giving 2020 a one-star rating with the added warning: “Very bad, would not recommend.”

2020 has been a difficult year, one that has so many people, including many of us feeling down and disheartened. Our world has been rocked by sickness, civil unrest, political divide, and the effects that all of these things have on our physical and emotional wellbeing. Let’s be honest, we’re looking for something on which to pin our hopes – some bright spot in an otherwise dark and dismal time. Scripture has just what we need – news of a Shepherd King who not only loves us but One who is determined and has the power to rescue us from everything and everyone that means to harm us. This is the truth that can change the way we perceive and feel about all that is happening in our lives and in our world: Jesus Reigns! 1) He reigns to dry our tears; 2) He reigns to calm our fears.

Paul’s words in our text follow immediately after what we might call a “what if” game – the kind we’ve all played, maybe this year more than usual. “What if we get an effective vaccine for COVID?” “What if the economy comes roaring to life?” “What if we get back to normal?” Our “what ifs” anticipate happy endings. But in Corinth, some people were going in a different direction, asking: “What if Christ had not been raised? What if he were still dead and buried?” If that were true, Paul says, then “**...your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.** ¹⁸ **Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.**” (1 Corinthians 15:17-18). If Jesus is still in the grave, you and I are on the hook for our sins. We alone are responsible for our failure to perfectly trust and completely obey God’s will for our lives. If Jesus’ body is still in a tomb outside of Jerusalem, then the troubles we are experiencing right now are just the beginning of suffering that will get unspeakably worse and never end. If Jesus is dead, then all those we’ve known and loved who’ve died trusting in Jesus, are forever lost and we are right on their heels.

Paul says, “If you want to play some sullen ‘what if’ game, that’s up to you.” **“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” (1 Corinthians 15:20).** Cheer up, dear Christian? The One who said he would own your sins, carry your cross, suffer your fate, die your death, and then rise again to prove it, has done it all! He lives and not by some fluke. He came to life under his own power! Imagine that, he shook off death the way you and I wipe sleep from our eyes every morning. What’s that to us? Everything! **“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.” (1 Corinthians 15:21-22).**

It is an undeniable fact that Adam’s sin has infected us all – all people. All of us were conceived and born in Adam’s sin. Sin’s self-serving nature showed itself in us long before we could walk or talk. Because of the sin we inherited from Adam, each of us was born spiritually dead on arrival. As I say, this is an undeniable fact. Look around you. There aren’t any perfect people in this world. Everyone got their sin from Adam. But listen to this. Just as one individual brought sin and death, so another gives life. All who believe Jesus to be the risen Savior from sin, will live even though they die. **“But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.” 1 Corinthians 15:23.**

Anyone who has ever tried their hand at gardening can appreciate Paul’s word picture. You’ve got those six or seven tomato plants, loaded with large green tomatoes, and then it happens – that very first tomato ripens. What’s going to happen next? You know! Very soon you are going to have more tomatoes you know what to do with! So it is with the resurrection of the dead: first Jesus’ resurrection and then, in turn, that of all his followers! Jesus’ resurrection is not just a curious event in our salvation history, it’s a life-giving event for you, and me, and all believers.

Jesus resurrection proves he’s the most power King ever – One who rules even death. Jesus Reigns, my friend, to dry your tears. His resurrection means that very soon you will see that loved one in Christ for whom you now mourn. And when you come face-to-face with your own mortality, when the doctor says, “There’s nothing more we can do for you.”, Jesus will dry those tears too with his promise that the body which now fails you, will soon be raised by the power of his command to be perfect and glorious like his own body.

Jesus is our Shepherd-King, by that I mean a loving King who never stops caring for his flock. So when I tell you that he dries tears, I’m not suggesting that once Jesus has told us something he expects that we’ll never be bothered again. That’s not the way it is with us sinners. Yes, for a time, Jesus’ promises bring courage and hope and then, suddenly, often unexpectedly, the tears come back again, and again and again. Sometimes it’s because of doubt. At other times it’s because the hurt is just too great. Jesus knows this and cares so much that he comes right back to us to dry our tears again and again and again. He’s doesn’t get tired of this. He doesn’t get tired of us. Instead he renews his promises as often as we turn to his Word and celebrate his Supper. These are the means by which our King rules our hearts with the peace that only he can give – peace not just in the face of death, but also in the face of life. Jesus Reigns to calm our fears – the fears we face every day by living in a sin-infested world.

Fifty days after his triumphant resurrection, Jesus ascended into heaven. Though he had certainly earned a rest, he didn’t go there to retire. Our King ascended to take his place at the Father’s right hand from where he rules heaven and earth every minute of every day. As Paul explains: **“For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” (1 Corinthians 15:27).** Jesus must reign. His love for us compels him to reign. Don’t you see: The One who died to save us, now lives to bring us safely to himself. He will not quit until he has destroyed all **“...dominion, authority and power.” (1 Corinthians 15:24).**

These are references to the forces of evil that are hellbent on tearing you and me away from Jesus. Satan is, of course, the leader of these forces and while much of his work involves an army host of demons we cannot see or hear, the threat is real and constant. You should also know that the devil is not beyond enlisting the aid of enemies more familiar to us and much closer to home, including the enemy within, our own sinful nature. Satan plays on our doubts and fears as he tries to convince us that God is too busy, too distant, too weak or uncaring to stop and help the likes of you and me.

It is Satan's plan to frighten us to the point where we abandon all hope in God and instead turn to other saviors like the power and might of our nation's military, or the intellect of our scientists, or the foresight of our economists, or the wisdom of our leaders. Understand, none of these things are bad. In fact, they are all great gifts from our loving God – blessings from him that we dare not abuse by trusting these gifts instead of the One who gives them to us.

You see the temptation and danger in this. Take the pandemic for example. We got some great news this past week about a couple of vaccines that are being hailed as “game changers.” I really hope that proves to be true. Like so many of you, I'm looking forward to life returning to what I think of as normal. But if those vaccines and others like them prove ineffective, what then? Is everything lost? What if the economy isn't in a V-shaped recovery? Is everything lost? How could it be? What has changed? Nothing! Christ has died. Christ is risen! Christ will come again! Everything that matters most will never change and can never fail us. Our sins are paid for and heaven is our home.

So what does this mean for our lives here and now? Must we live in constant fear until we hear the trumpets blow, announcing the return of Jesus? Jesus doesn't want us living in terror. He reigns to calm our fears. He means to rule our hearts with his gospel of peace, a gospel that ensures that Jesus isn't sleeping at the switch. He's in complete control. He knows exactly what he's doing and he does it all with us, his church, in mind. History bears this out. I think of the persecutions that fell upon the early Christians not long after Jesus' ascension. Those Christians couldn't stay together. They scattered to far away lands. Was everything lost? No. The gospel seed was carried by the Christians and took root. The church grew beyond its member's comprehension. King Jesus knew exactly what he was doing. And so it is today. What is Jesus up to? He's making all things serve our good as Paul assures us in Romans 8. We don't have the details, but then again, we don't need them. We know the Shepherd King. The One who gave himself for us will never let us down.

Yes, we still have enemies, but these too must answer to Jesus. Take death for example. Look at what Jesus has done to death? When we were lost in sin, death meant unending punishment for us. But now that Jesus has taken away our sins, he has made death a servant that delivers the souls of his believers to his waiting arms in heaven. Jesus is doing the same thing with all our enemies and with all the things that scare us. He's ruling them, using them in ways that must bring us his blessing until that day comes when they no longer serve his purpose. Then he will destroy them once and for all. Paul says, **“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (1 Corinthians 15:26).** That will happen on the day of Christ's return. The bodies of those who fell asleep in Jesus will be raised, never to die again. In that moment, Jesus' mission will be accomplished. He will hand the kingdom over to our Triune God and we will live forever in the company of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Let these truths calm your fears. And in those moments when life looks like some endless maze of trouble, remember that the One who gave himself for you is in charge. Jesus is with you to keep you safe until you are with him in the home that he's won for you and for all who trust in his saving Name. Amen.