

Sermon Easter 2020

April 12, 2020

Christ is Risen! He is Risen indeed, Allelulia!

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and our Risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

A friend of mine sent me a quote in an email this week. You may have seen something similar to it floating around online. It makes the point that as used to worshipping on Easter altogether as we are, as much as we think of celebrating—and I would add rightly so, with joyous gathering and great singing and praises, there's something we can identify with in relation to the first Easter. Think about what we see there. In John it tells us that the disciples were locked in the room, in fear. In a sense we are locked in in our fear too.

Now to be sure, there is an aspect to this that isn't fear driven. There's the aspect where we are trying to care for our neighbor, and that desire is a good desire. It is right to seek not to hurt or harm our neighbor in his body but help and support him in every physical need. That is good. But for many there is a fear aspect too.

And as we look at that fear, you see that there's an enemy that we're afraid of. Shifting from that connection from the email to a different point another friend of mine made, there is this invisible enemy out there. There is this enemy lurking about that is one that we don't know precisely where it is, where it has been, or where it might be. But we know that it's there almost like Peter describes the Devil, prowling about, looking for who it might devour.

As we celebrate today, though, we celebrate our Lord Jesus who has won the victory over a different, but connected invisible enemy. This invisible enemy is fatal. It's the infection at the very root of all of our problems. Today we celebrate that Jesus has won the victory over sin. As He was raised from the grave, we see that sin is now forgiven. Your sin is absolved. In fact, we see that Jesus has not only overcome sin for you, but He's overcome the consequence of sin. He's overcome death. In this, then, He's also overcome the power of the devil.

As we make that connection, then, what we can understand is that the enemy that we fear isn't actually the coronavirus. No, it's actually this trifecta of sin, death, and the devil. But Christians, today is the day we celebrate that those enemies have been overcome. Today is the day we celebrate that Christ has risen from the grave, and now He is the Victor over these powers. And today is the day that we celebrate that this victory is ours! Thanks be to God! Amen!

But as we celebrate locked up in our houses, as we watch a church service on a computer monitor or on a television screen, listening to preaching and music that clearly doesn't sound the same as being here, but at best sounds like its coming right out of the

sound system at Grace and at worst sounds like its echoing in a can, as we experience this, it doesn't feel like Jesus has won, does it? It doesn't feel like this is the reality for us, does it?

In fact, as I was preparing I kept thinking about the newspaper headline you would see from World War II: Victory!! That was real, the victory was won! But there were places where fighting continued after that. There were places where axis soldiers hadn't gotten the memo. There were places where they still thought that they could maintain their positions and not have to face the music of their loss. In other words, that victory for the Allies was real, it was now, but the fulfillment was not yet.

That's how we can understand this victory of Jesus. It is ours now, but the fullness of it is not something we experience yet. In fact, I think in our circumstances it's helpful to look at the now and not yet of this victory with regard to each of those enemies of sin, death, and the devil individually. So, let's do that.

First, sin. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, **“For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”** So by the one man's disobedience, by Adam's disobedience, we were all made sinners, but through Jesus, we are righteous. This promise is ours. The promise to you now is that you have victory over sin. As Paul says in the next chapter in Romans in connection with Baptism, **“For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.”** You are righteous in Jesus. Sin doesn't have dominion over you. That promise is yours. So don't use grace as an excuse for your sin. That's not the way it works. However, the reality of the not yet is that you will still sin. You will still sin and you need to know that you have the freedom from the guilt that comes from sin. The devil will use your guilt to drive you away from Christ and into despair. So, when your Christian life doesn't look as pious as you'd like for it to, know that in the not yet of the fullness of your freedom from sin, you are forgiven. Christ has won it all for you.

To make this a bit more concrete, think about an alcoholic. And I like this illustration because the reality is that just as we can think of addiction as a disease, it's a reflection of all of our addiction to sin. So if an alcoholic were Christian, he could know that the promise of Jesus' victory now gives him power over that addiction. Not power and strength of himself, but power and strength only in the forgiveness that Jesus has won. In a sense only in absolution. But if that alcoholic would fall and take a drink or get drunk in the not yet of this promise. He can still take comfort in that grace and forgiveness. In fact, I would advise him that the place to come is to the Word, to the rail, to Beichtstuhl as the Lutherans in Germany called it—to the confessional. There the fall can be brought to light and the Gospel the promise of forgiveness can be placed upon it giving grace where there is guilt, life where there is death.

As I say that, that moves us to the next enemy, the defeat of death. I think this can be especially pertinent in our circumstances with the coronavirus. Here in the victory over death, we as Christians know that the promise of resurrection is ours. We know that we have eternal life in Jesus. We know that these bodies that bear the death of sin have been buried in Christ's tomb through baptism so that through His resurrection, we too will be raised. That's the not yet, though. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15: **"Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule 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."** Through His resurrection that we celebrate today, we know Jesus has won the victory over death. We see it. But death won't be destroyed until His return. That means that we'll still see it and its effects in things like the coronavirus until that day of His coming. But the victory is ours in Him.

To make this also a bit more concrete, I reflect on a common misconception I see about this in the American Church. That's this idea that if we just believe enough or pray in the right way this can be avoided. In particular I think about a friend of mine I know from my vicarage congregation. I was talking to her right before things got really bad with the virus and she said how someone close to her spoke of praying Psalm 91 and claiming it for themselves as a response. Now to be sure Psalm 91 says, **"Because you have made the Lord your dwelling place— the Most High, who is my refuge— no evil shall be allowed to befall you, no plague come near your tent."** But how do we understand this?

I would say pray that psalm. Pray all the psalms, and if it's comforting you especially to pray that psalm in these circumstances, that's great. But in this now and not yet, understand that this Psalm is specifically fulfilled in Christ. That's clear when it says in the next verse, **"For he will command his angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways. On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone."** If you recall the Devil quoted that to Jesus in the temptation. That's about the Christ. And so the promises of it are ours as we are in Him. And those promises will be fulfilled at His return. So, certainly, pray that psalm wholeheartedly in comfort knowing that the promise of Christ's victory is yours. But in the not yet of that promise, understand that if you would get coronavirus, if you would even get it and die that doesn't mean that you didn't claim it with your whole heart. That doesn't mean that you are so lacking in faith that you aren't saved. See that's the danger that concerns me with this idea that we can pray things and claim them for ourselves. If we don't approach them like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did with God's protection from the fiery furnace in Daniel 3, if we don't say I know God can protect me, but if He doesn't He's still God and He's still good, then should it be God's will to get sick, we could fall into despair. Because you see in the not yet, these things will befall us, coronaviruses and pains and death. All the more in the not yet, our faith is always lacking. These things don't come because of a lack of faith in a particular claim. No, because you see the Lord looks upon us in

view of the perfect faith of Christ. And so that's the now and the not yet of death's defeat. We will know it fully when we are raised, but the promise of it is ours now.

Finally, the victory of Christ over the Devil. This is one where when we look all over the world, we can see it. We know that Christ has won the victory. We know that He has overcome the devil in His resurrection. We know that the devil is like a mortally wounded animal, we see it Revelation Twelve, in chapter Twenty there where Christ has cast the devil into chains for His figurative Thousand Year reign we are in now. We know that in the end the devil will be cast into the lake of fire because Christ has won the victory over him. As Jesus says, "take heart I have overcome the world."

But in the not yet, we wonder why we see so much that still reflects that work of the devil now. We do though. And that's only something we can understand in view of Jesus' victory. As it appears that the devil wins all over the place, with sicknesses and people falling from faith, and wars and pestilence, it's something we can only take comfort in in view of the fact that Christ has defeated the devil by taking away his claim to dominion through the forgiveness of sins, and that He actually reigns over all that, working it to His good. But this is the now and the not yet

To conclude, then we can say that in this now and not yet, then we live in the knowledge that this victory is ours: victory over sin, over death, and over the devil. We live in the knowledge that even though we don't experience the fullness of this victory yet, it is promised now. This means that even as we are in our homes, we do celebrate. We celebrate that Christ Himself has entered into this world, He has taken upon Himself sin that He could defeat it. And that He could in that forgiveness overcome death and the devil as well. We celebrate that Christ has even taken coronavirus unto Himself, and He has overcome it. What a blessing for us to know.

In view of that, the email that I mentioned at the beginning closes saying, "Alone in their homes they dared to believe that hope was possible, that the long night was over and morning had broken, that God's love was the most powerful of all, even though it didn't seem quite real yet. Eventually, they were able to leave their homes, when the fear and danger had subsided, they went around celebrating and spreading the good news that Jesus was risen and love was the most powerful force on the earth." This will be us Christians. We will leave our homes at some point. And when we do, we have the joy of knowing at best that it will be to enter into the fullness of this promise of our Lord's resurrection, where His love is proven to be the most powerful force. Or it will be to a life more akin to what we're used to. But in any case, we live in that life knowing that Christ has won the victory for us. The victory over sin, death and the devil. Again that fullness of that promise is not yet known, but the promise is surely ours now. Ours by the Word of Promise from Him, ours by the promise of that Word in baptism where He has joined us to His death now, that we will surely be raised with Him in His resurrection. Amen.