

### What Does Easter Mean?

#### I. Believers Rise

#### II. Jesus Reigns

*<sup>19</sup>If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

*<sup>20</sup>But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup>For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup>For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. <sup>23</sup>But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. <sup>24</sup>Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. <sup>25</sup>For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. <sup>26</sup>The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

Tell me, is there a more glorious day to be here in the Lord's house, than on Easter Sunday morning? I mean, to gather here with your fellow believers to hear again the words of the angel, "He is not here. He has risen! See the place where they laid him." To join our voices together in singing our favorite Easter hymns, with a brass and the timpani playing. To see the dressed in white and smell the fragrance of Easter lilies wafting through the air. Man, what a great day to be alive, here in the house of the Lord, on Easter Sunday morning!

But now, just for a minute, I want you to imagine how you would feel if there was no Easter Sunday morning. I mean, what if the life story of a man named Jesus of Nazareth ended the way every other person's life story typically ends, namely, with their death? Would we have anything to celebrate today? Well, I guess we could still celebrate Jesus' life. We could reminisce about how he healed the sick and fed the hungry, how he taught us that we should love our neighbors as ourselves. We might even remember that he said he was going to die for the sins of the world. In fact, even his death might serve as inspiration to us as we think about how he took the time to care for his mother, and forgive his enemies and promise paradise to a dying criminal.

And yet, if the story of Jesus ends with his death, how is Jesus any different from any other great and noble teacher down through the centuries? I mean, Confucius taught a lot of great things too. Mother Teresa helped a lot of downtrodden people as well. Buddha promised people a better life to come. All those people have bodies that are lying in a grave somewhere. If Jesus' body is lying in a grave somewhere, he's really no better than any of those other religious

leaders. Sure, he may have given us a good example to follow for our lives, but when it comes to life after death, a dead Jesus gives us absolutely no hope at all. In fact, isn't that the point that Saint Paul makes when he writes in 1st Corinthians 15, *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19)*. Isn't that the truth? If we have no hope of experiencing life after death, because not even Jesus could attain life after death, what reason would we have to celebrate today? If Jesus is still dead in the grave, then so is our hope.

But of course, Jesus is not still dead in the grave. What did we say moments ago? Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! And it's that fact, that historic fact, the fact that is substantiated by the corroborated eyewitness testimony of hundreds of people, the fact that ultimately transformed a bunch of frightened followers hiding behind locked doors into a band of bold apostles proclaiming the good news of a resurrected Lord to the ends of the earth. It's that fact, yes, that Resurrection Reality that still has an impact on our lives today.

In fact, that's what we want to focus on today, not so much on what happened on the first Easter Sunday morning, but rather:

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Here in 1 Corinthians 15, the Apostle Paul says that it means two things. It means:

- I. Believers Rise
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First, Easter means that believers rise. In other words, there's a direct connection between what happened to Jesus on Easter Sunday morning and what will happen to all who trust in him on their final day. Or to put another way, It's Jesus' resurrection that guarantees our resurrection. You realize, that's one of the things that makes Jesus' resurrection unique. Think about it.

Throughout the pages of Scripture, there are plenty of examples of people who were raised from the dead. In the Old Testament, you had the account of Elijah bringing back to life the son of the widow of Zarephath and the prophet Elisha raising from the dead the son of the Shunamite woman. In the New Testament, you have Jesus raising the man from Nain, the daughter of Jairus and of course, Lazarus after he was dead for 3 days. But all of those resurrections were different than Jesus' resurrection in two important ways. Number one, all those resurrections were, in effect, temporary. Those people lived a while longer. But in the end they all died, a second time. Jesus' resurrection, on the other hand, was not a temporary; it was permanent. Once Jesus came back to life, he now lives forever.

But there's an even more important difference between Jesus' resurrection and all the other resurrections in history. And it simply this. All those other resurrections certainly had a major impact on the person who was once dead, but they really don't impact my life today. Jesus' resurrection, on the other hand, was not just good for Jesus. Jesus' resurrection is for all of us! How did Jesus put it? "*Because I live, you also will live*" (John 14:19). Right? There's a connection between Jesus' resurrection and our resurrection. St. Paul makes a similar statement in our text for today, but he does it in a rather unique way. He writes, *Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep* (1 Cor. 15:20). What does that mean, that Jesus' resurrection represents the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep? Well, if you're a gardener, you know it's what it's like to watch all those green tomatoes form on the vine, eagerly waiting for the first one to start to turn red. And when it finally does, and you pick it, you do so with the confidence that it will not be the only tomato you're going to get from your garden. You know that it's just the first of many. So it is with Jesus' resurrection. By having Saint Paul call Jesus' resurrection the first fruits, God is assuring us that there are more resurrections to follow, namely, the resurrection of all believers in Christ.

In fact, did you know that in the Old Testament, God established what was called the Festival of the Firstfruits? It's that day on which the children of Israel would offer to God the very first sheaves of the grain harvest, as a statement of trust, that there would be more sheaves to follow. And God established that the Festival of Firstfruits should always take place on the first Sunday after the Passover. Do you know what we call the first Sunday after Passover today? Yeah, Easter Sunday. That's right, the Old Testament Festival the Firstfruits finds its fulfillment in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate firstfruits of all the resurrections to follow.

And exactly when will those resurrections occur? St Paul tells us. *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. <sup>23</sup>But each in turn: Christ, (who is) the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.* (1 Cor. 15:22-23) In other words, it's not like there will be all these different resurrections occurring down through the centuries. It's not like there will be a resurrection of all the believers and then a thousand years later, later a resurrection of the unbelievers. No, it will all happen on the same day, on the Last Day, the day when Jesus will return in glory to judge the living and the dead. The prophet Daniel described that day with these words. *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others*

*to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2).* In other words, on Judgment Day, there will be a bit of a double resurrection: those who are raised to go to heaven, and others who are raised to go to hell.

And recognize, that resurrection will not be simply a resurrection of souls. It will be a resurrection of bodies. You realize, when a believer dies, that person's soul goes immediately to be with God, just as Jesus' soul did when on the cross he said, "*Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.*" (Luke 23:46). When he breathed his last, his soul went to heaven even as his body was waiting to go into the tomb. But when on Easter Sunday morning, when his soul was reunited with his body, Jesus was able to walk and talk and eat and laugh, just as one day you and I will do when God reunites our soul and body and places us in the new heaven and new earth to live with God forever.

But now someone might say, "Well, that's great that someday believers will be raised from the dead to live with Jesus forever. But what does that fact have to do with my life today? I mean, I look at my life and I see a lot of things that are bothering me, things that I'm struggling with. I see a lot of things in our world that are totally messed up." What does Easter offer that addresses all those things? Well, remember, I said that St. Paul teaches us that Easter means two things: Yes, it means that I. Believers Rise. But it also means that II. Jesus Reigns. Isn't that the truth? I mean, think about it. If Jesus is some kind of superhero who now lies dead in the grave, what can he possibly do for you today? Nothing. But the fact is, Jesus rose triumphant from the grave. He's no longer the suffering servant. He's now the triumphant King. And as a king, Jesus now reigns. In fact, here in our text, St Paul says that *Jesus must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.* What does Saint Paul mean by that? "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." Well, think of it this way. The Bible says that the wages of sin is death. In other words, death is the penalty that humans must pay for their sins. But by giving his life on the cross, Jesus paid that penalty for us. So now, for believers, death is no longer the penalty to be paid. Instead, death is simply the mechanism that God uses to take the souls of believers into heaven. You might say that by his death and resurrection, Jesus has transformed death from something bad to something which God uses for our good. That's why St. Paul writes to the Philippians, *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain (Philippians 1:21).*

But let's also recognize that even though Jesus has transformed death, or a Saint Paul

puts it, even though Jesus has “taken the sting out of death,” that doesn’t mean that Jesus has completely destroyed death...yet. What do I mean by that? Well, you know that as long as we live in this world, we’re going to have to deal with the pain of seeing loved ones die. Let’s face it, that’s no fun. It hurts. Even when we're Christians, burying fellow Christians, even when we know where those believers are going when they die, that doesn't mean we don't shed a tear over what we have lost.

But Jesus says that the day is coming when there will be no more tears. That’s the day when the last enemy, namely death, will be destroyed. That's when all God's people will be welcomed into the mansions of glory, where, in the words of St. John, *there will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order things has passed away (Revelation 21:4)*. My friends, you can be sure that between that last day and this current day, your resurrected Lord continues to reign. In fact, he reigns over three kingdoms. The Kingdom of Grace, which is the Savior’s ruling activity in our hearts, as he grants us full and forgiveness, through his Word and Sacrament. The Kingdom of Power, which encompasses the entire world. Even though it sometimes seems like the world is out of control, the fact is, Jesus is still on his throne, controlling all things to serve the good of believers. And finally, Jesus continues to reign over a Kingdom of Glory, that is, heaven, where the souls of all those who have gone before us in faith are already enjoying life in the presence of God.

My friends, these are the things that you can be sure of all because of Easter. Because Jesus rose from the grave, someday, so will you. Because Jesus lives, he also reigns triumphant over all his enemies, even if you and I won't fully experience the effects of that triumph until we're with him in heaven. So, what does Easter mean? It means Believers Rise and it means Jesus Reigns. And you can be sure that's not simply wishful thinking. It’s not fake news, or artificial intelligence or virtual reality. No, that's God's truth for our lives. Yes, it’s Resurrection Reality. And it's all because...Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Amen.