

Easter Church
John 20:1-18, 1 Corinthians 15:51-58
Easter Sunday
April 4, 2021

1 Corinthians 15:51-58

⁵¹Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed,
⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.

⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.

⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Sermon

I’ve been thinking this week about how fortunate I am. I mean, as hard as the past year has been for me... and I’m certainly not saying my year has been any harder than yours... but as hard as this has been, I’m a lucky guy to get to do THIS for a living... to get to celebrate Easter with all of you. And it is not only on Easter, every day, I get to work with very talented and dedicated and NICE people, including all of you. And so, I was thinking this week about how blessed I am and how much I love being your pastor and because of that I really wanted to come up with a sermon that was... well, AMAZING! That was my goal. It’s Easter Sunday... following an “unprecedented” year.

Some of you have lost loved ones... others have faced illnesses or are caring for spouses or parents... For many of you this has been the loneliest year of your life – unable to be with family and friends and church. So, after a year like this... and now that we're finally able to re-gather... I set out to have a sermon that was truly amazing... but as it turns out that's harder than it sounds.

I've told you before that my dear wife, Kris – who rather than sit alone this morning, graciously agreed to serve as liturgist – Kris reminds me each Christmas and Easter that it's about the story... “Whit, just read the story and sit down! It's not like you can add to or improve it.” Well, I gently remind her that the good people who pay my salary and provide our insurance expect a little more than that on Christmas and Easter... as well you should! But Kris is right about this – it's not the sermon that is amazing on a day like this... it's what the sermon points to.

The sermon simply points to the amazing power of the Word made flesh... the One who lived among us full of grace and truth... the One who suffered and was executed on a cross... and who is NOW risen from the dead. So, whether this sermon will be judged amazing or not, let me see if somehow, I can point you to this power.

I was reminded this week of the opening lines of Charles Dickens' “A Tale of Two Cities”:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,
it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness,
it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity,
it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness,
it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair,
we had everything before us, we had nothing before us...

Sounds a lot like Hickory, NC this past year, doesn't it?

Well, that's the tale of two cities... this morning I want to offer a tale of two churches.¹ The first is Notre Dame in Paris – Kris, Evie, and I were blessed to be there in 2017. Many of you have been there as well. It is a massive and magnificent and stunning cathedral.

Yet as you know, Notre Dame caught fire in April of 2019 – and the whole world watched in real time as flames and smoke poured from the roof and eventually the great spire collapsed. And what was amazing is that you had this destructive fire... and then almost immediately there was talk about “rebuilding.” The president of France promised to rebuild by 2024 and launched a fundraising campaign that raised more than a billion euros. And why? Why was it so important to rebuild? Well, most folks said because Notre Dame is a “cultural icon.” And that's true – it IS a cultural icon... but you rarely heard anyone say it was a church – that we needed to rebuild it because it was a church. One person even said it is the greatest museum in Paris. Though fans of the Louvre might beg to differ, you get the point. Is Notre Dame a cultural icon... a great museum... or a church?

The second church in this tale can be found in many places and called by many names. You walk in the door NOT to find tour guides, but greeters who welcome you warmly and offer to pray with you. They introduce you to other people who say how glad they are to meet you and ask if you would like to sit with them. They tell you about their sewing ministry that meets on Tuesday and the Bible studies all through the week and intercessory prayer group that meets Thursday mornings.

¹ This idea (and other parts of this sermon) came from a sermon preached by Dr. James Howell to Myers Park United Methodist Church, Charlotte, NC., on Easter Sunday 2019.

You pick up the brochure in the pew and learn how these people are building affordable housing and feeding people and tutoring elementary kids and supporting medical missions work in Africa. And if you're not careful, you'll find yourself signing up for their next mission trip to muck out homes that were inundated by the recent flooding.

Do you see the difference? This second church is not a cultural icon. And though it could be housed in a beautiful building like this one, it is nothing like a museum. It is a church... a living, breathing church.

This building is for God! We all know that... and let me just say that one of the things I most love about you is that you know this building is for God... you know it is supposed to be used for God's purposes. But you also know that, like Notre Dame, this building can burn down... it can be destroyed... but the church will not be destroyed... because the church is not a building... the church is the people whom Christ sends into the world to say and to do the things he said and did. We know this because once the disciples met up with the Risen Lord they never went back home. They never went back home... instead they scattered into the world to say and do the things that he said and did when he was on earth. "As the Father has sent me, so I send you," Jesus said to them just before he breathed on them and gave them his Spirit. He breathed on them and sent them out so they would become his people... his church. You see, Jesus was raised from the dead not just so you and I can go to heaven and have eternal life – as good as that is! Jesus was raised from the dead so you and I can be a part of his church... his people... his Body. It's like we're going to pray in a little bit – thy kingdom come... thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. And if we're serious about this prayer... and if Jesus is raised from the dead, then what do we do? We take our place in his Body - his church... and we get busy with all the stuff that he cared about.

Now, I'm not saying ANY of this is easy. Church is hard... church work is hard work. It's hard because church is just people... and you know as well as I do, people sometimes make things hard. I laughed this week to hear a pastor tell about a call he got from a guy who said, "You need to know you got some hypocrites in your church!" to which the pastor replied, "Well, give me their names!"² So church is hard because we're people... but then you add to that the fact that the stuff Jesus cared about is really hard stuff. Most of the stuff we do is relatively easy – we go to work and school and soccer games and do the laundry and mow the lawn... we can get that done. But in church we say, "Let's welcome the stranger... and house the homeless... and feed the hungry... and help addicted people get clean. Let's have racial reconciliation in our city and find some way to make Jesus happy and get ourselves unified around his mission, rather than divided into our territorial camps." We pray this Lord's Prayer on Sunday and then go home see the news of folks pouring across the border... and everybody debates whether that's a good idea or not (and I get that), but you know, I think I can say with 100% certainty that in heaven nobody will need to flee grinding poverty or violent drug cartels or corrupt law enforcement officials... so maybe now, because Jesus is raised from the dead, we can find a way to welcome the stranger. Most of you know we try to do our part with affordable housing in Catawba County through our partnership with Habitat - first, because we know some folks just don't have a safe, warm, dry place to live... and second, because, according to Jesus, everybody in heaven is going to have at least one room in a great mansion, right? If Jesus is risen, how do we NOT try to make sure every kid has a safe neighborhood to live in and enough food to eat and at least a crack at an excellent education? Jesus taught us to pray "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" and if we take that prayer seriously then we will have all these hard and hugely ambitious things on our "to-do list."

² James Howell

But let me also say this – if Jesus is raised from the dead, then how can we NOT at least try to do this stuff... if Jesus is raised from the dead, then how can we NOT have hope and courage... if Jesus is raised from the dead, then how can we NOT try something that's really hard... because how bad could it be? Because Jesus is raised from the dead.

Church is hard... it's hard because we're all just people which means we're ALL just hypocrites... and it's hard because the stuff Jesus cares about is hard. But friends, believe me when I say that whatever we do "in the Lord" is never wasted... whatever we do "for Jesus" is never wasted... because the Risen Christ gathers up all that we try to do in his name, and he redeems it and blesses it and makes it for good. I think that is part of what Paul was trying to say in the passage I read earlier. Sometimes I read these words at funerals – (and they are certainly fitting for that context). But they are also fitting today as we ponder what it means for the CHURCH and for US that Jesus is raised from the dead. Paul has been writing about the power of sin and the power of death and then here at the end of the passage – almost as if he is mocking them – he bursts out with: "Where O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? But thanks be to God who gives us the VICTORY through our Lord Jesus Christ." We're not singing it today, but I love the way the old hymn puts it: "The strife is o'er, the battle done; the victory of life is won; the song of triumph has begun. Alleluia!"

If Jesus is raised from the dead, the victory of life with all its frustrations and hard challenging work is won! And then Paul brings it home: THEREFORE, my beloved... (and here he is talking to you and me) ... Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord... and here's the thing: because you know... that in the Lord... your labor is not in vain... your labor is not in vain.

Your labor in trying to provide at least one more unit of affordable housing is not in vain... your labor in trying to move the poverty needle at least one little tick in the right direction is not in vain ... your labor in tutoring a child who could just as easily be left behind is not in vain ... your labor in caring for your loved one day in and day out is not in vain. Because Jesus is raised from the dead, the victory of life is won! Because Jesus is raised from the dead, your labor is not in vain. Because Jesus is raised from the dead, the church can be the church... because Jesus is raised from the dead.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.