

Sermon #1,234: 1 Cor. 15:50-58 (*Hymns: 544, 532; comm. 539, 543, 167.6.7*)
11-20-16, Last Sunday of the Church Year, Bethany-Princeton MN

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY AND THE LIFE EVERLASTING

Prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, You will come again in majesty to call forth all who sleep in the graves, either to the resurrection of life or to the resurrection of condemnation: We humbly ask You to show us grace and to raise us from the death of sin to the life of righteousness, that, when we depart this life, we may rest in You and, having been found acceptable in Your sight, on the Last Day be raised to life everlasting, inherit the Kingdom prepared for us from the foundation of the world, and give You glory and praise, who live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, now and forever. Amen. (*Collect on the Trinity 26 Gospel*)

The Sermon Text, 1 Corinthians 15:50-58. ⁵⁰ Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. ⁵¹ Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed - ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. ⁵³ For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory? ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord. Lord this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who will come, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all who believe: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

I have never preached on these verses, even though I've spoken them at the graveside service for many burials. As I read these words today I had the music of Handel's Messiah in my head, because this is a great solo

toward the end of Messiah, beginning with “Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed,” and it swells and gets more and more dramatic until you get to the jubilant “last trumpet.”

But I really learned what this meant, at a performance of Brahms’ Requiem. Brahms, the great German composer who grew up around the Lutheran Church, used these verses in the Requiem and taught me something. When he comes to the famous words “*O Death, where is your sting?*” he uses the music to declare forcefully what is really happening.

At this point in the chapter St. Paul has just quoted a prophecy from Isaiah: “**Death is swallowed up in victory.**” Then he sings a song: “**O Death, where is your sting? O Hades (Grave), where is your victory?**” We read these words in a normal voice. But in Brahms’ Requiem, the chorus is literally shouting, almost screeching the words, “*O Death! Death!*” Then: “*Where is your sting?*” That gets across what this is: a taunt.

This is similar to when Elijah the prophet was taunting the false prophets who were crying out to Baal, and he said to them, “*Cry aloud ... perhaps he is sleeping and must be awakened*” (1Ki 18:27), he was taunting them because Baal did not exist, was powerless, and there was nothing to fear from that corner. Now St. Paul is taunting death. But while we think it’s so obvious that a false god like Baal is powerless because it doesn’t exist, on the other hand in the face of death we cower, we are plunged into sadness and depression, it exerts power over us, drives us to distraction, disorders our world and even our whole day, and even long after our loved one has died it has power – seemingly out of nowhere – to make its presence felt, immobilize us so we spin our wheels all day long.

And yet, what St. Paul wants to tell us is that death is as powerless as Baal. We would argue with that. We would say that Baal did not exist, while death certainly does. And that is true. Death does exist, ever since the fall of Adam: “*By one man sin entered the world, and death through sin; and thus death spread to all men*” (Ro 5:12). Death comes to all.

Death is the separation of soul and body. The reason people fight so hard at the approach of death – even when they’ve lost some of their senses – is that the body is resisting that separation. That separation is hard for us who remain. It’s bitter to face. This is how it exerts power over us.

St. Paul says that the reason it exerts such power over us is, simply, sin: **"The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law."** A person dies not just because it's fate, but it's God punishing sin. A person dies because he/she is a sinner, that's what the Bible says: *"the wages of sin is death"* (Ro 6:23). So there is no avoiding it, because of sin. This stings.

It is also no mere coincidence that when a person gets close to death, the guilty conscience starts to act up and listening mostly to the voice of the Law. The memory of past sins comes back. It can make a person uncertain of salvation. It's just horrible, how the devil uses death to attack a person even at his weakest state, on the deathbed.

These uncertainties extend to our thoughts about death. Here in 1 Corinthians 15, St. Paul was addressing skeptical people who said such things as: *"But how are the dead raised up? And with what kind of body do they come"* (v. 35) We are not skeptical about it, but the devil knows how to speak to you in a scoffing way, with the voice of death. When you are suffering, when you are grieving, when you are sad and lonely and missing someone, when you are filled with anxiety for how you will handle a loved one's death or whether you will be brave enough facing your own death, this is when the enemies of your faith – the devil, the world, and your sinful flesh – treat you roughly.

You get filled with thoughts of what will death be like, what is it like to make the journey to "the other side," will it be too hard, etc. Or what will life even be like there, how can it be your own body that's raised after decaying to dust, etc. Or you feel so far away from your departed loved ones, you feel the separation, how will it be when you see them again, and it seems like it will be so long until then! The devil is taunting you.

So here at the end of 1 Corinthians 15 we are given a gift. Inspired by the Holy Spirit – so you know it is true – St. Paul reveals what happens. He goes over the basics of the day when Christ comes again. He describes the resurrection of the body and when life everlasting begins. He says that **"the last trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible."** It is stated that certainly: the dead will be raised. He says – obviously about those who believed in Christ and are therefore forgiven, righteous and holy – that **"this corruptible must put on incorruption,"**

and then each one will see the reality, at that definite time and day, **“when this corruptible has put on incorruption.”** It will be a glorious body. It will be *“like Him [Christ],”* as it says in 1 John. It will be the same body but gloriously different, just like Jesus’ risen body was. This is what St. Paul means when he says, **“we shall all be changed.”** He says it will happen as quickly as you blink your eyes: **“in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.”**

All of this agrees with Jesus’ words in John 5, that *“all who are in the graves will hear His [the Son of God’s] voice, and come forth and be raised [either] to life [or] to condemnation.”* It agrees with what St. Paul was inspired to write elsewhere, that *“Jesus Christ will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able to subdue all things” (Ph 3:21).*

Now this is a gift, that God gives you this information. But that isn’t the main thing. He is not here simply to answer all our questions about how it will happen. The real gift, when you are being taunted by the devil and death, is that He gives you not information but the true victory: our faith. I just quoted that Bible verse at our friend Wayne’s funeral last week: *“This is the victory that has overcome the world - our faith” (1Jn 5:4).*

In fact, here St. Paul winds up all of this by emphasizing this victory: **“Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** How do you have this victory? By faith. This brings us back to the creed. “The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting” are how the creed ends, you know. But when you say those words, by that point in the creed you might be forgetting the “I believe” part. Each statement in the creed is really meant to have “I believe” with it, even this part. So we are saying, “I believe in the resurrection of the body ...”

This is the gift we are given. The faith that says, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” You need this. When you are having a hard time with death - when the devil and death are taunting you - you say this: “But I believe in the resurrection of the body.” You taunt him back. It is not wrong to do so. For when the devil asks you, “How do you know what you believe is true?” you answer him with Jesus’ own resurrection. Then the devils will cower in fear. This taunting him back is exactly what Jesus Himself did when He descended to hell after coming to life on the

third day in the tomb. He rose – in His body – and went to hell to preach and declare His victory over death to the devil and all his minions in hell. Jesus taunted them. He taunted them with it – declared how powerless death is over a Christian for Jesus' sake – so that when the devil and death taunt you, you can taunt them back with Jesus' victory which is now your victory.

This is the key to facing the enemy of death. Our problem at such times is that we face these questions without Jesus. When people picture heaven or “what it will be like” there, I think most of the time Jesus isn't in that picture. But He has made it a new picture. First because He Himself defeated death and rose from the dead. And second because He gives us this victory and we will rise from the dead on that day in the same way, with our own bodies reunited with our souls, but glorified and perfect.

For the Christian, death isn't death; it is only a sleep, from which He will wake us up and give us our new bodies in an instant, and take us with Him to a glorious life that St. Paul describes here as “deathlessness,” and which consists of the song: **“O Death, where is your sting? O Grave, where is your victory?”** The answer: It's nowhere. Not for you. Not for Christians. The victory is with Christ, and that's where we are. With Him. We sing this song now to strengthen our faith, so we will sing forever in unbridled joy and untroubled peace, in His presence. Amen!