

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Easter, April 12, 2009

He Is Risen! The Promise of What Is to Come!
Mark 16:1-7; 1 Corinthians 15:20-26

“When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body. Very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, they were on their way to the tomb and they asked each other, ‘Who will roll the stone away from the entrance of the tomb?’

“But when they looked up, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away. As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.

“Don't be alarmed,’ he said. ‘You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’”
(Mark 16:1-7, NIV)

“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, 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.” (1 Cor. 15:20-26, NIV)

Shortly after I graduated from seminary, I visited and had the opportunity to preach at the Garden Tomb in Jerusalem, Israel.

Some believe this site which was uncovered many, many years ago may be the tomb where Jesus was buried and raised from the dead. It is a quiet and lovely place where one can pray and reflect on the greatest event in history which may have taken place there. As you walk into the tomb itself, to your right is a wooden door placed by the Christian organization which oversees and cares for the property. On the simple wooden door is a plaque with these few but powerful words from the Gospel of **Mark 16:6: “He is risen; He is not here.”** (KJV)

He is risen! Three tremendous words which changed the world and changed history! Three tremendous words which changed forever the lives of the disciples and all since them who love and follow Jesus. Three tremendous words which still change lives because of the truth they proclaim. The tomb is empty! Jesus Christ is risen! He is alive! He has risen bodily from the dead – the first ever to do so and the promise to all who follow Him that they, too, will be raised from the dead.

Paul wrote about those three words in **1 Corinthians 15:20**: “**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.**” It is highly significant that Paul uses the term “firstfruits” in speaking about Jesus and His resurrection. For the term refers to an offering called the firstfruits in Judaism found in **Leviticus 23:10-17**. There we read that, “**on the day following the Sabbath after Passover,**” the “**priest was to wave a sheaf of first ripe barley [a grain] before the Lord to consecrate the beginning harvest.**” (*Bible Almanac*, pg. 404; *The New Bible Commentary*, pg. 1071). In this dedication of the harvest, the full harvest that was to come was foreshadowed, and they were consecrated, dedicated, to the Lord by this first sheaf of barley brought as an offering on this day.

Easter Day, the day Jesus rose bodily from the dead, was by the way, the day following the Sabbath after Passover – the very same day that the firstfruits of the harvest were dedicated to the Lord. (*The New Bible Commentary*, pg. 1071)

So Paul calls Jesus the firstfruits in this passage. In calling Jesus the firstfruits of those raised from the dead, Paul is stating that just like the firstfruits of barley were the guarantee of the harvest to come, so is Jesus, as the firstfruits of those raised from the dead, the promise, the guarantee, that all who die in Him will be similarly raised to life, never to die again. (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle of the Corinthians*, The New Testament International Commentary on the New Testament, pg. 749) His resurrection “is a pledge and proof of the resurrection of His [God’s] people.” (Morris, pg. 213)

By understanding the background of **1 Corinthians 15**, we see the following concerning Jesus being the firstfruits of those raised from the dead as well as the impact of the words “He is risen.”

First, “He is risen” means Jesus is the very first one raised from the dead never to die again. He is a taste, a promise, of what is to come. He “was not the first [person] to rise from the dead. He, Himself, raised some, such as Lazarus, from the dead.” But Lazarus would die again. (Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, pg. 213) “Those...whom Jesus had raised from the dead during their earthly life [such as Lazarus] were still subject to death at a later time. The Resurrection of Jesus [therefore] stood on an entirely different [realm]...” (*The Interpreter’s Bible*, Volume 10. pg. 234) “His Resurrection was to a life which knows no death... the forerunner of all those that” ...would never die again. (Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, pg. 213)

In raising Jesus from the dead, God is saying, “I promise that all who follow my Son, Jesus, will be raised from the dead as well. Since death did not hold Jesus, it will not hold you who believe in Him as Lord and Savior.”

Jesus’ resurrection guarantees that death won’t hold us. When we die, our existence will not end. Physical death is not final. It is not a period. It is, for Christians, a comma or a dash, moving us on to something different, better and exciting. Physical death is, therefore, a transition. It is not final.

When will the resurrection of the dead occur? When Jesus returns at the end of time and establishes His Kingdom in its fullness. Then, at His command, body and soul will be reunited, perfect and whole. Paul expresses it so beautifully when he writes in **1 Corinthians 15:51-55**: **“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 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?’”** (1 Cor. 15:51-55, *NIV*)

Jesus is the promise, the guarantee that one day we will be raised from the dead, never to die again.

Secondly, “He is risen” means Jesus is also the prototype, the pilot model so to speak, of those who will be raised to everlasting life, and He is going ahead of us to Heaven and one day He will return. If we want to know what our resurrected body will be like, all we need to do is read the Gospel accounts concerning Jesus’ resurrected body. The resurrected body is made of flesh and bones similar to ours now reunited with our spirit. The same body that went into the tomb is the same body that came out, raised to life, made perfect – healed of all disease, pain, suffering, and deformities, never again subject to death. We will be recognizable. We will know one another just as the disciples knew Jesus when they saw Him in His resurrected body. (*Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia*, Volume 5, pg. 74) We will be able to eat food just as Jesus ate fish after His resurrection. Our bodies will have some new properties such as the ability to go through closed doors just as Jesus did after His resurrection.

Jesus is now preparing a place for us in Heaven. He said in **John 14:2-3**: **“In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.”**

Those last words are the best definition of home for the Christian—to be where Jesus is.

There will be no homeless people in Heaven. There is plenty of room for all who follow Jesus. He has a room there for you and for me.

One of the insights that struck me while working on this part of the message was how characteristic it is of Jesus to be a servant even in this. Because He Himself is the one preparing this room for us just like a servant would for guests. He doesn’t tell us, “When you get there, I’ll give you all the things you need to build your own room.” No, He says He’s preparing the room for us.

Indeed, He prepares the whole way for us to come there to Heaven. William Barclay notes: “One of the great thoughts of the New Testament is that Jesus goes on in front for us to follow in His steps. One of the great words which is used to describe Jesus is the word *prodromos* (Hebrews 6:20)...[which means] forerunner. In the Roman army the *prodromoi* were

the reconnaissance troops. They went ahead of the main body of the army to blaze the trail and to ensure that it was safe for the rest of the troops to follow...That is what Jesus did. He blazed the way to heaven and to God that we might follow in His steps.” (William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, pp. 180-181)

Jesus made sure it was safe to come home to God. Jesus blazed the way for us.

Finally “He is risen” means, since we can live forever, we can face death head on, unafraid. Paul said in **1 Corinthians 15:54-55: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”** Jesus said in **John 11:25-26: “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”**

Scholar Leon Morris writes concerning these words: “the man [person] who believes on Jesus...will live even though he dies. ...For...the unbeliever death may be thought of as the end. Not so for the man [person] who believes in Christ. Such a man [person] may die in the sense that he passes through the door we call physical death, but he will not die in the fuller sense. Death for him is but the gateway to further life and fellowship with God. (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John, The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, pp. 550-551)

Over the years as I have seen death suddenly or slowly take the lives of family members and friends, my family and I have been greatly comforted by the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. When Mary Jane’s mom developed a degeneration of her body where her mind was still alert and active, but her ability to speak, write and move was shutting down, I saw an active, lively woman being forced into a life in a wheelchair with only a word or phrase coming from her now and then.

I remember that last time Mary Jane and I saw her. It was shortly before Christmas 2005. She had had a rapid decline in health and we were not sure how long she had to live. We came to see her perhaps for the last time.

When I looked into Mary Jane’s mom’s eyes, I could see the real her deep within despite all the restrictions and limitations her body now put on her. At one point as we sang Christmas carols, she joined in on “O Come, All Ye Faithful” for the chorus. It was the most we had heard her speak in a long time.

When we said “goodbye,” we knew this would probably be the last time we’d see her on earth. But the resurrection of Jesus gave us the certain hope and the promise we’d see Mary Jane’s mom in Heaven which took the sting out of saying goodbye for the last time.

When my dad died, I was with him. When I arrived at the hospital, he was unconscious. I spent the night in his room. The next morning after my sister had gone home to take care of some things, I spent time talking to Dad, believing he could hear me because the sense of hearing is the last to go. I reminded my dad of some special times growing up, hunting together especially the last time we did so together, being roommates on a trip to Israel and the Holy Lands, and other

times. After about 20 minutes, I noticed a change in his breathing, and with my last words to him, telling him of our family and my love for him, he was gone.

Many people fear being present when a loved one dies and some dying patients don't want anyone there. But I was glad I was there for my dad. In fact, I felt honored because Dad at that moment had the privilege and the honor of meeting Jesus face to face. Dad was now safe in the arms of Jesus, and it was because of the resurrection of Jesus that any fear of that moment was gone. **“Death had been swallowed up in victory! Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Corinthians 15:54-55 NIV)**

The words, the historical fact that Jesus is risen stand as that beacon of the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life that awaits all of us who love Jesus.

Max Lucado writes about what Jesus did to death so that all fear of death can be removed. He said: “Until the cross, Satan held a cruel ax over man's [humanity's] head. All feared the ax of death. Its eerie glimmer humbled all who faced it. From the greatest to the smallest, all avoided the ax [of death]. Satan's mysterious, abrupt blade severed man from the living and cast him into the unknown.

“For centuries men [people] had appeased the ax [of death], evaded the ax [of death], ignored the ax [of death]. But its razor-sharp edge made victims of all, relentlessly marching each to the chopping block; sweeping down upon mankind [humanity] an execution that none could escape.

“Until the cross. It was at the cross that the power of the ax [of death] was dissolved and its true weakness disclosed. With all of the strength that Satan could muster and all the cruelty he could display, he brought the ax[of death] down upon the neck of the son of God. The savage blow rang throughout the forest of death, and echoed across the universe.

“‘I have done it!’ Satan laughed. His wiry figure contorted with laughter. ‘I have killed life.’ The triumphant scream echoed in the chambers of Hades. And for a brief, fearful moment, all humanity gasped.

“But the Divine Figure [Jesus] was not to be trapped. His body rose from the block, his head still intact, his life surviving. Jesus had blunted the ax [of death]. Jesus had flouted the executioner's threat. Turning to Satan, he posed the question that paved the path to immortality. ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?’” (Max Lucado, *On the Anvil*, pp. 87-88)

Paul says in **1 Corinthians 15:57: “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Brothers and sisters, “What death did to Jesus is nothing compared to what Jesus did to death.” (James Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*, p. 42)

He is risen! He is risen, indeed!

Hallelujah! Amen.