

**1 Corinthians 15:51-57**  
Easter Sunrise + April 21, 2019  
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho  
Pastor Tim Pauls  
The Death of Death

The Word of the Lord from 1 Corinthians 15:54b-57: "Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, "He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!"

You've come for a sunrise service this Easter morning; but here and now I give you a funeral sermon instead. I announce to you the death of death: a trifle premature in some ways, but guaranteed all the same.

"The sting of death is sin," says Paul, and let's look at that for a second. The word for "sting" is the same word for "goad," that sharp, pointy stick that someone might use to keep cattle going in the right direction. It's not the most complimentary picture: we're the cattle, and death doesn't care who you are. It's just poking and jabbing all the time, constantly reminding you that it's around. I do mean *constantly*: dead flies on the window sill, spoiled fruit in the basket on the counter, milk gone bad in the fridge, disaster and mayhem on the evening news, a pet that succumbs, etc. It all adds up. It's all the work of death, reminding you that it's around, that it's bigger than you, that it comes to all. On the best of days, it's still a shadow on the edge of your consciousness, because even on the best of days you have to take care to stay alive.

Unpleasant, yes? Death keeps poking, prodding and goading. It's a grim view of life, but it's not wrong. If you weren't sinful, you wouldn't be dying; so every sin goads and prods you closer to the grave. That's why Paul says that the sting, the goad, of death is sin. He also says that the power of sin is the law. God's law is holy – it's good stuff, good for you. It's good when people don't murder or steal or commit adultery, yes? But while God's law is holy, you're not; and your breaking the law is what gives death power over you. Along the way, of course, sin and death work to make God look like the enemy for His "outrageous" demands; because if they can make the Savior look like the killer, then you have no hope of victory. As absurd as that may sound, it's a pretty effective tactic: you live in a society that often calls life a burden and death a solution, even a friend.

Death is goading, herding you; and as time goes on, the destination comes more into focus. It pushes and prods you into a deepening, darkening box canyon. There's nowhere to go but forward, and eventually all that stands before you is a grave; and once you're inside, death plans to keep its goad firmly planted in your belly so that you can't get back out.

What a horrible way to live.

Then, there it is: the grave. It's still ahead – you're not there yet, but let's take a peek. Know what you find inside?

Not Jesus, that's for sure. He isn't in the grave anymore. He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

That's the miracle we celebrate on Easter. Without it, there's no good reason to be a Christian because there's no hope. But Christ is risen from the dead: He *was* dead, but now He

lives. When He is crucified, death swallows Him up – gulps Him down. As Luther says, death swallows Him up like a hungry trout going after a worm; too late for death, though, it finds that the worm has a hook. Jesus only submits to death so that He might gut the grave from the inside out. He doesn't slip away while death isn't looking: He destroys the power of death. On Easter morning, the tomb is empty because death can't hold Him. Christ is risen from the dead.

At this point, you could accuse me of simply preaching a distraction to sidetrack you from your own mortality. One second, we were edging close to *your* inevitable grave, and the next I've switched to Jesus. Is that the best we can do – are days like Easter just a diversion from doom that must come? No, no: it is far better than that.

Why is Jesus on the cross? He is dying for sin. Whose sin? Not His: He has none, for He is the holy Son of God. Whose sin? Yours. He dies with it. He dies for it. He takes your sins, your guilt and your shame into His tomb.

When He rises again, He leaves them there.

Then He visits you. He comes by water and the Word. He joins you to Himself in Holy Baptism so that you know that He's died for *you*. Not only that, but you have died with Him. In your Baptism, you've already died with Christ and you are already raised with Him. If Jesus isn't in the grave, then you can't be either. You don't see this yet: you're still walking by faith, not by sight. You're still the heir who's named in the will, but hasn't seen the inheritance yet. For now, Christians are still laid to rest; but for them, death is just a sleep and Christ is coming back. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. It's guaranteed because Christ has died and Christ is risen. In the meantime, until His return, the Lord still permits the death of your perishable, corrupted, sin-infested body; but only so that He can raise you up imperishable, sin free, never to die again.

Now, follow this through. If Jesus has taken away your sin, and the goad of death is sin, then death has nothing left to goad you with. It can't keep you pinned in the grave, because it's got nothing to pin you with; instead, *death* is pinned under the foot of Christ and it can only do what He permits. In the meantime, your life is changed *now*: you're not being driven hopelessly to your grave anymore, because death's goad is gone. It's got nothing to poke you with. Instead, you live your life as one set free in Christ; as one set free, you live a life as He would have you live, rejoicing in His grace and loving those around you. The spoiled milk in the fridge is now a reminder of what you've been saved *from*. You're not trapped in the horror that this life is all that there is. You know this: God has given you life now, and this mortal span is only the beginning. For Jesus' sake, you're going to live forever.

In Christ death has lost its sting, because the sting of death is sin, and Jesus has taken your sin away. But if that's true, how come death still feels so unbeatable and powerful? Because it still bullies and talks a big game: along with the devil and your sinful nature, death says, "Remember the law: the wages of sin is death. Forget what Jesus has done: you're sinful, and so you're mine."

Again, that's why Paul says that that the power of sin is the law: death keeps accusing you of your sin, and it uses God's holy law to do so. So when death preaches the law to you, you say, "Death, you've forgotten half the sermon again. It's quite true that I've sinned, but that's why I will *not* forget what Jesus has done. He has died for my sin and He is risen again. Death, Jesus has defeated you, and He has defeated you for me."

That's what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 15. When he confronts death in our text, he mocks it. It sounds dangerous to mock death. It's bigger than you are: you're more prone to

knock on wood superstitiously and avoid the topic completely than to mock it. But while we ought not joke about death, as Christians we do well to join in its mockery. We don't claim any power over it – we rejoice that Christ Jesus has power over death and grave, and that He joins us to Himself and shares that victory with us. Eternally. Thus Paul mocks death to rejoice in Christ: "Death is swallowed up in victory.' 'O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

Thanks be to God, who gives *you* the victory ... For Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!  
Alleluia!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen