

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

“We Look For the Resurrection of the Dead”

April 9, 2022

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Easter Sunday

Our sermon text this Easter Sunday in the year of Lord 2023 is found in 1 Corinthians 15:19-26.

Listen now to God’s holy and inerrant word, given to us from the Apostle Paul, as he wrote by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

God’s word is more precious than gold, even much fine gold. It is sweeter than honey, sweeter even than the drippings of the honeycomb.

19 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.

Thus far the reading of God’s word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you. Let’s pray...

This morning, on all corners of this globe, in all sorts of different languages, Christians are — just as we did a moment ago, confessing their faith using the ancient words of the Nicene Creed.

And one of the phrases that the church speaks today is this one: “*We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.*”

Those words are being spoken today by the church in English. In Mandarin. In Hindi. In Spanish. In French. In Arabic. In Bengali. In Swahili. In Russian. In Portuguese. In Indonesian, and in all sorts of other tongues as well.

I hope you know beloved, that when you say that you look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come, you do not say those words alone.

No, you say them with the church down through the ages — you say them with Augustine and Patrick and Calvin — you say them with anonymous blacksmiths and fieldworkers and maidservants and slaves and kings who lived and died long ago. And you say them with the church around the world today.

The wording of the creed on this point has always struck me. We not only believe in the resurrection of the dead — we *look* for it. We anticipate it. We hope for it. We long for it.

As those who are in Christ, we have been given already the forgiveness of our sins. We already have peace with God. We have prayer. We have the word. We have the Holy Spirit dwelling in us. We have the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper.

But there is still one thing we lack. We do not yet have the resurrection of the dead. We do not yet possess the life of the world to come.

And so we look for it.

One of the things that we do when we look for the resurrection of the dead is we cultivate a kind of holy dissatisfaction with the ways things are now.

Beloved, at this point in history, we live in the before times.

We live in the time before the resurrection of the dead, in the time before the life of the world to come, and it is right and holy for us now, even this Easter Sunday in the year of our Lord 2023, to be unsatisfied by this state of affairs.

Let me be clear. To look for the resurrection of the dead is to refuse to make peace with the way things are now, to refuse to make peace with death.

I don't know about you, but I am weary of death. I am ready for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

Almost three years ago now, my friend and parishioner Nathan died suddenly in a car accident. His life was cut short in his early 40s, and he left behind a widow and four children.

I loved Nathan, and I think about him all the time. I carry his death with me day by day, week by week, month by month.

Only six weeks ago, a pastor friend of mine lost his wife suddenly to leukemia, and two weeks ago another pastor friend's daughter was murdered at her school in Nashville, along with two other children and three adults.

I carry these griefs, and many others besides, just as I know you also carry terrible wounds caused by death in this world.

It's impossible to be a human being and not to be confronted with death's horror.

The Apostle Paul knew this. He gives language for our discontent. He says, *"If in Christ, we have hope in this life only, then we are of all people most to be pitied."*

To be clear, Paul speaks this way because he is not content, and we should not be content either with some vague hope about the immortality of the soul, some hazy idea that after we die, after our loved ones die, our souls and their souls go to “a better place.”

No, what Paul wants, and what we want, is the resurrection of the dead.

When we say we look for the resurrection of dead, what we are saying is that we refuse to settle for death to be defeated by anything less than resurrection.

What I want, and what Paul wants, is the life of the world to come, the life of the new creation that is not yet here but one day will be.

What I want is to not just to somehow believe that my friend Nathan is in a better place now.

No, what I want is to embrace Nathan again, to hug him just as I did right out there on that sidewalk in the sunshine after worship on the day before he died three years ago.

I don't want anything less than that.

I want death to die, to be completely destroyed, to lose all its power over myself and all of those whom I love.

I want the dead in Christ to rise, and to live forever in their new and glorious bodies in the new creation that Jesus himself will bring.

And beloved, that is precisely the hope and the promise that we give thanks for this Easter Sunday.

For we are those who, because of the resurrection of Jesus, look for the resurrection of the dead.

Listen again to these words from the Apostle Paul:

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

What Paul is saying is here is that if, if death wins, if death is the end, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then we are all fools.

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then there is no reason for all our alleluias this morning, no reason for our singing, no reason for our glad tidings, no reason for our Easter suits and our Easter dresses and our Easter feasts.

Christianity without the resurrection of the dead, without the resurrection of the body, becomes exactly what Karl Marx accused it of being: an opiate of the masses — something to make men and women feel a little better about their desperate plight and keep them reasonably happy and distracted in the midst of their suffering in this life.

But beloved, this is the grace and the good news of the gospel:

Christ is risen from the dead, trampling down death by death, and upon those in the tombs bestowing life!

Here is how the Apostle Paul puts it:

19 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.

The logic of Paul's words is this.

Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was crucified by sinful men, really died.

He died in the same manner of every human person who has ever died.

Jesus' heart stopped beating. Jesus' lungs stopped functioning. Jesus' brain ceased activity. Jesus' soul was ripped from his dead body, and his body, cold and lifeless, was wrapped in linen cloths and laid in a tomb by his friends.

Jesus knew the fullness of death's horror and power, just as everyone person whom you have loved and lost to death has known the horror and power of death.

But then, and this part is shrouded in mystery, three days later, early in the morning on the first day of the week, God, by the power of the Holy Spirit, raised his beloved Son from the dead.

By the power of the living God, the God who made heaven and earth, Jesus of Nazareth burst out of the tomb in which his friends had buried him.

Now, it's important to make this distinction.

Jesus did not just "come back to life."

No, his Father raised Jesus from the dead in a glorified and resurrected body, full of power and strength, and he bestowed upon his Son the gift that no man had ever yet received — the gift of everlasting, eternal, physical, bodily life.

As Paul puts in Romans 6, what is different about Jesus' resurrection, what makes it absolutely unique, is that *"Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him."*

And the promise of the gospel, the promise of Easter, is that one day, Jesus Christ, having been raised by his Father, will raise each of us from the dead in the exactly same way.

To be absolutely clear, what I mean is that Jesus will raise us from the dead in a way that is absolutely different from the way he raised Lazarus from the dead, from the way he raised the widow's son or Jarius' daughter.

Beloved, when Jesus raises us from the dead on the last day, we will be raised as he was raised.

On that day, what happened to him on the first day of the week, on Easter Day, will happen also to us.

And we, being raised on that day from the dead by the power of the Risen Son of God, will never die again; for death will no longer have dominion over us.

As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, Jesus is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

By one man, Adam, came death. But also by one man, Jesus, shall we all be made alive.

And made alive in just the way he has been made alive — with glorified physical bodies, risen to live in the resurrected earth, the new creation that our Lord will bring with his coming.

Make no mistake — the resurrection of our Lord Jesus was physical and bodily.

As we heard in our reading from Luke this morning, when Jesus appeared on the evening of his resurrection to his disciples in the upper room, they worried that he was a spirit, a ghost, that his body was not true living flesh.

And so Jesus spoke to them, and he said, *“Do you have anything to eat?”*

And, in their presence, Jesus ate a piece of grilled fish, and spoke to them, saying: *“Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. Touch me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”*

This, beloved, is what we believe and confess when we say that we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

This is the very heart of our faith, and the substance of all our hope.

That Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and having died once, he will never die again.

And one day, he will raise our very bodies from the dead and give us the same everlasting life that he knows now at his Father’s right hand.

In the risen body of Jesus we have the sealed promise, sealed in his very resurrected bones and flesh that he also will raise us from the grave.

Beloved, in a world of suffering and pain and horror, let me make this clear.

We make no peace with death.

We broker no deal with the deterioration of our bodies, with the pain and suffering and horror of death.

We do not console ourselves with false sentiment or some vague hope in the immortality of the soul.

No, we are those who look for the resurrection of the dead.

We are those who scan the horizon for life of the world to come.

We are those who drive by the graveyards of our beloveds and say to ourselves — that is the place — that is the sacred place — where one day Jesus himself will raise my husband, my wife, my mother, my father, my brother, my sister, my child, my friend, from the dead and give them life everlasting.

We are those who look the horror and violence of death straight in the face and we say:

Death be not proud...for one day, one day, Death — *thou* shalt die.

We are those who say with the prophet Job:

I know that my Redeemer lives,
even now at his Father's right hand,
and at the last Day he will stand upon the earth.
And after my body has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh (in my risen, glorified flesh) I shall see Jesus.
Though I die — I shall see and embrace the Risen Christ,
For my risen eyes shall behold him at the last Day.

Beloved, Christ is risen. He is risen indeed!

And this day, because of the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ and the Son of God, we are those who look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of Holy Spirit. Amen.