



Sermon for the funeral of Rev.  
Roy A. Harrisville, Jr.,  
Professor Emeritus Luther Seminary,  
August 3, 2023 at Mt Olivet Lutheran  
Church, Minneapolis, MN.

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. (1 Cor 15:19–20)

Can you hear it in the Apostle's voice? Can you hear the self-awareness in his voice? Can you hear him entertaining the possibility... that he could be wrong; that he could be pitifully wrong about Jesus and life and eternity? "If for this life only..."

Many Christians are brazenly arrogant about their faith as though they had manufactured it by themselves and can be proud of their spiritual allegiance, wearing it like a badge that shouts "I'm holy!" Not St. Paul. Not the Apostle to the Gentiles. He had the presence of mind and the humility to express what arrogant people cannot: that he could be wrong, that he could be mistaken. Imagine this giant of the faith who later wrote that he was certain that neither death

nor life nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation could separate us from the love of God that is ours in Christ Jesus our Lord, that this man, this preacher, could actually contemplate the possibility that all of it might be a pitiable flop.

St. Paul knew that his gospel was a scandal to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. No Jew worth the name would allow more than one god-head and no Gentile would consider the death of God as the basis of religious devotion. St. Paul understood that the Christian faith was not something you'd find in Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. It wouldn't fly on college campuses, in the halls of government, or on Wall Street. The idea that the Son of God would spend his life on uncaring, ungrateful, self-absorbed mobs of religious leaders, politicians and all manner of sinners including his own clueless disciples; that the Lord of the universe would renounce the power of creation to die for those who just wanted to watch him bleed—is not the kind of heroicism that Homer wrote about or Arnold Schwarzenegger portrays on the silver screen. That the death of a crucified commoner could be the very bedrock of an eternal and present hope and the reason for a transformed life was and is too much for a lot of people.

So, they reject this story of dying and rising and claim it's nothing but a crutch for the weak minded who can't handle either death or life. But then, at the very same time, they come up with phrases like "passed away," "slipped away," or "bought the farm," and a host of other ways to try and paper over the ugliness and finality of death. These days you hear that someone has simply "passed." Passed what? His house? The corner drug store? Why can't we say he died? Why can't we say he's dead and lies motionless with no breath? The denial of death is all pervasive in our culture, from the very words we use to describe it to the green carpets that cover the dirt by the grave. So, in the end who is fooling whom? Who is really turning a blind eye to the reality of death? Who among us has the same courage as the Apostle Paul to admit that our society might be wrong about death ... and life? Because no matter how hard we try to white-wash it or paper over it, death still hurts. It still grieves. It pains, alienates and destroys, and no amount of romantic obfuscation will ever be able to change that!

"If for this life only ..." Death is not a part of life. It never has been and never will be. It is the enemy of life. The negation of life. The end of life. Death is everything that life is not. That is why it is so ugly

and hard. That is why it occupies so much of our efforts to forget it or to cover it up with flowers and poems. Be your own judges and tell me that when a loved one dies your heartache and tears are false, that the emptiness in your chest isn't there, or that mourning can just be wished away by so much popular vocabulary. Denying death doesn't work. That just makes it worse....

"But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."<sup>1</sup> There it is. There's the way to deal with death. Not with denial, but by meeting that enemy head on. Christians do not have to acquiesce to the culture. We can look death in the face with the death of the One who faced death and conquered it. We need not be timid or afraid of offending people when we use the words "death" and "dying," for we believe that our Lord destroyed the power of death in his death and that his death was vindicated on the third day when he was raised. Every time we relinquish that message to the sensitivities of the culture, we cheapen what he did, we rob it of its radical power, and trash the amazing love that calms every fear and comforts every heart. Every time we reduce the ugliness of death to a mere spiritual transition, we reduce Jesus. If death is not that big of a deal, then neither is He. "But in fact..."

Some might say we are deceiving ourselves. St. Paul understood that as well. He was clear about what this all sounds like and recognized that it is too fantastic for some whose experience and logic have convinced themselves otherwise. Rising from the dead is not rational, it's not reasonable, it's not comprehensible by human standards. Paul understood that. Yet, he insisted that he had actually seen the risen Lord. Moreover, he testified that many others, over 500 had seen him too and he risked his neck every day to proclaim it. St. Paul understood because he himself had fought against this good news at first. He had led the fools who preached this stuff to jail in chains. But on the road to Damascus something happened that gave him a new sight, and his life was never the same again. "But in fact..."

Is it really too fantastic, this story about Jesus and Easter? Is it too fantastic to embrace because it is too far beyond our experience? Is it too alien for common pedestrians like us? Or, perhaps is it too wondrous? Then, believe for its beauty and grace. "Blessed are the poor

<sup>1</sup> The metaphor of sleep is not a denial of death, as the context of 1 Cor 15 makes clear, but an expression of the hope of resurrection.

in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Believe for its perfect mercy. “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.” Believe for its complete comfort. “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” Have faith in the beauty of the One who cried, “Father, forgive them, they don’t know what they’re doing.” Believe for its sheer beauty.

The seventeenth century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal, said, we all wager that God exists or not. All of us do. It is unavoidable. But which is better, to wager that God does not exist and live your life that way only to find at death that he does exist? Then, you’ve risked everything. Or, is it better to wager that He does exist and to live your life in that belief, only to find out at death that he does not. Then, you’ve risked nothing. But in the life that leads up to death, that races toward death, only with the hope of life can we live a fulfilled life here and now. Only with that wager of God’s existence can we hope to lead a life that does not insist on its own rights, its own privileges, its own pleasure but on the needs of others, the neighbor, the other person. As Christ gave up his life for us so we may live for others and embody the impossible love that we have been shown and the incredible hope that since our ultimate destiny is secure in Him, we need not worry about what we are to eat or drink or wear, but what our neighbor needs. The hope of resurrection changes and transforms us into people who may courageously live with the abandon of those who know where they are going in the end and it gives us a peace that is beyond human understanding, which enables us to live a life worthy of life.

There is a beauty in that which Moses can’t give you. Muhammad can’t. Buddha can’t. They all died in old age after teaching people to follow the law, make themselves righteous through submission, and avoid suffering. Jesus died kicking and screaming to grant us his righteousness, to give us his goodness, to give us his life. That agonizing death is more beautiful than a sunrise in spring and more lasting than time itself and grants a life that can walk through the valley of the shadow of death without trepidation or alarm.

“But in fact, Christ has been raised for the dead ...” Dad is dead. We can say that without fear. Now he rests in silence and peace until awakened by the trumpet at the last day when the dead shall rise and we shall be changed. Death will not have the last word. The last word is life: new life in Christ that gives us the reason, the purpose, and the strength to live life here and now. That life was given to Dad in

his baptism and every day of his life through the Word and the gift of faith. The last word in Christ Jesus is life for Dad and, in fact, life for every one of you. Amen ⊕

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