

Easter Sunday – 2019

"The Last Enemy"

Text: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

"Awake my heart with gladness, see what today is done;
Now after gloom and sadness, comes forth the glorious Sun.
My Savior there was laid, where our bed must be made
When to the realms of light our spirit wings its flight.

The Foe in triumph shouted, when Christ lay in the tomb
But, lo, he now is routed, his boast is turned to gloom,
For Christ again is free; in glorious victory
He who is strong to save has triumphed o'er the grave!" (TLH 192)

Grace be multiplied to you on this special Easter morning, and peace from God our Father, and from our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians: it is a joy and a privilege to bear that name at all times – the name of Christ Jesus our Savior - but it is a special joy and privilege on this day. It is on this great day that our salvation for time and eternity has been sealed. Christ entered our world at Christmas, and he completed his mission of salvation on Good Friday, but not even those two earth-changing events can match the value of this day for the child of God. This day, for all Christians, is *the* day. It is *our* day. On this day salvation, *our* salvation, is declared by God himself to be complete. Our eternal future has been verified, sealed for all time and eternity. The ultimate, pivotal battle between Good and evil has been joined and the outcome has been declared to the world. Jesus Christ has conquered sin and Satan and stands victorious above all power and authority. The sin debt of the entire human race has been verified by God himself to have been paid in full. The result is that we have been rescued from the certain torment that awaited us all. The payment has been made, and God has declared the payment complete. Thanks and praise to our merciful Savior God who has won the victory for us! Amen!

The text for this Easter Sunday morning is the word of the Holy Spirit recorded through Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians, the Fifteenth Chapter:

ESV(1 Corinthians 15:19-26) *If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every 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.*

These are the words – the very words of God. God's Word is the divine gift through which we are taught the way of life and salvation. We therefore stand in awe of this sacred truth, and can never value it highly enough. As we again prepare to study God's Word, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

The story is told of a kindly (if rather syrupy) pastor who was asked to fill in at the last moment to perform a funeral at a neighboring parish. Unbeknownst to him, the deceased was, in this case, a singularly notorious scoundrel who had seldom darkened the doorway of a church. Carried away by the moment, the minister heaped one platitude after another upon the dearly departed. The congregation, including the man's widow, became more and more puzzled. Finally, after a ten-minute stretch where the pastor lauded the man as a husband, father, and community leader, his widow nudged her son and whispered: *"Go up there and make sure it's Papa."*

How we love to praise the dead, even if that praise is undeserved, even if it is untrue. In our grief, we are perfectly willing to ignore reality in favor of what we *wish* had been true. To the world, dressing up the memory is every bit as important as dressing up the body. Yet, because of the sorrow of the occasion, no one tends to object to the hypocrisy.

What a different story with Jesus. When our Lord died for our sins, what good thing could anyone have said that was *not* true about him? Selfless dedication, loving son, community leader, a man who left his mark on the world like no other, a force for good, humble, hard working, caring – he was, in short, the perfect human being. But he was so much more than the perfect man. He was, from first to last, our Champion, our Savior.

Imagine the most terrifying enemy earth could possibly produce. Now multiply the horror and the evil of that creature ten thousand-fold and you begin to have a picture of our greatest enemy, Satan. Now picture yourself having to do battle with such a creature. Understand that you must not only fight this hideous beast, you must defeat him. The stakes are eternal. You lose this battle (slip up even once) and you will be tormented with this beast for all eternity.

What unspeakable relief was ours when Jesus Christ, our Champion, stepped to our side and said in great love, *"I will fight in your place."* Not one of us deserved such a thing. Not one of us was worthy of so great a service. Not one of us had any hope whatsoever apart from such a Substitute. As we look back now upon the battle that raged during Jesus' time on earth, we began to realize just how utterly helpless we would have been in such a conflict. Luther summed it up in the words of his famous hymn:

*"With might of ours could naught be done, soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord, and there's none other God;
He holds the field forever." (TLH 262 v. 2)*

This is the battle that reached its climax on Good Friday – the utter agony of our Substitute revealed in those terrible words spoken from the cross: ***"My God, my God, why have you forsaken Me?"*** In those words were all the torments of hell. There justice was being meted out for every sin of every human being ever conceived. Only Jesus could have won such a battle for us. Is there now any praise or act of thanksgiving too good for such a Savior? Is there any good thing we could say about him that is not true?

According to human reckoning, a champion who dies has lost, as when Goliath fell under the stone and sword of David. Yet here things are different. Christ Jesus was not conquered *by* death. He conquered sin and Satan *through* death. So we read in Hebrews 2:14b-15, ***Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵ and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.***

All of the sacrifices throughout the whole Old Testament served as constant reminders that the sacrifice for sin had to be a blood offering. Life and redemption, in the divine system of justice, could only come from death – the shedding of blood. Only the lifeblood of the perfect Son of God could pay such a debt. Even in the Old Testament, the sacrificial lamb had to be a perfect animal, without spot or blemish or defect. This too was a foretelling of just what would be necessary to cover our debt: Jesus, the *perfect* Lamb of God. Jesus, our Savior.

It was indeed Jesus, and Jesus alone, who conquered the enemies against which we were powerless, the enemies that nonetheless *had to be defeated* if we were to escape eternal torment in hell. By his perfect life, given in innocent death on the cross, our Champion has broken, defeated, and chained our great adversary, the devil. Like a dog log-chained to a hundred-year-old oak, Satan can have no power over us unless we let him. Again the words of Luther's great hymn:

*"Though devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpow'r us.
This world's prince may still scowl fierce as he will
He can harm us none, he's judged; the deed is done;
One little word can fell him."* (TLH 262 v. 3)

That "one little word" that can fell Satan (against which the devil is utterly powerless) is, of course, "Jesus." The empty tomb is all the proof that we need to assure us that Satan has been conquered. And yet while this terrible foe has been routed, our text tells of another enemy that still remains, and will remain until the end. Though Satan's domination over us has been broken, there is still no escape from the threat of this final enemy. The bitter irony is that this is an enemy of our own making.

Our text tells us, **"For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."** The last enemy that remains to be destroyed, the one for which man himself is responsible, is physical death itself. We are the ones who by our sins brought into the world not only spiritual death (which we define as the separation of the soul from God) but also physical death (the separation of the body from the soul). Our text uses Adam as representative of all sinners, but we find no solace in blaming Adam. Adam's sin brought death into our existence, but you and I added plenty of our own. You and I therefore brought death upon ourselves by our actions. This one enemy remains, and what sadness and misery it continues to cause us.

Yet note well both what our text *is* saying and what it is *not* saying. Death waits only to be *destroyed* or *abolished*, not *conquered*. It has already been conquered; that is, its power over us has been broken. When Christ rose from the dead, he absolutely conquered death for us. It continues for a time to exist, but it now has no more power over us than it had over Jesus. The Apostle Paul once wrote to Timothy: **"Christ Jesus took away the power of death and by the Gospel brought into the light the life which cannot be destroyed."** (^{NET} 2 Timothy 1:10) Though conquered, and with its power to do us any eternal spiritual harm gone, physical death is still our enemy. Man was not created to die, and physical death still awaits us all – right up until our Lord Jesus returns. It is now to our Savior's return that we look with eager anticipation, for our text assures us that **"at Christ's coming... the last enemy that will be destroyed is death."** Again, note well: **"destroyed,"** not *conquered*.

It is hard for us to imagine an existence without death, and yet that day will certainly come. When Christ returns, not only will the saints be raised, we will be raised *incorruptible*. There will be no more death of any kind. The terrible power of death has been broken, but then it will be destroyed. It will be abolished. It will simply cease to exist. The life that then exists – all life – will never end. Death depends on sin and Satan for its very existence. When these are gone, death too is gone.

Mark well then the joy of this day. Revel in it. But rejoice even more in the fact that, because of this day, the best is yet to come. The day is coming when no enemies of any kind can threaten us. Nothing will be hanging over our heads. Nothing left to dread or to suffer through. Everything that we now find disagreeable, or frustrating, or ominous will be forever gone – including death itself. We will exist in perfect contentment and joy, without fear of change or decay or deterioration of any kind.

May God the Holy Spirit work in the hearts of each of us to preserve us unto that Day – the Day of our Lord's reappearing – when our final enemy, death, will simply cease to exist, destroyed forever as we enter the heaven prepared for us by our Savior. Amen.