

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

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

⁵⁶ *The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.* ⁵⁷ *But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 15:51-57)*

Change We Can Believe In!

Remember the slogan “Change we can believe in”? It was a big part of the last presidential campaign. Lately, people who are critical of the president have been bringing that slogan back. Now, Easter Sunday is no time to engage in politics and that’s not my intention this morning. Rather, I bring it up because it illustrates just how hard real change is. Any politician who gets elected on a mandate for change is going to have his words thrown back in his face at some point. Real and lasting change in this life is very hard to accomplish. When you do succeed in making it happen, it often brings with it a whole new set of circumstances and issues that you didn’t think about beforehand and that you could not have foreseen. Human nature being what it is, once you have the change you worked so hard for, you might start wishing for the good old days. But this morning’s epistle lesson is all about change. The change it promises still lies in the future, but it’s a change that God will bring about. It’s a change that Jesus won when he rose from the dead on that first Easter morning. It’s a change that truly does make our lives different and better. Jesus won for us **change we can believe in.**

I.

That change starts with us. **We will be changed!** That’s the **change we can believe in.** When will that change take place? St. Paul said it better than I ever could: **“Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.”** “The last trumpet” is Judgment Day. When our Lord comes back we’re all going to be changed. Not just those of us who are still living on that day. Paul says that we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed. We won’t all die. Some people will still be alive when the Lord comes back. If that happens today or later this week, we might all still be alive. If, on the other hand, the Lord waits another hundred or even another thousand years, then we’ll be dead. But the final and greatest blessing that Jesus won for us is rising from the dead. He will pry us out of our graves and we will live again.

Either way, we and all Christians will be changed. That tells us the rising from the dead doesn’t just put us back the way we were when we were alive, because those Christians who are still living when Jesus comes will also be changed. Paul says, **“For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.”** What do “perishable” and “mortal” mean? They both mean the same thing. You all have refrigerators because of what they mean. Perishable goods are things that can spoil – things like fruits and vegetables and meat and milk and eggs. These things can all rot because they’re mortal – they’re dead or dying. The roast that you’ll have in the oven today used to be a cow or a pig, but now it’s dead. Even the eggs and the milk and the fruits and vegetables are no longer connected to the plant or the body that kept them alive. So, if you leave them out on your kitchen counter overnight, when you come down for breakfast tomorrow, the stench will be overwhelming.

But St. Paul wasn’t concerned about our groceries. He was talking about us. These bodies that we walk around with are perishable. They’re destructible. They can spoil. These bodies are mortal. They can die. More than that, they are dying, right now. Everybody in this building today, everybody on earth, is dying – even the little babies in the back of the church are slowly dying. Now, I don’t mean that I expect any of them to

leave us today. We all might live for years to come. But every day that we're here, we take another step closer to death.

A couple of weeks ago, I was teaching a Bible class to our Ladies Guild and I came late because I was teaching a different class. I forgot that I had two classes scheduled so close together and I ran over on the first class. So I made a joke about old age catching up with me. As it happens, most of the ladies in the Ladies Guild have been on this planet a little longer than I have. So, when I joked about getting old, several of them said, "You're just a kid!" We all had a good laugh about it. But the truth is, at 46, I'm not 20 anymore. While people who are 76 or 86 would gladly have 46 back, at 46, you realize that 20 had a lot going for it. Why is that? Aging is really a symptom of dying. Forty and fifty year olds begin to realize that their youth is over and with it, we begin to feel how mortal we really are. Seventy and eighty year olds feel it even more clearly. As someone I know likes to say, "Old age ain't for sissies!" Even if they live for ten or twenty more years what they've got left won't be anywhere close to as long as they've already lived.

It doesn't matter how old we are. We're all dying. But a change is coming, a change we can believe in, a change that makes everything different for us. At the last trumpet, these bodies will change. The perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable. The mortal must clothe itself with immortality. The dying must clothe itself with eternal life. That's what Jesus won for us on the first Easter morning. Death is defeated. And we will live forever!

You older and middle age members, think about the creaks and the groans, the arthritis and the heart conditions. Even you younger members, think about the glasses and the blown out knees and the weight problems. All that's wrong with these bodies will be fixed! In truth, the bodies we were born with never lived up to what God designed them to be. Even if you're 25 or 15 or 5, your body has already suffered from being in a dying world. Even kids wrestle with weight problems and diabetes and all manner of other physical limitations, all of which point to the fact that we're dying. When Christ returns all that will end and these bodies will be perfect. And they will stay that way forever.

Why? Because they'll no longer be attached to sinners. We all were born as sinners. In addition to dying bodies, we all have dying hearts. Sin is what breaks the design God made. It's what causes all the age and all the hurt and all the failures even in our physical bodies. But when Christ returns, he will wipe away our sin. We will be perfect in our hearts and minds and we will be perfect in our bodies. What a wonderful change is coming! It's coming because Jesus already lived it. It's coming because he died, just like we have to die. But then he rose. When he rose, he paved the way out of the tomb for us.

II.

And all that change will all happen in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye! It took each of us years to get where we are today, to reach our current states of decay, if you will. But when Jesus comes back, in an instant he will call all the bodies of all the dead out of their graves, he will judge the world, and he will transform us believers and make us like him! That moment will effect the biggest change in our world since Adam and Eve first fell: **death will be gone!** That's the **change we can believe in!**

St. Paul says, "... **then the saying that is written will come true: "Death has been swallowed up in victory."** Death loses when there's nobody dead anymore. Death loses when there's nobody left who can die anymore. Death dies! That's what Jesus won for us when he rose. Why is that such a big deal? What makes death so bad? I wonder how many of us have actually stopped and asked ourselves that question. Instinctively, we fear death. We hate death. We hate that it robs us of our loved ones. We hate that our bodies are dying and aging and getting weaker with every disease. We hate that we're powerless to stop it and we can't see past that ending of our lives. But to stop and ask ourselves why do we feel that way about it – well, my guess is most of us aren't that introspective.

But St. Paul forces us to consider it. He says, "**The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.**" The Greek word that he uses for "sting" here means anything that can pierce us. It can mean an animal's claws. It can mean the stinger of a bee or a scorpion or even the quills of a porcupine. But it can also mean spurs or goads or even a pointed stick. What do all these things have in common? They hurt us because they do real damage. A pointed stick can put out your eye. Even when the pain stops, the vision is still gone. And of course, none of us wants to get stung by a bee or a scorpion, let alone get stuck by a porcupine.

The sting of death is sin. What makes death so painful and damaging to us is our sin because our sin earns that death for us. More than that, our sin earns hell for us after we die. That's why "going to heaven" is

such a rich promise. If I'm going to meet my Maker when I die, I want him to love me and take me to heaven. But if I'm going to have to answer for all that I've ever done wrong, if I'm going to have to pay for every hurtful word I've ever spoken and every selfish action I've ever done, if God has a record of all my lusts and all hatred and all my bitterness, well, that makes dying pretty scary. How much hell will I have to suffer for all that? The truth is, I deserve an eternity in hell. That's death's stinger.

What makes a stinger hurt? It just makes a tiny hole in your skin. Why is it worse than a pinprick? The venom. A bee's body manufactures a poison and a tiny bit of that poison enters your body when you get stung. That's what makes it swell up and hurt. Paul says that the power of sin is the law. God's law is the venom that makes death so horrible for us because God's law condemns sinners to hell. But Jesus has pulled the stinger right out of death. You know what happens when you pull a bee's stinger out, right? It flops around few minutes in pain, and then it dies. Well, Jesus has killed death. Oh, it's flopping around right now. It still claims us for the moment, but only until Jesus comes back. And then death will be done.

How did Jesus pull that stinger out? He let death sting him. He died in our place. He suffered what God's law demands that we suffer. He suffered it for all of us, for all the world. Then he rose. When he rose, he pulled out death's stinger and death doesn't have another. When he rose, he promised us eternal life. When we meet our Maker, God is not going to sit down and review every single sin. He's not going to demand an accounting. Instead, he's going to look at our lives through the blood of Jesus and call us holy. He's going to welcome us into heaven as his dear children. There, we will wait until our Lord returns and raises these bodies and death dies.

All that is the gift of Easter. Jesus rose. That's God's way of saying your sin is paid for and you don't have to fear death anymore. Jesus rose. That's God's way of saying that death has no real claim over you anymore. You may have to pass through it. But now, it's just a doorway that leads you to heaven. And it's only temporary. It only lasts until Jesus comes back. When Jesus rose, he changed everything that sin does to us forever.

Of course, here and now, we still feel it. We still lose loved ones and that hurts. We still feel these bodies aging and getting weaker. We still have to deal with all the damage that sin does to us here. But Jesus rose and the battle is already over. That gives us hope right now. Jesus rose and God promises that he's watching over us and nothing that happens to us here can separate us from his love in Christ. Jesus rose and no matter what we face here, we know we are going home. We know that our loved ones who die in faith have gone home. Jesus rose and the day is coming when he will return and he will sweep away all that death and sin have done to this world – all that they've done to us. There is no greater reason to rejoice. Rejoice my friends! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.