

## 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

<sup>19</sup> If we only have hope in Christ, only in this life, we are of all people most to be pitied. <sup>20</sup> But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died will now live forever more. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human beings; <sup>22</sup> for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. <sup>23</sup> But each in Christ's own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming we too shall rise that belong to Christ.

Owls and cemeteries, you may not think of them as being connected, but they have been together throughout the world for a very long time. For centuries, the call of the owl has been linked to cemeteries in mythology. So, it seems, in the quietness of the tombstones...the owls and their cry, have been linked to the shadows of darkness and end of life.

The Native Americans were sure owls lifted the departed to the spirit world. In the British Isles, the Celts in their pagan ceremonies honored those who recently departed, believing owls were able to communicate with those who passed away... helping them moved to the other side.

Over time, stories were created giving Owls super natural abilities, and sadly now, their common night time calls are also associated with spooky stuff and scary legends and myths.

But the reality is, the connection with owls and grave yards is really no myth at all. The truth is that many owls live in the cavities of trees, in the oldest plots of land. And where are those plots of land today? Generally, in cemeteries, because it is there, where the largest oaks with the largest cavities are readily found.

I came across an article where several graduate students from the University of Minnesota, in the College of History and Archeology, were researching the similarities and differences of cemeteries around the world. Their original intent was to discover and catalogue the different burial rituals and customs. The students along with several of their professors noticed and discovered that even in densely populated areas where homes, businesses and civilization had now encroached upon these cemeteries, they also were amazed these cemeteries contain such large trees.

They also noticed in many of these locations, there was an abundance of owls which originally was not their intent of their study.

This sparked the attention of several graduate students in the College of Natural Science who were looking for a research project to explore for their thesis work. So, they began studying the owls in and around random cemeteries in a fifty mile radius of the university while talking to local bird watching groups.

What was even more surprising to these science grad students, and to their delight, not many experts hadn't even researched this world wide over the years. They were amazed of the of all the different species of living plants and other animals that were found in cemeteries. It opened the door and soon more universities and colleges were joining in on the research too. One student even remarked, "Cemeteries, there is so much life here, who would have thought?"

Yes, cemeteries are places that many of us associate with death, but in truth they are the places where the largest trees still thrive... and because they thrive, owls and many other animals are protected and it is there they raise their young. For you see, those who think that cemeteries are only for the dead, in reality, they are a places where many species of animals can also be found beaming with the abundance of life.

These students said that this study opened their eyes and helped them put aside their feelings that cemeteries are not for the dead, but also for the living.

Likewise, in a way, in our world we too are surrounded by things that draw our attention away from a living God. Captivated by the glitz of entertainment, technology, casinos, sporting events and soccer practices on Sunday morning, all this and more have successfully drawn people away from the church on Sunday.

Yes, because of that, many have lost their faith and God has been almost removed from their life entirely. Like the cemetery, churches like ours are still places where people can still come to regain their sense of spiritual life after the outside world has worked hard to take it away. There is life in those old churches if they but only look.

When Paul wrote this scripture I read today, Paul was facing the same controversy in the early church. Christians in the Church of Corinth were saying there was no resurrection of the dead and they knew there was no hope of everlasting life with God in heaven. Even back then, less than 50 years after Christ's historic resurrection many stopped going to church. Like today, many are buying into the wisdom of nonbelievers that resurrection was a hoax... or a very rare and an extraordinary event. Life after death is too good to be true.

They accepted that Jesus was raised on Easter morning and that was only because he was the one and only son of god and only Jesus could live forever more. For the rest of us... the regular everyday Christians, it just wasn't in the cards. So, what hope was there? And that troubled Paul that they believed that.... but can we blame them? Why, because when doubts stroll through the cemeteries of our lives, we too can only see death and not life.

And in our honest moments when we walk through those cemeteries of life, maybe more see death than life. Why? Because when we struggle in life, those tall gray tombstones seem so large, so lifeless and unmovable, that it is difficult to find promise and hope.

It is when the gray tombstones of a lost job, an addiction to drugs, a difficult divorce, a failing mark on a midterm, the diagnoses of an illness, the fear of aging, or when... a once loved family no longer give you the time of day ....it is when these headstones come up against us, where can we... find the hope of new life?

So, God's peoples, hear the Good News... the good news is that in the cemetery times of our lives, new life can both emerge and thrive. God promises us the in the tombs of our lives He is closer to us at any other time of our life.

The scripture shows us that God was so close to Christ at the cross, even Christ was in doubt ... when he called out, 'My God, My God why have you forsaken me?' But God did not forsake Christ, and that gives us hope in our time of doubt. God is closest to us in our darkest hour and in our lowest valley than at any other time. God is always wooing us with his Holy Spirit to remember the faith... and is always reassuring us to maintain our hope in Christ. Even when others tell us this is only false hope. If it indeed a false hope, I would rather have that hope than no hope at all.

But because of Easter and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, witnesses who saw the empty tomb and Christ standing before them alive again, they no longer doubted and stood strong, no longer in fear, many later died being martyrs while they brought the Gospel of Christ to others. Now with heart felt convictions, these disciples grew the church... not behind closed doors but out in the open going against the Jewish religious authorities who thought they silenced Jesus Christ and all his followers forever.

That is why we are here, in this holy sanctuary, to hear the Word of God and celebrate Christ's resurrection from the dead and to celebrate our resurrection to come. We come to be reassured on this special Sunday to learn that the dark cemeteries of our lives are not the end.

It is here every Sunday we come to know and maintain that hope that life abounds in Jesus Christ.

Two years ago, I did a summer funeral where the burial was in a quaint old cemetery. It was there in that cemetery I marveled at the many tall large pine and oak trees... teeming with birds and squirrels. There near the site where the service was one of the largest oaks I had ever seen. After the service I walked over and noticed that oak was next was a grave of a civil war soldier. It was at that moment I realized that this was more than an old grave of an old dead soldier but a place of life.

That oak as I learned was planted for that soldier and over the years they preserved that large oak tree. For ,is it wasn't for that soldier, I am sure that oak could have been cut down long ago. So it seems that old oak and that old soldier are connected in a special way. It is that soldier that guards that old oak, not the other way around.

Even now, oaks and cemeteries are connected in diverse ways. Because they are holy places, they are preserved and protected for generations to come. Cemeteries are places we bury those we love who have passed into the arms of Jesus, and because of those resting places are protected, living creatures and plants flourish too. As it is with Christ, because of his death we are protected by the promise of everlasting life and resurrection into heaven is assured.

If this is not what you believe, then as Paul said today in verse 22, “you are of all people most to be pitied.” I say show me what hope you have that apart from Christ and his church and resurrection power.

I will conclude this story. There was a young boy who grew to admire two of his greatest heroes. Not Batman and Superman, but Mr. Kangaroo and Mr. Rodgers. It seems he made it a point to watch their television shows as much as time would allow him too.

And to his amazement it was announce that Mr. Rogers would be paying a visit to the Captain Kangaroo show. Seriously? The boy was astatic because both of his heroes would be together at the same time. Life couldn't get any better than this. So, every day the boy would ask, is this the day? Is this the day that Captain Kangaroo and Mr. Rogers will be together?

Well the day finally arrived, and the boy had the family and even a few neighborhood friends he invited to gather around the television to watch the show. And sure enough, as Captain Kangaroo did the opening of the show, who should walk in and stand next to Garfield Goose and Captain Kangaroo was Mr. Rogers. There they were, Mr. Rogers and Captain Kangaroo standing side by side.

The boy watched and surprisingly he quickly got up and walked out of the room. A moment later his mother got up and followed him into the kitchen and ask her son if anything was wrong? And the boy replied, “Mom, It’s too good, it’s just too good.”

You know, maybe that’s it. Maybe the news of Christ’s resurrection and empty tomb on Easter morning is just too good. The news of Jesus Christ’s victory over death is just too good to assimilate all at once.

Especially in the cemeteries of our lives where hardship is still found as quickly as next week. Outside these doors others are still eagerly waiting to tell us that their faith in God and the hope in Christ is not that important. Why? Maybe it’s because in the tombs of their lives, they have failed to pause to see the hope, and they have missed the fellowship and the resurrection of Christ on this Easter morning because God’s love and forgiveness.... is it too good to be true.

But it is true and because God carried Jesus through the worst of times, God is just as willing to carry you through whatever you will face. That is God’s Easter promise. It is too good. Because Christ has risen from the dead so shall we.

So, if your life right now seems as dormant as a cemetery, I beckon you to stop and look around and search the text, and search your soul in prayer and thanksgiving with God. Why? Because in your darkest cemeteries our ever-living Christ beams with abounding hope and love. Yes, pause and you will find life and hope in this glorious Easter and among those owls and oaks. Amen