

DEATH SHALL HAVE NO DOMINION

Romans 6:1-14

What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means! We are those who have died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness. For sin shall no longer be your master, because you are not under the law, but under grace.

1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-23

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

MESSAGE:

Some of the Corinthians to whom Paul was writing in today's Epistle lesson were contending that Christ could only have risen in Spirit, because there was no such thing as a bodily resurrection from the dead. In that opinion they are joined by a long line of skeptics.

In ancient times, Greek philosophers from Plato to Epicurus objected so strenuously to the idea of bodily resurrection from the dead that the idea was formally banned from all philosophic discussion. Paul found this out to his chagrin when he was invited to speak at the Aereopagita, the main forum for philosophers in Athens, and was met with hoots of

derision when he testified to the physical resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it was not only the Greeks who rejected the possibility of the dead coming back to life. One of the two leading parties of the Jews, the Sadducees, categorically denied the possibility of a resurrection of the dead. Another group of philosophers, who called themselves Gnostics, believed that all physical matter was inherently evil and that the body—being physical—was something from which the spirit yearned to be free. They rejected not only the possibility, but even the desirability of a bodily resurrection.

And so it continued: throughout history: the idea of the resurrection of the dead has been considered “outside the box” by both philosophers and scientists. It has been foolishness to the Greeks, a stumbling block to the Jews, and a fairy tale to atheists. Perhaps that’s why most religions tend to prefer “spirituality” over “physicality,” as if the flesh were inferior to the spirit. Some Christian churches have fallen into this way of thinking.

The physical resurrection of Christ and His promise of eternal life for all who believe in him has a low priority in the preaching and teaching of many Christian churches. More emphasis is placed upon Jesus as an enricher of life in the here and now, rather than as a bloody Savior who died for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life. Jesus is regarded more as a source of spiritual and emotional health than He is as a Savior from sin and death—a spiritual coach who encourages and helps believers to lead rich, rewarding lives.

To a Christian with that kind of faith, bodily resurrection from the dead is almost irrelevant: it’s what’s happening while you’re alive that counts. All of this is in spite of the fact that one would be hard-pressed to find Scriptures that speak in any positive way about a believer’s “quality of life” in the here and now. Jesus didn’t say, “*Believe in me and your life will be enriched.*” Quite the opposite, He said, “*The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.*”

Jesus didn’t come to teach us how to fulfill our human potential; he came to show us how we can have eternal life through faith in His death and resurrection. And that is why it’s important to understand that Jesus came as a physical human being, He died as a physical human being, and He rose from the dead as a physical human being. And if we trust in His promise, so will we.

Jesus came to bring life through death, and in that mystery lies the sum and substance of the Christian faith. This is why in the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ appearances to his disciples after he rose from the dead, a great deal of emphasis is placed upon His physical presence. On one occasion, when his disciples thought he was a spirit without a body, he said, “*Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.*” On another occasion he asked them, “*Do you have anything here to eat?*” *They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.*” When he appeared to Thomas, he showed him his wounds and said, “*Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.*”

According to the Apostle John, the author of the *Book of Revelation*, even in heaven Jesus retains his physical body along with the scars that testify to his scourging and his

death on the cross. Jesus was and is the *incarnate* Son of God, and “incarnate” means that he took on human flesh and blood at his birth, and then suffered and died a human death on the cross. And when he rose from the dead, it was not as a spirit or ghost or angel or “shade”; it was as a body that had suffered, bled and died, and could now eat, drink, feel and be felt.

Paul wrote, “If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For just as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”

Here Paul touches on what SHOULD be the main focus of our Christian faith: our inheritance of eternal life by passing through physical death. What gets in our way, I think, is our conviction that since our death is inevitable, it has the ultimate say over our lives. That in the end, death rules over life. But that’s the very opposite of the truth.

God created us to live eternally—not to die. Death is not “natural”; it is an intruder in God’s perfect order, and in Christ, it is rendered powerless. In Christ, life rules over death.

In the worship of *Old Testament* Israel, there was a festival called Bikurim, the feast of first fruits. It came two days after the Passover and it celebrated the beginning of the harvest. Christ rose from the dead on the day of Bikurim. So when Paul calls Christ “...*the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep*,” he is saying that the bodily resurrection of Christ is the beginning of the resurrection of all those who belong to Christ. The ultimate blessing was anticipated in the preliminary blessing.

[Describe experience with planting a lawn.]

Christ died and rose *and so shall we*. That is our hope, our faith, and the clear teaching of the Scriptures. Jesus died to make everything new! He turned the Titanic around by liberating all creation from slavery to the evil forces in the universe that are opposed to God. And chief among these evil forces is death.

As long as we are held in thrall by a fear of death, it’s hard for us to believe in the possibility of resurrection from the dead. In effect, we remain convinced that creation remains in bondage to death. But just as death entered the world through Adam, resurrection from the dead entered the world through Christ.

In Christ’s resurrection, God began the work of delivering us from death’s reign. Christ’s resurrection is the visible sign of our liberation from sin, death and Satan.

It can be appealing to think of Jesus as a Savior *IN* the world rather than the Savior *OF* the world; someone who rescues you regularly from the trials of life—a kindly companion who smoothes out the bumps in the road as you travel down the road of life. But that’s not the real Jesus. The real Jesus warned his disciples, “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Our job as Christians is not to live frictionless existences in an evil world, but to keep our faith fixed on our goal: the resurrection of our bodies unto eternal life.

I'm sure most of you remember the pastor you had before I came along--Dennis Mann. I knew Dennis pretty well since we were in the same circuit of churches and we got together on a monthly basis. Since I served on the District Board of Trustees, I also got to know Dennis's wife Bonnie who was the chief financial officer of the Ohio District. When I retired from Our Redeemer Lutheran in Solon back in 2010, Karen and I started attending Hope. We came here for two reasons: we were made to feel welcome and we both liked Pastor Mann's preaching. He preached simply and clearly and from the heart--traits that are of first importance for a pastor.

Some of you may also remember that I occasionally accompanied Lynn by playing my banjo, much to the dismay of Rick Mattmuller.

When Pastor Mann led worship services, he always took prayer requests before praying the prayer of the church. One Sunday someone asked him to pray for healing for an elderly member who was receiving hospice care and appeared to be near death. I will never, ever forget what Dennis said. He said, of course I will pray for her, but you need to realize that if she dies, she is healed.

If she dies, she is healed. I think that sums up everything I've tried to say in this sermon. Death is not God's failure to heal; it is God's ultimate act of healing. Isaiah wrote, "Death has been swallowed up in victory." Shakespeare wrote, "Death once dead, there's no more dying then." John Donne wrote, "Death shall have no dominion." On my Aunt Belle's gravestone it says, "Death is but the dawn of eternal life." Take your pick.

Amen.