

“God Gives Us the Victory”

It was ABC's Wide World of Sports, debuting in 1961 that gave us an enduring phrase to describe the excitement of sports and competition: “The thrill of victory...and the agony of defeat.” Perhaps just hearing those words brings a picture to your mind. Maybe it is athletes on the podium and receiving their prizes—the thrill of victory or maybe teammates celebrating together or winners with their hands in the air in triumph. And what about the agony of defeat? In the opening sequence of that television program, the agony of defeat was represented by a ski jumper whose attempt went very badly, and he toppled over near the bottom of the ramp and went careening at full speed into a number of spectators and media. It occurs to me that even non-sports-fans can appreciate these concepts. Perhaps if that is you, you picture something very different, but you know joy and sorrow, elation and dejection, victory and defeat.

As we have gathered together early on another Easter Sunday morning, it is not difficult to see how this concept applies to the first Easter. We heard and read just a short while ago St. John's account of early Easter morning—full of both agony and thrill, defeat and victory. That first Easter was that way for many, though John focuses a good deal of attention on Mary Magdalene specifically. She was one who went to Jesus' tomb, the place where he had been laid just before sundown on Friday, in order to anoint his body. What she found instead was an empty tomb, and she went to tell Peter and John about it. Then she came back. While she was all alone there in the garden near the tomb, she felt the full agony of the situation. She sat and she wept. She was defeated. The person most special to her in all the world had been taken away. Taken away by death and now taken away even from his body's resting place.

But how quickly things changed when Jesus came up to her. He dried her tears by calling her by name. And then in her happiness, her elation, Jesus could barely keep her from hanging on to him. She had gone from the pit of depression, desolation, and despair, to the highest heights of joy and amazement. She had seen this man defeated by death itself, but now he stood before her alive. He had been victorious over it.

As I mentioned, Mary was not the only witness of this amazing news. Peter and John saw it that first Easter. Later on Paul saw the risen Jesus, too. And I mention Paul specifically because, by the Holy Spirit's leading, he wrote the words that we will consider more closely in our sermon this morning. In fact, seeing the risen Lord Jesus had such a powerful impact on Paul that he became one of the greatest missionaries of all time, and his writings make up a large part of the New Testament. He journeyed around the Mediterranean world spreading the news of a Savior who was put to death but lived again. And one of his stops along the way was the city of Corinth.

Corinth was a large and cosmopolitan city. Paul founded there, in the midst of several pagan temples, a Christian congregation. He stayed with them for a time to offer encouragement before continuing his work elsewhere. But he also stayed in touch with the Corinthians. We know of at least three letters that Paul wrote to them, two of which are included in the Bible and one other that is mentioned there, and we know that the Corinthians had their ups and downs. 1 Corinthians was the second of those letters. It was written by Paul after the Corinthians apparently reacted poorly to his first letter. Word came to Paul about all sorts of issues that the people were facing in Corinth and in the congregation, and he wrote again.

Near the end of his letter, Paul addressed one specific problem. The problem was that people were teaching and also believing that people didn't rise from the dead. They were calling into question what had or would happen to those who had already died, and what would happen to those who were still alive. They even allowed doubts to creep in about whether Jesus himself had risen from the dead. In addressing this issue, Paul wrote an entire chapter all about the resurrection: 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Over and over again he reminded the Corinthians that Jesus had been raised from the dead, and they would be, too. If not, his message was fake and false and futile. It's no wonder that we use 1 Corinthians chapter 15 frequently on Easter Sundays from year to year. Specifically today, we are going to take a few moments to consider the later part of this chapter, verses 51-57.

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?” 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.

Easter is all about victory. It is not just Jesus’ own victory over death, but it is also the victory that God gives to us. This was the message that the Corinthians needed to hear. To a group of people who were caught up in impressing others with their knowledge, who even tried to impress each other within the congregation by bragging of their own spiritual gifts, to people who relied on their own intelligence and therefore heard and even believed that no one rises from the dead, Paul announced that the sting of death was gone. All these sins that give death its sting have been removed by Jesus’ death on the cross. The law that accuses and therefore gives sin its power has been fulfilled. Thanks be to God!

And Easter is still all about victory today. Do you suppose that human nature has changed in the years since Paul wrote these words? Do we have any less desire than the Corinthians to appear wise to others? Are we less prone to doubt? Are we better prepared to ward off the temptations that come our way than they were? Or do we have the very same sinfulness in our lives—the same pride, the same divisions, the same selfishness? It is not often, and probably not often enough, that we stop and think about these things—about how often the law overpowers us and accuses us, and it is just and right to do so. And stop and think also about how death stings us, how we suffer the consequences of our sin in our lives: pain and suffering and sickness, and yes even death. How many of us have lost someone close to us? How many of us have stared our own mortality in the face and realized that at any moment this could be over? And to all appearances it looks as though death is the ultimate defeat. We will always lose, and it will always win.

That’s the case when we sit in the garden with Mary and look into the tomb from which a body must have been stolen. That’s when we live like the Corinthians who have heard that nobody rises from the dead. But on Easter morning, Jesus comes out of the tomb, alive! He comes to us and speaks our name. He sends his messengers, like Paul and Peter and John, to us with the amazing news. He has won the victory over the law, over sin, over death! And he gives that victory to you.

In a way, the verses before us today aren’t really an Easter text. A whole lot of 1 Corinthians chapter 15 speaks about Jesus rising from the dead, but these verses focus more on the last day, on Judgment Day. They focus on when Jesus will raise us and others, when he will make our lowly bodies to be like his glorious body. They focus on the perishable and mortal being replaced and changed into the imperishable and immortal.

But these words are absolutely appropriate for our Easter morning. They come from the confidence that believes Jesus own words: “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19). There is still more to come. We still must wait for that day when we will be changed in this way, but the first Easter was a little foretaste of what’s in store. The first Easter paved the way not only for our annual celebration of Jesus rising from the dead, but also for our own personal Easter, when he will call us out of our tombs. And if it should happen, and it certainly could, that he returns before we sleep in our graves, we won’t miss out. All of the believers alive will also be changed and made ready for eternal life. This is the ultimate Easter victory—eternal victory. This is what we celebrate today, and not only today but also every Sunday—indeed every time we turn to God’s powerful Word.

For now we deal with the agony of small defeats, but one day every defeat will give way to the ultimate thrill of victory! Death has no victory. It has no sting. Jesus is alive. Thanks be to God!