

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)*

We Will All Be Changed

Can you change? Think about the bad habits that you indulge in. Think about the things that annoy your spouse or that make you hard to be friends with or that are just plain unhealthy. How hard would it be to change those things? When I was in high school, one of my uncles was known for his very jovial approach to life. He was fun to be around. He liked to eat. He liked to watch TV. He liked to have a few drinks with friends. As he got older, he started to put on some real weight. But when I was in college, he had changed dramatically. He was slimmer, living a more healthy lifestyle. He and my aunt walked every day. One day we were at his house and my dad asked him how he managed that change. And my uncle said, “Well, I had a heart attack. It’s not a method I would recommend.” Of course, we knew that had happened. But he really put into perspective the level of event it took to bring about that level of change in his lifestyle. If the truth be told, he kept up that healthy lifestyle for a number of years. But as he got older still, he slipped more and more back into his old habits. Change is hard. Sometimes, it takes a near death experience to change us. Sometimes it takes a miracle.

That really is the point of what we want to focus on this year on Easter Sunday. Even if my uncle had lived the rest of his life without overeating or drinking too much and always getting enough exercise, those things would’ve only been surface level changes. Even if I could cut out of my life all that things that make my wife crazy – even I started closing drawers and cabinet doors and actually putting my laundry in the basket and keeping my desk at work neat – even those thing would all be surface changes. No matter how much we change here, no matter what new directions you successfully take your life in and how many destructive and even sinful habits you break, in your heart you will still be the same here. The biggest change of your life has already taken place: God gave you faith and he put a new man in your heart. That was a miracle. And it takes a miracle every bit as great to change us forever. That miracle could only happen through the Easter miracle that we’ve come here this morning to celebrate. St. Paul focuses on the biggest change we’ll ever go through in his great resurrection chapter – 1 Corinthians chapter 15. Today he winds the whole chapter up by saying **we will all be changed.**

I.

Think how much you’ve changed from the time you were born until today. Go back and look at the pictures from your confirmation, from your high school graduation, from your wedding. Do you recognize that young person looking back out of those pictures at you? Well, the change that’s coming is going to make those changes look like nothing. **We will all be changed. Our dying bodies have to live.**

When is that change going to happen? St. Paul says, **“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.”** When is he talking about? Judgment Day, right? The last trumpet sounds when Jesus returns to judge the world. We will not all sleep – some Christians will still be alive that day, maybe even most of us here today. But in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, Jesus is going to raise the dead and judge the world and transform us. What we will be when he’s done is so far outside of our experience that we can’t even imagine what it’s going to be like.

In fact, that change is so hard to imagine that many people just dismiss it outright. Paul calls the coming change a mystery. He doesn't mean it's a puzzle we need to solve. He means it's something we could never know unless God revealed it to us. What is life after death really like? If you watch TV, you'd think that you're going to walk around without a body and yet somehow still be the same age you were when you died, still dressed in the same clothes you were wearing when you got hit by that bus or struck by lightning or whatever. I hope you were wearing something comfortable! Paul's point this morning is that it's not going to be like that, not even when we're in heaven before the resurrection, but certainly not after the resurrection. We will be changed.

Changed how? Paul says, **"The perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality."** What does that mean? You all know what perishable is, right? It's all those foods that you have to keep in your refrigerator or they'll spoil. Ten years ago, after Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast, we saw a report from some of the people working on the clean-up months later. They said that when you went into an abandoned house, whatever you did, you didn't open the refrigerator because the smell was so awful. You just tied it shut and hauled it away.

In this life, things rot – and they do that because they die. The mortal must clothe itself in mortality. Mortal means dying. Paul is talking about us, about these bodies that we have right now. They die and they rot. The truth is, that's the practical reason why we have churches. We're all going to die and we need God to do something about that. He has. Easter tells us that. Jesus came out of his tomb to tell us that these dying bodies, that will rot and turn to dust, these bodies will be changed. Even if we die centuries before our Lord returns, we will rise and be changed. These bodies will be clothed with imperishability and immortality. In other words, we will lose the ability to die. We will lose the ability to rot.

It has to be that way. For Christ to complete his work, we have to be set free from death and decay. For us to live forever, these bodies have to rise and they have to conquer death forever. In Christ, that's exactly what happens. That's what that first Easter means. That's why every year, we follow those women who got up before the sun rose to go out to Jesus' tomb and give him a proper burial. It's why we listen to their worried conversation about who would roll the stone away. It's why we stand close behind them when they go into that tomb and see that angel there and hear his incredible words, **"You are looking for Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He has risen. He is not here."** Those words tell us that Jesus conquered death for us. Those words tell us that Jesus destroyed decay and corruption for us. Those words tell us of the change that cannot be stopped. We all are dying right now, physically. Even the youngest children who have gathered here today are on their way to the grave. But when Christ returns, we will lose the power to die and we will live with him forever.

II.

That change is the whole reason Jesus came into this world. He came to kill death. He came to destroy decay and rot. When he returns, we'll live in a world that is forever new and we'll have bodies that are always in perfect health and in the full bloom of youth. We will be the way God always planned for us to be. That's true for you and me personally because we know what happened on that first Easter Sunday and what it means. **We will all be changed. Our sinful hearts have been set free.**

St. Paul celebrates the end of death. All of us who have ever had to go to a funeral want to join him. Death is the destroyer. Death is the robber who takes away the people we love. Death is the bringer of old age and pain. It has to die. But what makes death like that? St. Paul says, **"The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law."** You all know what a sting is, right? It's the business end of a bee. What makes death hurt? Sin. Why? Well, if God had designed us to die, if his plan had been that we would live here for a while and then close our eyes here and go be with him in heaven, death wouldn't be all that bad. God could've set the world up that way. But he didn't. God's plan was for us to live forever, in perfect harmony with him and with each other. Sin ruined that plan. Sin introduced death into this world. And sin brought punishment with it. The power of sin is the law. God's law says, "Sinner, you will die. And then you will spend eternity in hell." That's what makes death so bad.

Even people who don't know the Christian teaching about death and hell fear death, because on a gut level, we know that we have to face God when we die. We know that we have all kinds of things that we have to answer for. Don't you have to admit that's true? I'm not going to engage in a list of sins this morning. You can do that all by yourself. What are the things you feel guilty about? What words, what actions bother you if I

say, “God is always watching”? What do you fear him dealing with? All that is sin. You feel guilty because you are guilty – just like me. We all have sinned and we deserve God’s punishment. We deserve death. We deserve hell.

But we’re not going to get it. Jesus died on the cross on Good Friday to pay for our sin. He suffered hell and then death there so that we don’t have to. And on Easter Sunday, he rose from the dead to tell you and me that we are free. All our sin is done. It’s all gone. So St. Paul could ask, “**Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?**” Death doesn’t win. It loses. Death can’t hurt us anymore. The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But then Paul says, “**But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.**” When Jesus rose from the dead two thousand years ago, we won. We conquered death. We will live with him forever. We will not spend one second in hell. We will never be punished for any sin we’ve committed, no matter how much our conscience refuses to let it go. We are forgiven and free in Christ.

Death has lost and we won. It lost because Jesus died and rose. And it lost because God came into our hearts through that message and he gave us faith. Right now, we have already won. Right now, we have risen from spiritual death and we live with Christ. Sin is beaten and we don’t have to feel guilty anymore. Sometimes we still do. Sometimes we insist on wallowing in our guilt. Sometimes we can’t find our way out of guilt. But the answer is that empty tomb. Jesus rose and God is finished with our punishment. God has forgiven you forever. Because he has taught you that truth, when Jesus returns, you will rise and live with him. If you die before Jesus returns, your soul will go to heaven and live with Jesus, while you wait for that glorious day of resurrection and renewal. When that day comes, the greatest thing about that new life won’t be the perfect world we live in. It won’t be the new and perfect bodies we have. It won’t be the centuries we will live without age or weakness. The greatest thing about that new life will be the new hearts we will have. They will be completely sin free. We will be in perfect harmony with Jesus and so we will see him face to face forever.

All that began when Jesus came out of that tomb. By the grace of God, my uncle is still with us, although he’s getting up there in years. I remember when he was young and vibrant – when he was the center of every conversation. When I was a boy he was larger than life. The years have taken their toll. But even for those of us who haven’t passed nearly so many years, sin has taken its toll. We are all dying. We are all trapped in these weak and changing bodies. We are all doomed to sin over and over again and wrestle with our guilt. But Jesus is going to change us. He is going to make us like he is. That means that sin and death will have to let go of us and all that they have done to us has to be undone. That change is coming. We see it not in anything that we can see here. We see it in the empty tomb of Christ. The fact that we do see it there shows that God has already changed us from being unbelievers to being believers. Celebrate all the changes of Easter. Amen.