

# Death Has Been Swallowed Up in Victory

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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1 Corinthians 15:50-58

You can think of death and resurrection in different ways. The most obvious way, the most conventional way, is to think of death and resurrection as single events. Your death is the day you die, the day your physical body ceases to function. The resurrection is that day 2000 years ago when Jesus rose from the dead, when he walked out of the grave after three days. There's the day of your death; there's the day of Jesus' resurrection. They are singular events. That's a perfectly fine and perfectly true way to think.

But death and resurrection can be much more than that. The Bible often talks about death and resurrection as more than that. In this passage, Paul is talking about death and resurrection as more than that. Death and resurrection aren't singular events; they are ways of life. Death and resurrection represent two different approaches to existence. Death and resurrection are powers; they are spirits that can rule your everyday life.

Here's a picture of that. Esau McCaulley is a professor of New Testament Theology at Wheaton College and he learned how death could be like a power when he was a young man. Esau McCaulley grew up in one of the tough neighborhoods on the South Side of Chicago and by his own admission, the experience of living there as a black man hardened him. Life in his neighborhood trained him in anger and cynicism. He learned to hate the drug dealers because he had addicts in his family and every payday his own Father would visit the dealers before he came home to his family. He learned to hate the talk show radio hosts who spoke about families like his that depended on assistance as if they were the epitome of everything that was wrong with America. He hated the TV preachers who said that broke black folk like his family could receive abundance if they would only send in their \$100 gift today.

McCaulley testifies that all this amplified his anger to a point where "it wasn't just the ugly things I rejected; I despised the beautiful things as well." At school his teachers would try to be positive with him, but when they would tell him stories about the power of his mind and the opportunities he had, he and his friends would mock them.

For him, there was one day in particular that embodied just how strong his cynicism had become. In High School, McCaulley and his friends were sitting in the class of one of the few teachers who hadn't transferred out of the district. She was a teacher who was determined to stay in this troubled school and help these kids. But that day, McCaulley and his friends were not interested in her efforts. They were acting out. They cracked jokes about the teacher. They interrupted her lecture. They began a particularly intense game of trash can basketball with paper balls flying all over the room. McCaulley said, "The more the teacher tried to ignore us, the more we tried to break her." It worked. "After class I saw her out in the hall, visibly troubled, steadying herself for the next group of kids. I remember walking away with my classmates, pretending to celebrate our victory, but a part of me knew that we had lost much more than we had gained." What do you call it when you are at a point when you don't just hate the bad things in life, but you start to feel contempt for the good things, that you set yourself against someone who is trying to bring hope? I would say that you are under the power of death.

I think that's what Paul might say. When Paul talks about death in this passage, he's clearly not just talking about the day that your heart stops beating; Paul sees death as a force that menaces us, a force that wants to have us, a force that wants to swallow us. Paul talks about death having the power to sting us and wanting to gain a victory over us. Paul talks about death as a power that shapes the way we approach life. You see that earlier in the chapter. In verse 32, Paul gives us a whiff of death's spirit when he says, "If the dead are not raised, then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." 'If the dead are not raised, what's the point!? Let's party like it's 1999.' You don't need to be seriously ill to be in the grip of death. If you are young and strong and 17 like Esau McCaulley, and you are convinced that nothing really matters, if you scoff at hope, you're dancing with death already.

Death has a lot of converts these days, or if not converts, there are a lot of people who are going through life under the power of death. Many people have observed that our age has become uniquely hopeless. Even though we have more stuff than we've ever had, pessimism and hopelessness continue to rise. In a recent article David Brooks gave multiple examples of how anger and pessimism have become the dominant spirit of our days. Here are just a few of them. In 1964, 45% of Americans said that most people can be trusted. Today that number is 25%. Since about 2004, the share of American twelfth graders who agree with the statement, "It's hard to have hope for the world" has been surging. Child birth rates have plummeted in our country. Wanting to have children is an act of hope, it's a belief in the possible goodness of the future; fewer and fewer couples seem to see that possible goodness. Instead they are reading articles like the one published in the New Yorker last year: "The Morality of Having Kids in a Burning, Drowning World." It's not a stretch to say that pessimism and anger and fear have become the central organizing and galvanizing force in our politics these days. We will all see very clearly over the next months. Death is not just an event, it is a spiritual force, it is a tool of the evil one. Hopelessness, doom, pessimism, cynicism, rage, these are all death's things and they are 'flourishing' right now.

But wait, you might well ask, Peter, when you put all these gloomy examples in your sermon, aren't you just contributing to the cynicism and pessimism? Aren't you adding to the fear? When you pile up disturbing statistics, aren't you doing death's work? No, I am not. Because I am here, we are all here, to speak a Word against the gloomy power of death. I am not intimidated by the growing influence of death, and I can say that for one reason and one reason alone: I can say that because Christ is risen. I have hope in the face of all this mess, I see a future in the face of this gloom, not because of the platform of a political party, not because of the strength of the American economy, not because of resilience of the human spirit, not because of the advancements of science; I can stand here, we can stand here, in the face of the world's struggles and be people of faith and hope and love and joy because Christ is risen.

2000 years ago when all human hopes had failed, three gloomy women came to the grave on a Sunday morning expecting to find death. Instead they found the stone rolled away, they found the grave empty, they found Jesus' burial cloth folded neatly, they found an angel who told them He is not here; he is risen. And pretty soon after that, Jesus found them and said, "Hey it's me! I am alive! You don't need to be afraid anymore!"

It was nothing less than the turning point of History. That morning all you had was three hesitating women, they told 11 fearful disciples, "Christ is risen!" And then, by the power of the resurrection, through the work of the Holy Spirit, they told some friends who also told a few more friends, and now there are 3 billion Christians in the world today. 3 Billion Christians who in one way or another are standing up today and saying to each other and saying to the world, "Christ is risen!" Because of the resurrection, whatever your life might look like, whatever our present cultural moment might look like, fear can't win. Cynicism can't win. Pessimism will not stand. Injustice will not prevail. Because Christ is risen. "Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting! Thanks be to God he gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord."

This resurrection wasn't just a one-day thing; it unleashed a new Spirit, a Spirit of life that moves against the spirit of death. Easter isn't just something that happened 2000 years ago, Easter is every day. Easter is every morning. Easter is the way we live our life. That's how Paul sees it. Verse 58 is so important here. In verses 50 to 57 Paul shows us Easter in it's great and glorious future. "We shall be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet, for the trumpet shall sound and the dead shall be raised imperishable!" But then in verse 58 Paul shows us Easter in the nitty gritty now. "Therefore my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, for you know that your labor for the Lord is not in vain." That's Paul telling us that Easter is not just one day; Easter is a way of life; a way of life that gets up every morning and moves in the opposite direction of death. It's a way of life that speaks words of love and hope and does deeds of love and hope in the face of the cynicism and the fear and the gloom. It's a way of life that stands firm in the face of all that stuff because it knows that Christ is risen and its labor for the Lord is not in vain.

And that's what you see right from the beginning of the church, once the Holy Spirit came on the early believers, they weren't just people who believed in Easter; they were Easter people. And every day since by the power of his resurrection we have lived as Easter people in the face of death. When Peter got up on Pentecost

Sunday and preached a sermon of hope to a cynical crowd who thought he was just a drunk Galilean. That's Easter. Paul and Silas are locked in the darkness of the Philippian prison after being beaten and facing a trial. They meet the darkness by singing hymns. That's Easter. Plagues sweep through the Roman empire and the fear of death causes most people to abandon their neighbors and protect themselves. But the Christians do the opposite. They care for their neighbors regardless of whether they are Christians or not. That's Easter. In his fight against racism, Martin Luther King Jr. gets spit on roughed up and thrown into prison, but when he gets out he keeps preaching non-violent resistance based on the love of Jesus. That's Easter. In the face of threats of beating and prison Chinese house church pastor Wang Yi gathers his church together and preaches the supremacy of Christ over all other powers including the state. He calls his church to the crazy love of Jesus. That's Easter. A high school sophomore who struggles with depression, bad enough that she had to leave school for a week to spend time at Pine Rest. On the day she comes back to school she bows her head and prays for courage. She walks into school with her head up. The first person she sees is one of her friends who gives her a quiet but firm hug. That's Easter. The widower who just lost his wife two weeks ago comes back to church for the first time alone. He sits in the pew with some friends. When the opening hymn starts he rises with first verse and sings along. "Love's redeeming work is done. Fought the fight the battle won. Death in vain forbids him rise. Christ has opened paradise. Alleluia" He can feel the tears coming but he keeps singing. That's Easter.

I am convinced that every day, multiple times a day, we encounter the power of death. We come face to face with cynicism, fear, anger, hopelessness, doom-saying. It's a seductive power, it wants to pull us in. Whenever we meet that power with an act of simple faith or simple hope or simple love, we declare Christ is risen! We push back the darkness. We say to the evil one, "Where is your victory, where is your sting." So, my dear brothers and sisters, with the Holy Spirit as your guide and the power of Christ's resurrection under your feet, my final word to you is this, "Stand firm let nothing move you. Always give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor for the Lord is not in vain." ©Rev. Peter Jonker