

Easter 2018

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Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces! And the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

! In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. So my brothers and my sisters, Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Feels good to get that out after the past few weeks of Lent, doesn't it?

We've had all of our alleluias bottled up. And it should feel good. Because we are celebrating the most important event in history.

We are remembering not just the death, but also the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is risen! And on one level, we think about what it means for the world, for human history, what it means for the church.

[1:15] But at the same time, we miss something if we don't stop to think about what it means on a personal level. We miss something if we don't stop to consider, what does this mean for me?

Will you consider that question with me this morning? I want each and every one of us to realize this event, this resurrection, means something to me for my life.

My prayer is that each of us would leave this place this morning, knowing that the resurrection of Jesus means everything to us. There's another question I want us to consider.

Am I afraid of death? Am I afraid to die? Will you think about that with me this morning? Because death is something that we will all be faced with eventually, unless Jesus comes back first.

It's something that we will all face because we are all sinners, myself included, and the wages of sin is death. Now, a little over a year ago, I was reminded that I'm going to die, reminded in a very vivid way.

[2:29] I had just gotten home from a meeting here at the church. I pulled into our driveway. I put our van in park. I started to get out. Somehow, as I was exiting, the van slipped out of park, started rolling backwards down the driveway.

I was knocked over, pinned under the door, and dragged down the driveway underneath the van. Amazingly, I walked away with only injured ribs and some really bad bruises.

I frankly consider that miraculous. It easily could have killed me. And this freak accident reminded me that any of us could go at any moment.

And we have to wonder, are we ready for when that time comes? Now, right about now, you're probably thinking, Wait a minute, I'm feeling good. It's Easter Sunday. I'm in my festive outfit with my festive hat.

I've just eaten delicious food. And now that I'm hoping for an uplifting service, that jerk in the pulpit is being a killjoy and rambling on about death. What's up with that?

[3:34] Stick with me. If we have the right answer to the question of death, it's not something negative and hopeless. Not at all.

And it won't ruin your Easter celebration. Because the message this morning is actually a declaration of victory. And I promise you, it is a victory that thinking about your own mortality and your own death can do nothing to diminish.

We write about that victory in our Gospel reading for this morning, where we see the women going to the tomb of Jesus, expecting naturally that they're going to find a dead body there. Because usually, dead bodies stay that way.

And what happens? They encounter an angel who was described as a young man in Mark's Gospel. And he has this to say, Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified.

He is risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid him. The angel gives what actually sounds like a shockingly matter-of-fact message, doesn't it?

[4:42] He says, You were looking for Jesus. Don't worry. Yes, he died. But he's not here anymore because he came back from the dead. Would you like to take a look? Now, I can understand why he told them to not be alarmed.

Because for one, seeing an angel would be probably a terrifying experience. But secondly, they were encountering something that usually doesn't happen. Dead people coming back to life. That doesn't happen a whole lot. The matter-of-fact tone from the angel does not do anything to diminish just how epic this news is.

The angel is announcing Jesus' victory in what was the greatest battle imaginable. Jesus, in going to the cross, wasn't simply being dragged there as a helpless victim.

Jesus went there on purpose, and he went to wage war. He went there to wage war with sin, by bearing our sins, to win forgiveness for sinners by dying in our place, so that we could have peace with God.

[5:52] He went there to wage war with the devil, who had held us as prisoners and captives. And he went there to wage war with death itself. He entered into battle with death by dying.

And just when it looked like Jesus had lost and death had won, then we see the real outcome of the battle. Jesus rises again. And in doing that, he tramples death under his feet, crushes it, and stands in victory over it forever.

This victory over death is what the prophet Isaiah said would happen in our Old Testament reading for this morning. He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken. He will swallow up death forever. And that is precisely what Jesus has done. And that's a vivid image.

You know, we can think of death like a monster or a terrible beast that swallows us up, swallows up the things that we love most, and drags it all down into the dark, seemingly never to see the light of day again.

[7:24] And if that is all there is, there is nothing to celebrate today. If that is all there is, death is something to be feared. Because it separates us forever from everyone that we love.

If that is all there is, death is something to be feared. Because I'm going to die, and in a generation or two, no one will even remember me, that I existed.

And I will take my place in the dustbin of history. If death is all that there is, then when it swallows me up, nothing that I have ever loved, nothing that I have ever felt, nothing that I have ever done, will matter.

Give it time, and all of those things, and the memory of them, will be swallowed up too. But death being swallowed up changes everything, does it not?

Alright, I am about to risk showing my nerd credentials and use a Star Wars illustration. I'm going to draw the anger of true Star Wars fans because this illustration comes from episode one.

[8:35] Sorry, guys. So, I'll keep it simple for the non-Star Wars fans in our midst, but at one point in the film, our heroes are being pursued by this giant aquatic beast that's trying to eat them in the craft that they're traveling in.

Just when it looks like all hope is lost, the beast itself is eaten by something bigger. One of the characters then utters the iconic line, there is always a bigger fish.

It's a pretty good illustration, actually, of what we see happening in our Isaiah text. Death, which tries to swallow us up, has itself been swallowed up by something more powerful.

Death has been swallowed up by the risen Christ. And the resurrection of Jesus demonstrates that death is no match for Him. If we were using our bigger fish analogy, we would have to say there is no bigger fish in this case.

In Acts chapter 10, the apostle Peter says this about Jesus. We read this a few minutes ago.

[9:47] They put Him to death by hanging Him on a tree, but God raised Him on the third day and made Him to appear, not to all the people, but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with Him after He rose from the dead.

And He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that He is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To Him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins through His name.

Because Christ has died and because Christ is risen, everyone who believes in Christ receives forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

Everyone who knows Christ as Lord and Savior is not only completely forgiven by God for their sins, and that's amazing enough, but shares in the resurrection victory of Jesus.

Those who trust in Christ will never be swallowed up by death. And that changes everything.

[11:00] That changes how the Christian answers the question, are you afraid to die? If death cannot swallow us up, if we stand in victory with Jesus over death, why would we need to be afraid?

The one who has swallowed up death can rescue us from death. And we'll rescue everyone who calls on His name. Why be afraid to die when there is a Savior who has defeated death and can rescue you from it?

The great poet George Herbert, who also happens to have been an Anglican priest, said this, Death used to be an executioner, but the gospel has made him just a gardener.

Take that, death. When death tries to swallow up the Christian, tries to swallow up the believer in Jesus, all that death does is usher the Christian into the nearer presence of Christ.

The nearer presence of the one who loved us, died for us, and rose again for us. That's all that it can do. Why be afraid? And if that's not enough, Jesus is coming back.

[12:22] And when He comes back, believers will be raised from the dead, be given new glorified bodies that will never hurt again, break again, or die again. I'm holding out hope that my resurrected body will even have shed a few pounds.

Isn't what Jesus has done glorious?

Why be afraid? The 4th century Christian Saint Athanasius, isn't that a great name?

I once tried to convince my wife that if we ever had a son, we should name him Athanasius. She wasn't going for it. But Saint Athanasius put it like this.

Before Christ came, even to the saints, death was terrible. All wept for the dead as though they perished. But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible.

[13:25] For all who believe in Christ, trample on it as it were nothing, and choose rather to die than deny their faith in Christ. And that wasn't just true 1,700 years ago.

That's true now. Around the world, there are Christians who are dying, who are facing death, sometimes being beheaded, sometimes being bombed for their faith.

And you know what? They are facing it with courage. Because Christ has risen, because they know that in Christ, they will trample death under their feet. And it's not just extraordinary martyrs.

I have seen regular Christians, brothers and sisters in Christ, stare death right in the face and do so with peace.

I have seen smiles on death beds because those brothers and sisters were ready to see Jesus.

They knew that this is true and was true for them.

[14:39] Death is no longer terrible because Christ has risen. And it wasn't because they thought that they had lived a good moral life and knew that God was going to accept them because of that.

No, they knew that they were sinners. They also knew that Jesus died for their sins and that they had forgiveness and eternal life in Him. I've seen brothers and sisters depart this life unafraid because of the hope of the resurrection.

Through the witness of others who have gone to be with the Lord, I have seen that we don't have to be afraid. The resurrection makes all the difference in the world. Why be afraid? If you are a believer, rejoice this morning.

Death has been swallowed up for you and you will trample it under your feet through the One who trampled it under His feet for you. Don't be afraid.

Look to the cross and the empty tomb and remember and rejoice. your sins are forgiven. You have peace with God. Death will never swallow you up.

[15:58] Don't be afraid. Now this morning, if you don't know Jesus, I want you to know that you don't have to leave here this morning still afraid.

No matter your sins, your failures, your fears, it remains true that Jesus Christ is able to save you.

Call to Him, pray to Him, ask Him to save you from your sins and from death and He will do it.

He does not turn away anyone who calls on Him for mercy. He is risen, He is able, and He delights in showing mercy and rescuing from death and in calming our fears.

What a glorious Savior we have. Here's what I want us to understand. Because Jesus is risen, we don't have to be afraid of death ever again.

What does the resurrection of Jesus Christ mean to you? My hope, my prayer for you is that it means everything to you.

[17 : 15] My brothers and my sisters, Christ is risen. The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.