

#### 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of End Time (Christ the King) (11/26/23 - SJ, SM)

1 Corinthians 15:20-24 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. <sup>21</sup> For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. <sup>22</sup> For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. <sup>23</sup> But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. <sup>24</sup> Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, dear fellow redeemed:

You'd agree, wouldn't you? Suppose your neighbor came to you and said, "Did you hear what happened over at Eternal Hills Cemetery last week? John Smith, who worked at Wal-Mart, has been pretty sick and he died last Saturday. They buried him at Eternal Hills on Tuesday. But he didn't stay buried very long. On Thursday he came back to life and rose from his grave!" If someone told you that, you'd say "That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard. You don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

That's the position the people at Corinth were in: They were struggling with the whole idea of someone who was "dead and buried" coming back to life. So the Holy Spirit moved Paul to write this chapter in which the apostle affirms the truth of Jesus' resurrection. But more than that, Paul shows what the resurrection of Jesus means to you and me personally. And what he emphasizes in our portion of this chapter is that:

#### OUR LORD JESUS IS RISEN AND REIGNS!

1. He Has Literally Been Raised from the Dead, 20a.
2. He Now Assures Us of Our Resurrection, 20b-22.
3. He Has Ushered in a Whole New Era, 23-24.

#### 1. He Has Literally Been Raised from the Dead, 20a.

The people of Corinth are struggling with the idea of resurrection. Earlier Paul quotes them when he says, "**Some among you say, 'There is no resurrection of the dead.'**" Then Paul says, "Let's just consider that for a moment. Let's think about the consequences of there being no resurrection." The minute Paul starts discussing that, you want to cover your ears with your hands and blot out what he has to say. If there is no resurrection, then Christ isn't raised either—and then all our preaching is absolutely "**vain**" or **worthless**. Even worse, we're actually lying when we preach. Then our faith is worthless if we believe in a "dead and still buried" Jesus. Plus, all those deadly, damning sins you and I commit continually and so casually are still clinging to us. All our loved ones who have already died would now be suffering the consequences of their sins, for they "have perished," that is, they are in the eternal torment of hell. If Jesus didn't rise, then we have to quit kidding ourselves. We have to drop all this nonsense about having a message of hope and joy, a message that stills nagging consciences and soothes the troubled hearts. Then we have to admit, as Paul says that "**we are to be pitied more than all men.**" We're just deceiving ourselves.

But that's not the situation we're in, because **Christ has indeed been raised from the dead**. What a simple, but incredibly powerful statement this is. The Corinthians and our human nature may tell us one thing—people just don't rise from the dead; but the reality is something far, far different—now Christ is risen from the dead. Your mind may stagger at this thought and raise all sorts of objections, "It just doesn't make sense! I've never heard of anyone rising from the dead. Not even *once!*" But Paul brushes all the objections aside with this simple, unmistakable affirmation: "Now, right now, at this very moment, Christ is risen from the dead." We have a risen, living Savior! He, who was literally dead and buried, is now risen from the dead and is truly alive.

You know, of course, that Paul doesn't merely say, "Trust me on this one. Take my word for it." Near the start of the chapter the apostle lists a number of resurrection appearances, in which people saw the risen Savior with their own eyes. He ticks them off one after another: Peter, the Twelve, over 500 believers, James, all the apostles, and finally Paul himself. This list doesn't only include those who wanted to believe or who could be talked into believing. But there are people who once refused to believe and who had to believe in spite of themselves. Paul tells us that at the time he wrote this, "**over 500 believers**" were still alive at the time. Paul's skeptics could go and question those people themselves.

The glorious truth of the gospel—the heart and center of the good news—is this simple, but indisputable truth: Now is Christ risen from the dead. We have a risen, living Savior. Do we always live in the joy of our Lord's resurrection? Do we always reflect that in our daily lives? Or do we sometimes have our moments of weakness and doubt? Even the staunchest of believers can lose sight of this glorious comfort, as Katie Luther demonstrated to her husband. One day Katie was dressed all in black and went around the house crying inconsolably. When Luther heard her, he rushed to her and asked, "Katie, what's wrong?"

"It's my Lord," Katie said between sobs, "He's, he's dead!" "That's nonsense!" Luther thundered. "Our Lord isn't dead. He's risen and reigning." "Why, then," Katie asked, "have you been moping around the last week as if Jesus were dead? I thought surely our Lord had died, judging from the way you were acting." Perhaps we need the periodic reminder that now, right now, at this very moment, Christ is risen from the dead.

#### 2. He Now Assures Us of Our Resurrection, 20b-22.

And that makes all the difference in our lives, as Paul says "**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive again.**"

The apostle tells us that our risen Savior **“has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”** The picture is refers to the first sheaf of grain that the farmer harvested. When the farmer harvested that first sheaf, he brought it to the Lord as a wave offering before the Lord. He gladly gave this offering to his God, because he knew how generous God is. He had absolute confidence that there would be so many other sheaves to follow. And that’s the confidence we have because Jesus is risen. Our risen Lord is just the first-fruit, just the first of countless millions who will follow him in his resurrection.

Don’t let go of this picture too quickly. Let it comfort you again and again. Jesus is only the first-fruit, remember. That means other fruits will follow, and you and I are the “others.” Just as Christ was raised, so we and all who believe in Christ will be raised as well. Better yet, we will be awakened from the **“sleep”** of death, to use Paul’s words. That’s what death is for those who are in Christ—a “sleep.” For us death is not a terrible, dreaded state, something we fight against to the very last and resist with everything in us. Rather, for us Christians death is being **“asleep in Jesus.”** And in a very short time, when it will seem that we just closed our eyes to take a brief “nap,” Jesus will awaken us to life everlasting. His resurrection guarantees that, for he is just the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep in him.

He doesn’t try to lessen the seriousness of sin or soften its consequences, which is how our world operates. “Sin” and “death” and “hell” are the ultimate four-letter words in today’s society, words that should not be repeated in polite company. We no longer talk about people rebelling against God or violating his holy will. That’s too harsh and unfeeling. Instead, we say someone is “disturbed” or “has problems relating to others,” as if that resolves the problem. But Paul speaks the law clearly pointing out that sin has brought “death” into the world—eternal separation from God.

How do we celebrate the glorious news that because Jesus lives, we shall live also? Perhaps we can follow Luther’s example and write some sacred graffiti around our homes. Luther had days of doubts and discouragements, just as we do today. Questions and concerns crept into his mind, as they still do in ours. When that happened, Luther would write in Latin “He lives! He Lives! He Lives! in large letters on his table and the walls of his room. Luther was reminding himself that he had a *living* Lord, and that makes all the difference in the lives of his people. We have the assurance that our Lord has rescued us from death—from eternal death—and now, even though we die, death is nothing more than a nap before our Lord awakens us to life eternal. Shouldn’t we write that on our hearts and minds, if not on our walls, and then read it and rejoice it in everyday?

The apostle calls our Lord **“the firstfruits,”** using the picture of the early harvest. When the first crops appeared in the fields, the people of God took the firstfruits and presented them to the Lord. And they did this to express their confidence that their gracious, generous Lord would continue to enrich their lives. Wouldn’t that be a fitting way for us to respond to our Lord’s grace as well? How fitting that we bring a special, firstfruits offering to our God to reflect the joy and delight we have in *the* firstfruit, our Lord Jesus. We are having a Jubilee, a celebration of the Lord’s favor, and how appropriate that as part of that celebration we bring the Lord our firstfruits.

### **3. He Has Ushered in a Whole New Era, 23-24.**

And we certainly do want to celebrate, especially when we consider that our Lord has ushered in a whole new reign for his people. Paul tells us **each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority, and power.**

How different you and I look at life, including the end of life, because Christ has risen. We know, for one thing, that death will not be the end of everything. Oh, we accept the fact that one day our loved ones will place our cold, lifeless body in a grave somewhere. Physical death still affects us, or at least our body. It doesn’t affect our soul, which immediately goes to be with our Lord when that separation of soul and body that we call “death” takes place. But even our body itself will not be in the grave long, because Jesus is risen from the dead and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

But very soon, when our Lord returns, we **“who are Christ’s”** by faith in him will be made alive again. The first thing our Lord will do when he returns on the last day will be to awaken all those who fell asleep trusting in him. All people will be raised, of course, unbelievers as well as believers. Paul doesn’t mention the unbelievers here because his purpose is to comfort us, **“who are in Christ,”** that is, who recognize him as our triumphant Savior.

And when we are raised, **“then comes the end,”** Paul says—the end of the world in which we live and the end of life here on earth as we now know it. Our Lord will **“put an end to all rule and all authority and power.”** Any kind of power or authority, whether among governments or in the spirit world such as death’s seeming power over our bodies—all power will come to an end. That power won’t exist anymore. There will only be the rule of victorious Lord Jesus, and **“He will deliver the kingdom to God the Father.”** He will hand over to the Father his rule of grace, which will include all who are “in him,” whether they are believers who are still alive when he comes back or believers he called to life again at his return.

It will truly be glorious when Jesus returns in his full majesty and shows us that **“salvation and strength and the kingdom of our God and the power of his Christ has come”** (Rev 12:10). All the hosts of heaven and the saints of God will sing in joyful praise. And you know what will be the best part of that day? You and I will be among those who are singing that joyful song. No heart will know more joy on that day than yours or mine, and no voice will sing with greater delight than ours.

Let our song of celebration and joy begin on this Christ the King Sunday; and let it never stop until our Lord returns and we sing it with even greater delight before his throne. Amen.