

## "The Last Enemy Destroyed"—1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Some years ago a young man of the Presbyterian persuasion went away to college and proceeded to make himself obnoxious to his fraternity brothers by constantly talking about his Presbyterian heritage. According to this young man, everything about being a Presbyterian was first-rate. Now, this might have played well at a Presbyterian college, but this young man happened to be attending a Baptist college, so most of his fraternity brothers were Baptists. They weren't about to let him get away with all of his boasting about being a Presbyterian, so they devised a plan.

One Saturday night, as they were sitting around having coffee (this is an old story and it was a Baptist college), the Baptist boys slipped some sleeping powder into their Presbyterian brother's coffee, and when he passed out, they loaded him into a car and drove him out of the city to a graveyard in a remote area. They had already prepared for their prank by having placed a large open coffin on the flat slab covering one of the graves. They put their friend in the coffin and then hid behind the nearby tombstones to see what would happen.

Well, the night passed, and nothing happened. Finally, dawn came—the sun began to rise, the long rays of the sun cast gray shadows throughout the graveyard, and the mist began to rise from the ground in that slow, spooky way. Meanwhile, the frat boys who had been in hiding all this time began to whisper among themselves, saying, "It won't be long now!"

Sure enough, in a little while, a noise came from the coffin. As they watched, they saw one arm come up and stretch itself, and then the other arm came up also. Then they saw their Presbyterian brother sit up and look around. The Baptist brothers began to whisper excitedly to each other, saying, "This is it! He's going to look around and see where he is; he's going to scream and jump up and run out of the graveyard; and we're going to laugh about this for the rest of our lives. Isn't this great?"

But rather than jumping up in fright and running away, the Presbyterian brother blinked for a moment, looked around, smiled, and then shouted in a loud voice, "Hallelujah! It's the great gettin'-up morning, and the Presbyterians are the first ones up!"

We've come together today, on this Easter morning, to celebrate our faith that, whether we're Methodist or Baptist or Presbyterian or Episcopalian or whatever, there will be a "great gettin'-up morning," a day in God's good time when every Christian, whether alive or dead, will rise up to claim the promise of everlasting life with God forever. We stated our belief in this as we shared this morning in The Nicene Creed when we said, "We look for the resurrection of the

dead, and the life of the world to come." There's an old gospel song which I love that begins by saying,

On the resurrection morning  
When all the dead in Christ shall rise,  
I'll have a new body!  
Praise the Lord, I'll have a new life!

And we proclaim it also as we read and affirm what Paul tells us in his First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter fifteen and verses nineteen through twenty-six:

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

No matter how the proclamation is made, whether in Scripture or song or creed or even a practical joke, the message remains the same: those of us who are in Christ don't need to have any fear of death, because death is no longer an enemy. Death has been conquered by death: death has been conquered by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and our Savior.

You see, the resurrection of Christ stands at the very center of our Christian faith—and to preach Christ crucified without also preaching Christ raised from the dead is truly not to preach Christ at all. Without the resurrection, the cross is a hollow victory. Without the empty tomb, the cross is incomplete. For what good is it if sin is conquered but its wages are not? What difference does it make if we say to people that their sins are forgiven but we don't offer them new life? We must proclaim Christ, and him crucified; but we must also proclaim Christ resurrected and the promise that this holds for all who believe in him. And this promise tells us that death for the Christian is no longer the end of life, but it has simply become the transition point from one stage of living to another, more glorious stage—life in the eternal and glorious presence of God.

Now, here is a reality—unless the Lord returns in our lifetimes, we will all die; that is, our biological functions will cease. There’s a story about a pastor who was preaching one Sunday morning on the topic of death, and in the midst of his sermon he said, “Every member of this church must one day die.” Sitting on the front pew, however, was a man who started smiling. So the pastor said again, “Let there be no mistake—every member of this church must one day die.” The man on the front pew began to chuckle to himself. So, looking straight at the man, the pastor said, “I tell you, every member of this church must one day die.” At this the man on the front pew began to laugh out loud. The pastor stopped his sermon and, addressing himself directly to the man, he said, “Would you please tell me what you find to be so amusing?” The man said, “Didn’t you say, ‘Every member of this church must one day die?’” “Yes,” said the pastor, “that’s exactly what I said.” “Well, that’s good,” said the man. “Why?” asked the pastor, and the man said, “Because I’m not a member of this church!”

Yet the pastor was right—we all must die. That’s not a cheery thought on this Easter morning, but it is the truth. Sometimes death comes as a friend, when it is a release from suffering—indeed, we sometimes choose to call death a form of healing. But the Apostle Paul sees death as an enemy, something opposed to the will of God, something brought into the world by Adam’s sin and thereby affecting us all. For death as an enemy means that the only hope that exists is in the here and now, in this life alone, and after that there is only eternal separation from God.

Paul sees death as an enemy—but death’s grip on life is broken by the resurrection of Jesus. The promise of God for those who are in Christ—that is, for those who have accepted what has been accomplished by Christ—is that those who have died in Christ shall be raised from the dead at the coming of the Lord. In bursting the bonds of death on that first Easter morning, Jesus secured for all who would believe the promise that we, too, shall slip death’s grip—not just in the life to come, but also in the here and now.

You see, what we celebrate today is the final victory—the last enemy, death, is destroyed. But it’s a victory that doesn’t wait for the end of our lives or the Lord’s return—it’s a victory that can be and is being fulfilled right now in the lives of those of us who believe in and accept the free gift of God’s love made real in Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. For not only has God forgiven our sins—not only has he wiped the slate clean, not because of anything we’ve done, but only because of Jesus—but he’s also gifted us with a new life, a new beginning, a fresh start. We now have the chance to live life the way God intended for us to live it—in love and obedience to him, and in love and charity toward our neighbors through the power of God’s Holy Spirit. We now have the chance to drink freely and fully and deeply from the well of the true joy, the true peace, and the true fulfillment that God wants us to have.

You see, the new life that is the resurrection victory in the here-and-now sets us free. We're free from the worry, the concern, the fear of death. I can't tell you how many times I've sat by the bedsides and held the hands of the dying—both the aged and the not-so-aged—and heard them say, "I'm not afraid of death—I'm ready, because I know where I'm going."

The new life that is the resurrection victory in the here-and-now sets us free from our despair over the usefulness of our lives, the wonder if our lives have any real meaning and purpose. But in Christ, they do—for in him, life becomes directed and focused, not on what we want, but on what God wants for us.

The new life that is the resurrection victory in the here-and-now sets us free from self-centered concern—rather than being so focused on ourselves, we can turn our focus and our attention and our energy to something of much greater importance—and that is how we can serve God and our neighbors in all that we say and do.

When I was in Israel back in the early nineties, I visited two possible sites of Jesus' tomb, but in neither place did I find the body of Jesus. Yet, I already knew that he wouldn't be there—indeed, I didn't even have to go to Israel to be absolutely sure. The resurrection of Jesus was real on that morning when the tomb in which he was laid was found empty, and I believe it's just as real today. The resurrection is not just something that happened "back there"—not just an historical event which we recall with some holiday, as we might celebrate Columbus Day. Nor is the resurrection something that awaits us only in the life to come, when Jesus returns and all who believe will receive their new, immortal, imperishable, incorruptible bodies. Christ's victory over the last enemy is being felt today, as men and women and boys and girls embrace the free gift of God's unearned, undeserved love. What we celebrate today—what we experience in the here-and-now, and what we look forward to being fulfilled when Christ returns—is the final victory. What we celebrate today is that the last enemy—death—has been destroyed. And because death has been destroyed, you and I can live in the joy and peace and glorious presence of God, for now and forever. Thanks be to God!