

**Sermon Notes for 3/27/16 (Easter Festival)**

**Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN**

**Text: Isaiah 65:17-25**

**Theme: Celebrating Life Within A Death-Oriented Culture**

**Hymn: LBW 134 (Christ Jesus Lay in Death's Strong Bands)**

**The Point:** Because Jesus has conquered death and is alive, we His people live in Him and also seek to penetrate our death-oriented culture with the Good News of life, hope and eternal joy.

**Introduction:** Christ is risen! HE IS RISEN INDEED, ALLELUIA! Today we come to the conclusion of our current sermon series. Over these past weeks, we have examined what it means to be a “Faithful Minority in a Faith-Denying World.” Looking at a number of cultural realities, we have dug deeply into the meaning of living as a disciple in such a contrary world as this one. God’s Word calls us to joyful witness, to compassionate engagement, to self-sacrifice, to humble service in the midst of a world that is oriented far differently. Today we look at one more contrast to which we are called in the course of our discipleship, namely CELEBRATING LIFE WITHIN A DEATH-ORIENTED CULTURE.

How shall we celebrate life? Isaiah’s prophecy spells out the coming of God’s kingdom in terms that reflect our experiences as members of this world’s kingdom. God says, “I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating.” Then He begins to give the contrasts with the “former things,” which are really the “current” things as we know them. We live in a world where death reigns. Every living being is heading toward death from the time of its birth, indeed from its very conception. Sounds of weeping and cries of distress are common. Just last week again we heard much mourning and pain from the deaths inflicted on people in the Brussels airport and subway station, hundreds injured and more than thirty dead.

Lord Byron’s epic poem *Cain* speaks eloquently about the experience that Cain had in the face of his own anger and hatred, which led to the murder of Abel. According to Byron, here are Cain’s words after he has slain his brother Abel, looking upon death for the first time in his world:

“His eyes are open! then he is not dead!  
Death is like sleep; and sleep shuts down our lids.  
His lips, too, are apart; why then he breathes;  
And yet I feel it not. His heart! his heart!  
Let me see, doth it beat? methinks No! no!  
This is a vision, else I am become  
The native of another and worse world.  
The earth swims round me: what is this? 'tis wet;  
          [Puts his hand to his brow, and then looks at it.]  
And yet there are no dews! 'Tis blood, my blood  
My brother's and my own; and shed by me!  
Then what have I further to do with life,  
Since I have taken life from my own flesh?  
But he cannot be dead! Is silence death?  
No; he will awake: then let me watch by him.  
Life cannot be so slight, as to be quench'd  
Thus quickly! he hath spoken to me since  
What shall I say to him? My brother! No;  
He will not answer to that name; for brethren  
Smite not each other. Yet, yet speak to me.

Oh! for a word more of that gentle voice,  
That I may bear to hear my own again!”

Cain is baffled and befuddled by the reality of death literally staring him in the face. We do not have the experience of Cain, do we? Even when it comes without warning, death is not the unrecognized, abrupt, unanticipated interrupter that Cain knew it to be. Cain had never seen it before. But death is a constant companion – or, more appropriately, a constant nag – in our lives. Can anyone deny that we live in a death-oriented culture? And I am not just implying the reality that all of us baby-boomers are nearing or are already in retirement, retiring at the pace of 10,000 per day. Last October, some 17 million people skipped watching the Sunday evening football game to watch the TV season premiere of *The Walking Dead*, a series about zombies hunting and eating people. Our cultural death orientation shows itself in a number of ways. One of these is the way that death has been presented as a solution to our problems, rather than as a problem or issue to be resolved and responded to. So our culture has approved abortion on demand through all nine months of pregnancy as a way to resolve the issue of a problem pregnancy or to eliminate having to care for an “unwanted child.”

Physician-assisted suicide has been approved in a number of our states. Of course, the long-term problem with seeing death as a solution is that it can become not just a right, but an obligation. Enforced suicide may be a future pattern. Who will be able to resist the unassailable logic that, if I am sick or disabled and unable to contribute to society but have become a burden on it, I should (not just CAN, but SHOULD) end my life, for the sake of those around me?! Belgium last year became the first country in the world to allow child euthanasia with no age limits. Franklin Graham has said, “The prince of darkness is grimly and powerfully at work in world affairs. I don’t think there’s any doubt that this rise in the culture of death in our own country coincides with the embrace of an immoral, sinful, godless worldview that rejects Christ.” To which we would say, “Amen.”

Just as we have often caricatured Satan as a horn-wearing goat in red tights, so death has been caricatured as a skeletal figure or a hooded figure with a scythe. Sometimes these caricatures help people to avoid the reality of what lies behind or beneath. Tearing off the masks is a challenging assignment, but it is one that the Spirit loves to carry out, for “the truth shall make you free.”

God will not leave this world to its own death-dealing devices. He is out to recreate all things new. God is God of the living, not of the dead. God is biased totally toward life. He does not set about this re-creation as people might, with planning committees, tax proposals, and letting bids. No, His plan is very one-sided. He designs it, He broadcasts it, He carries it out, He crowns it with success. He does not hire architects and employ planning councils. His plan is unique, but it lies entirely along human lines of action and communication. But the way of success lies down a very difficult, twisted, violent and torturous road.

He sends His Son to earth to live among men as a man, to minister to slaves as a servant, to announce a kingdom with no borders or armies, to conquer death by submitting to its torments completely and willingly. His plan for saving a desperate, death-oriented world lies down the road to death and hell for Jesus. He suffers and dies – but, miracle of miracles, He becomes alive again. On the third day, His tomb is empty. The One who had bowed His head once to death now rises to eternal life, never to be subject to death again. This is the message of life that never ends. It is the lynchpin of God’s recreating work.

And what does that recreating work look like in the world? Well, Isaiah gives us a few hints: “No more shall there be in [this new Jerusalem] an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed. They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.” Nothing will hinder the rejoicing of God’s people in His kingdom. No

specter of death will haunt them. No lack of supply will burden them. No enemies will frighten them.

An old Greek legend told of the Sphinx at Thebes, which had the body of a lion and the upper part of a woman. It lay crouched on the top of a rock on the highway and propounded to all travelers a riddle. Those who failed to solve the riddle were slain by the Sphinx. None yet had been able to answer it. But when Oedipus came to the Sphinx she asked him the question: "What creature walks in the morning upon four feet, at noon upon two, and in the evening upon three?" Oedipus replied, "Man, who in childhood creeps on hands and knees, in manhood walks erect, and in old age goes with the aid of a staff." The Sphinx, mortified at the solution of her riddle, cast herself down from the rock and perished. \

So for ages, on the highway of human life crouched the cruel sphinx of death, propounding to all travelers its unsolvable and unanswerable enigma: "If a man die, will he live again?" No one was able to answer; all perished. Death reigned. Darkness held the upper hand. But Christ solved the riddle and overturned the sphinx from her rock. He is the First and the Last, the one who was dead and is alive forevermore. He conquers death by his own death. And because He lives, so do you!

I heard about a golf game called "Drink and Smell." The game involves two players, two caddies, two bags of clubs, and one large bottle of whiskey. After the first hole the winner gets a drink and the loser gets just a smell; the same procedure on the second and thereafter. If the same person lost 3 or 4 holes in succession, he would be bound to win the next, as the winner's alertness waned. Many see life this way, as a game of alternate victories and defeats, maybe even controlled by external forces like alcohol or drugs or money or good luck. But there is good news. You and I on this blessed day know more than just a random sampling of spotty victories and crushing defeats. We have seen the final, complete, ultimate victory in Technicolor on Easter Sunday, and with that victory are bound up all our other victories. Christ has risen as the firstfruits of those who conquer death; and as surely as He is the firstfruits, we are the latter harvest. For He has not died simply for Himself, and He does not live solely for Himself. He died for us, and He lives for us, for our life and salvation. Trusting in His name connects you to His life and His power.

You can speak with this living Lord and be assured that such speech, such prayer, is not just a shot in the dark. His promise resounds: "Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear." His promise is clear and unmistakable: "They shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—and their descendants as well." This is the Good News of Easter Sunday. Life and death are not in an eternal struggle for ascendancy. Life wins out in the final reel. Death loses, finally and absolutely. Christ is alive.

This message of life and resurrection transforms hearts and renews lives. The people of God are not called simply to create our own little monastic community as a critical response to the death-centered worldview that is held by many of our friends and neighbors. We are not called to live apart from the world. But we are challenged to present to them God's Good News in a way that strikes to the heart and communicates the truth of Christ's victory and of life that endures. I don't know all the ways that you might do that in your life. I can give you a couple of examples of how God's people have done that in other times.

On November 20, 1847, at Nice, France, a retired and long-time-ill Church of England curate, Henry Frances Lyte, died. He had worn himself out in charitable labors for years upon years in the slums of London. At his death his family found the almost illegible manuscript of a poem he had written during those last days. Fortunately they did not just discard it, and that poem is now known as a hymn which has sung itself around the world. It started this way:

*Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!  
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

There was a man whose faith in Christ enabled him to get the best of death, and the hymn which he left behind has helped multitudes of other souls to gain that great victory also.

**Conclusion:** One more account of a man of God: On a dark afternoon in September, 1583, in a stormy sea near the Azores, the *Golden Hind*, commanded by Sir Walter Raleigh, sailed close to the *Squirrel*, a smaller vessel commanded by Sir Humphrey Gilbert. The captain of the *Golden Hind* cried out to Gilbert, who was sitting in the stern of his vessel with a book open in his hand, and urged him, for safety's sake, to come aboard the larger vessel. This Gilbert refused to do, saying he would not leave his companions in the *Squirrel*. Then Raleigh heard him call out over the waves, "Heaven is as near by sea as by land." At midnight that night those on the *Golden Hind* saw the lights on the smaller vessel suddenly go out. In that moment Gilbert and his ship were swallowed up by the dark and raging sea. "Heaven is as near by sea as by land!" That is a true Christian sentiment. That is what Paul meant in that great sentence of his, "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." Live in that faith, and death will no longer have dominion over you. Fear will have no power, nor will the grave terrify you. Because Jesus has conquered death and is alive, we His people live in Him and also seek to penetrate our death-oriented culture with the Good News of life, hope and eternal joy. That is how God continues to recreate His kingdom, a kingdom of life and love. Christ is risen. HE IS RISEN INDEED, ALLELUIA! AMEN!