

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Muskego, WI

Easter Vigil/Sunrise – March 31 & April 1, 2018

1 Corinthians 15:51-57

DO YOU SEE IT? THE VICTORY IS OURS!

The man had worked 35 years before an injury changed things. He sat in his pickup in the growing dawn, parked along the back edge of the truck stop along I-43. The local police seemed to know his plight and let him be, but he was always ready to turn the key to move if he had to.

The local church had helped him a lot and he had spent the worst nights out of the cold. The preacher still came and they talked a lot about Jesus and read his Word. The man believed in Jesus his Savior, and he wanted to believe that he was a big enough God to help...but his body hurt from sleeping in the front seat instead of on a mattress. He was so often cold and the March sun only helped so much. A hot shower would feel good but the nearest one was 20 miles away and he had to ration gas. There were nights he prayed to God to end his life, but every morning he woke with the sun's first light and drew a deep breath to face the day. His eyes would cast heavenward, "**Father, is there a cure for this place?**"

The young woman stared at the headstone. "**October 1, 1988 to March 3, 2018.**" In the growing darkness she realized that it was her 29th day in a row coming to his grave. The grass would grow soon and the cemetery staff would put down sod to cover the raw earth. The grass wouldn't cover the pain of the last months. They had been hard. He had languished...but with the hope of heaven! HE had been *HER* strength through so many days that she felt guilty! She should have supported him! Jesus' cross beneath his name had been their strength. But so many evenings in her visits, through her tears, her eyes would look heavenward and her soul would cry, "**Father is he really the cure for this place?**"

My friends, do WE always see it and feel it? The victory?

1. Just Imagine the Change That Is Coming

A. We KNOW "the Way of All the Earth"

The verse ahead of our text is KEY to our time together today outside the tomb. Paul writes, "***I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.***"

I asked a moment ago, "Do you see it? The victory?" But it seems appropriate to first ask, "**Do you see it? Our dilemma? Do we truly see our problem?**" We cannot go to heaven as we are—*mortal*, for what is dying cannot inherit what is only living! Change is needed. Can you imagine that change?

We know the dilemma--at least in part. Death has brought down the greatest in history, and the greatest empires of men--ALL will one day lie in the dust. The greatest minds have sought to solve the problem--addressing death's symptoms and delaying its progress. But in the end, death still wins...and takes those great minds! And our day will come.

Joshua stated it bluntly in his farewell to Israel after Israel had conquered the land of Canaan. *“I am very old. You yourselves have seen everything the LORD your God has done to all these nations for your sake...Now, I am about to go the way of all the earth.” And Joshua son of Nun, the servant of the LORD, died at the age of 110. They buried him in the land of his inheritance.”*

“Death” we know. Joshua calls it “the way of all the earth”. But have we pondered the NEED for things to change—leaving behind sin and death and a life cursed by sin. We cannot go to heaven as we are. Mortality--death and decay—cannot exist in the Presence of the Creator who is holy and just and living! Change is needed for this flesh and blood.

B. Faith Sees The Way of Heaven

How often do you and I ponder the amazing gift of God that is our faith? Have you pondered life without faith? SOME of us are thinking out loud, “Oh pastor, you do not know it, but I have lived life without faith and I do NOT want to go back! It is an empty place and a hopeless place and a scary place.”

Without faith, our lives can be dominated by raw emotion. “This just CANNOT be! WHY do we have to die?! If there is a God, he is mean-spirited and...and... evil to have created us to live in this mess without a cure! We work our tails off for decades and to what end? Some of us die because of our work. Some of us die as soon as we quit work! Where is the justice? Where is the blessing of this place? My hopes and dreams were once as big as the world, but now they seem as small as Muskego, as small as the walls of my apartment!”

Even unbelief recognizes that some kind of change is needed in our reality, but it is God’s gift of faith alone that allows us to see the change truly needed! *“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 not able to die, and we will be changed!...For the mortal MUST clothe itself with immortality.”*

APPLICATION I know that I have asked you a similar question before, but I will ask it again in a different way: **“If you could pick your superpower, what would it be?** Laser vision like Superman? But what good would that do you without the rest of his powers to respond to what you see? Web-flinging like Spidey, hoping that no one learns to cut your webs faster than you can zing them? A magic shield like Captain America—SO awesome until gravity takes it out of your hands! And even Superman died at the end of the last movie I saw—dirt filling the hole.

Now, maybe you have never had a conversation about superpowers, but why is it that almost no one ever comes up with “immortality”? “I want immortality?” My guess is that when we are healthy we don’t think of it, when we are old we no longer want it...and in truth we cannot even IMAGINE it. What will immortality LOOK like and what will it FEEL like? HOW will we ACT?

I think we in faith can begin to comprehend the ACTION part. We will be without sin inside of our very natures—that bent to us, that pull inside of us--that always seeks to take what I want from you, or in spite of you, rather than, “How can I serve you today?” Can you imagine how excellent it will be?! Everyone loving us just as WE are always loving them?

An immortal body. A body free of the threat of death at any moment. A body free of aches and pains—its inherent weakness. A mind free of the shadow of depression and the darkness of anxiety? A spirit unafraid to die because death will not even BE a concept?

In a very small way, FAITH SEES “the Way of Heaven” that will trump forever the Way of All the Earth! Do you see it? The victory?

TRANSITION Sometimes it is hard to *SEE* the WHAT when we are not sure of the HOW. Let me give you an example. WWII. A historian once said: “Adolf Hitler never would have lost the war if he could have just an iron lid on Europe.” Someone was able to envision paratroopers and landing craft and more ships and planes than the world had ever assembled and the seemingly impossible came to be. **On a much grander and more meaningful scale**, the message of Easter is that. Someone saw and heard ahead of time the cry of his people, “Is there a cure for this place? Didn’t you promise it?”, and he answers the cry with the gift of his Son, “The greatest gift I have ever given!”

2. Ponder the Greatest Gift Ever Given

A. The Problem is REAL

When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory!” Where, O death, in your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He GIVES us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!”

Dear friends, you and I know that our problem is real. I believe the graves have stayed shut as long as I have lived? Paul reminds us that the root cause is sin, that “spiritual venom that kills” for the law of God had said “*the day you sin you will surely die.*” And the law of God says that sin is NOT like a virus that we might catch, but it is in us from our parents as surely as the color of our skin! Jonas Salk treated sin’s symptoms and polio is almost gone. Louis Pasteur gave us safer milk and vaccinations to fight disease—what a fun discussion THAT is today! Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin in 1928 and the world has never been the same!

But the GRAVES remain closed...and new ones are dug! We need a gift that is MORE REAL than the sin and the death and the darkness. So today the Spirit says, “Welcome to Easter! Do you see it? The Victory is YOURS!”

B. The Gift is “More Real”

In the history of the world, there is only one hero for mankind whose grave you will not find, whose bones you cannot unearth, whose images are NEVER put up as a monument or memorial. Jesus Christ, the Son of Man and the Son of God, took on the law of God—you shall and you shall not or you will die--and overcame its curse with his perfection. Jesus Christ took on sin and overcame its curse by suffering hell so that we wouldn’t have to. Jesus Christ took on the grave after everything else was finished, leaving the grave alive after folding his laundry so that we would see his touch and know he was fully in control! All graves remain shut, for now, except for one—and there is the “magic”, the “mystery” of Easter!

The Spirit says, “*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*” Any farmers among us? Any master gardeners? Anyone with zucchini coming out of your ears every August/September? You know what a “firstfruit” is! Not only is it the best, but it is also the sign of more to come, God willing! And God wills it that you and I

should follow the way of our Savior! That Easter is not JUST about him—it is about US! Our graves will one day open, because HIS did! True change will one day come to us all—dead or alive. There IS a cure for this place!

APPLICATION What impact does Easter have on your personal walk of faith each day? What influences your day more--death and its sting or Easter's "more real" gift of life? Which statement on the screen BEST fits who YOU want to be?

- a) **"I am about to go the way of all the earth."** --Joshua
- b) **"I am about to be gathered to my people."** --Jacob

Now both of our spiritual forefathers had reasons for stating things the way they did, however, I would lobby for letter B. Letter A, "I am about to go the way of all the earth", is reality, it is real, it is sobering, it is thought provoking. But, "I am about to be gathered to my people", Letter B, is "MORE REAL" because Jesus' victory over the grave guarantees his victory over sin and death, and he adds to our faith its hope and its vision, and the smell and taste of victory! **I know that my Redeemer lives! What comfort this sweet sentence gives!**

Easter tells us that church is NOT a weekly support group for weak-minded people, but IS a foretaste of heaven where God's people will gather, alive and well, in and because of Jesus. Body and soul, imperishable, in the loving Presence of our Living God and King! The graves will open! Do you see it? The victory?

CONCLUSION The young woman turned away from the grave for the 29th time, but for the first time she actually felt the hope of God in her heart, settling her emotions, her faith laser-focused on the God of Easter Day: ***"Whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies"...and we will be gathered to our people."***

And the man? He is probably awake right now in his pickup truck with the hope of Easter in his heart...he might visit this church today to be around his people, and this preacher still ponders how best to share the earthly blessings of Christ's victory that is ours this day. **Do YOU see it? Let us ponder how to LIVE it!** Amen.

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