

First Presbyterian Church
Isa. 25:6-9, 1 Cor. 15:50-58, "Swallowed Up"
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 3/31/2024

There are a lot of good things happening today:

Easter brunch, family get togethers, wearing nice clothes,
listening to great music, Easter egg hunts and, of course,
celebrating your unblemished NCAA tournament bracket.

Well, at least some of those things are happening today.

But what about the really good thing that we celebrate on this day?

What really happened on the first Easter?

Was it hopeful dreams or hallucinations?

Did the disciples witness a disembodied spiritual vision?

Is resurrection a mystical revelation felt in human hearts?

Are we here to remember an unlikely resuscitation?

Today is a good day because we remember what happened to Jesus of Nazareth
after the Friday he was executed by the Empire of Rome,
and after the Sabbath Saturday day when he rested – his body
was wrapped and buried in a sealed tomb.

Today we remember the miracle of the Sunday morning resurrection.

The resurrection is a purely unexplainable, unrepeatable miracle.

For those of us who didn't see and touch the risen Christ, it is unprovable.

It is also the centerpiece of Christian faith.

If Jesus was a good teacher who helped people and died,

he would be an honorable person,

but not worthy of being worshipped,

not able to atone for our sin,

not able to offer us any hope in the face of death.

If Jesus of Nazareth was not raised from death to new life,

our only hope in the face of judgment is to be just as good as him.

(I'm not trying out for that one.)

The prophet Isaiah described the judgment of the Lord as a shroud
which looms over the entire world.

Isaiah 24 describes terrible devastation and destruction that occurs
as the Lord lays waste to the earth.

Scholars think this is in part a remembrance of the destruction of Jerusalem itself
in 587 BCE by the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar.

But in Isaiah's vision, the wrath of God is writ large:
it extends to other cities
and other rulers across the whole world.

Isaiah equates the shroud of judgment with death itself. It covers the world,
cutting us off from the light of God. We know this shroud.

Sometimes it is thick and overpowering.

We collectively feel the texture of this shroud in the announcement of a pandemic,
in the threat of nuclear war,
in warnings about impending climate catastrophe.

We feel it personally when receiving an unthinkable diagnosis,
or in acts of betrayal and abuse.

Death's shroud is present through poverty, hunger, pain, and despair.

Death is the ultimate coercive threat used by dictators, bullies, militaries,
and even the criminal justice system.

Death is the ultimate non-negotiable outcome ... unless Jesus of Nazareth
was raised from death to new life.

It's such a singular idea that there are not any good metaphors I can turn to,
no stories to explain what this is like.

I love the butterfly analogy – a caterpillar
goes into a tomb-like cocoon
and then emerges transformed as a beautiful butterfly.

It's incredibly close to resurrection.

Except, you know, that the caterpillar never dies.

It is transformed *without* dying, which is not what we celebrate today.

I love stories of near-death experiences, or people who were clinically dead,
only to be resuscitated and return to their lives again.

Sometimes they see God. That...sounds just like Jesus!

Except that Jesus was dead for at least 36 hours
from Friday night to Sunday morning, and, most importantly,
he didn't go on to die again after that!
Returning to life only to face death once again is also not what we celebrate today.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church and attempted to explain
what genuine resurrection is all about.

He talks about the perishable and the mortal. That's us, right now.
That's the whole world under the terrible shroud
described by Isaiah.

This mode of existence is incompatible with the imperishable and the eternal—
that which is to come. Ah, you might think, Paul is saying that we must go
from life in a physical body to life as purely spiritual beings.

But no! Because Jesus was not pure spirit when he appeared to his friends
after the resurrection – he ate grilled fish to prove it.
Paul says that instead of returning to a perishable physical body,
Jesus' resurrection resulted in an imperishable physical body.

In v. 51 it seems Paul thought he would experience this in his own lifetime:
He described a climactic moment when the trumpet of judgment sounds,
Jesus returns, and in a flash the resurrection will take place.
In that moment the perishable world will be clothed with the imperishable.
The resurrection of Jesus does not merely bring *life* to those who are dead.
It completely changes *the nature of physical existence* for everyone.

Helen Keller, the blind and deaf woman who lived such an inspiring life,
understood this. She said:

**“There's so much I'd like to see, so much to learn.
And death is just around the corner. Not that that worries me.
On the contrary, it is no more than passing
from one room into another.
But there's a difference for me, you know.
Because in that other room I shall be able to see.”**

My kids love playing video games, and though the goal is always
to make it through the game without dying,
these games involve...quite a lot of death.

When I call out, “Turn off your game it’s time for dinner!”

I often hear in response, “Just a second, I’m about to die.”
Videogame death is no big deal because you can begin again
an unlimited amount of times.

Pretty cool, I guess. But the resurrection is better than that –
it is being transferred into a realm where there is no more death.

Isaiah foresaw something like this
in response to the terrible destruction of God’s wrath
and the impenetrable veil of death.

He saw...a feast! A feast on Mt. Zion – the Mountain of God’s connection
with Israel and through Israel with all of humanity.

I hope you’ll have a great meal today. We’ve got some pretty nice Pinot Noir
here in the Willamette Valley, but nothing we hope for today
can compare to the banquet table envisioned by Isaiah:

A feast of rich food and aged wine *for all people*.

Not just for this religion or that, not only for the wealthy and educated,
not just for this political party or that,
not for one race alone but all races and all nations, all people
will stream to share in a banquet of rich food exquisitely prepared
by God’s own hand.

And at this banquet, while the people eat, *God sits down to eat as well.*
And the Creator is hungry! God will sit on Mt. Zion,
rip down that shroud of judgment,
spin it around on a fork and swallow up death itself.

God’s own hand will wipe away the tears from every face,
because, as Rev. 7 puts it,

**‘Never again will they hunger;
never again will they thirst.
The sun will not beat down on them,
nor any scorching heat.**

**For the Lamb at the center before the throne
will be their shepherd;**

**‘he will lead them to springs of living water.’
‘And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.’**

That, and nothing less than that,
is the hope we have through the resurrection of Jesus.

And so, Paul concludes in one of the most triumphant moments in all of Scripture,
**“When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable,
and the mortal with immortality,
then the saying that is written will come true:
“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”
“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”**

An Anglican priest named John Donne lived from (1572–1631).
He was one of the finest poets in the English language,
and was also a tremendous theologian.

I want to read a brief poem of his
which surely emerged from reflecting on this very passage.

Without naming Jesus or the resurrection at all,
Donne mocks death’s impotence in the face
of what God has done through Christ,
and points out that death does not even get to choose when or how we die.

Death Be Not Proud (Holy Sonnet X)

Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou are not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men [and women] with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou'art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy'or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

This is what we celebrate at Easter, not merely new life for one person who died,
but the death of death itself and its stranglehold upon all of creation.

Jesus fulfilled the law perfectly on our behalf,
willingly died and atoned for sin,
and through the power of the Holy Spirit vanquished death
so that we all might share in God's victory.

I have seen people who draw near to death with this awareness deep inside them.
They are not afraid.
They are not unwilling to take the next step in their journey.
They are curious and even eager to see the face of Jesus.

Can you face your mortality with Isaiah's banquet vision in mind?
Beyond that, can you live *today and everyday* with that vision in mind?

Paul closes this passage with encouragement for daily life:
**"Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you.
Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,
because you know that your labor in the Lord
is not in vain."**

We who share in the astonishing news of Easter stand as a signpost
of what's to come *even when we see sin and death all around us*.

As people of the resurrection we have every reason to love our enemies,
to forgive those who have sinned against us,
to give generously to those in need,
to be people of creativity and hope.

Whatever your Easter dinner is like today,
may it remind you of the great feast dreamed of by Isaiah—
that when Christ returns, God also will sit down at the table,
and because of Easter morning,
death itself will be swallowed up.