

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 17, 2022

The Last Enemy

1 Corinthians 15:20-28

Corpses were “carpeted through the streets.” That’s the way the mayor of Mariupol described the death and devastation inflicted on the city by the Russian military. After weeks of bombardment, at least 10,000 civilians have died, and the death toll could pass 20,000. The city of Mariupol, once home to almost 500,000 people, has been utterly devastated by Russian attacks. The mayor has even claimed that Russia was trying to destroy evidence of civilian deaths by burning bodies with mobile cremation equipment.

The scope and scale of death in Mariupol, and places throughout Ukraine, make it hard to envision Easter in that part of God’s world. The church in Ukraine is comprised primarily of Orthodox Christians, who celebrate Easter a week later than the church here in the West. But still, across the lines of tradition and history, we all, united under one Lord, still declare, “Christ is risen!”

In circumstances like the present, it can feel like the church’s Easter declaration is being drowned out by the cries of pain, the calls for help, and the shouts of sorrow. In his Palm Sunday homily, Pope Francis summarized the war as, “mothers who mourn the unjust deaths of husbands and sons ... refugees who flee from bombs with children in their arms ... young people deprived of a future ... soldiers sent to kill their brothers and sisters.”¹

In this present world of war, killing, and death, we gather on another Easter Sunday to proclaim life. We should never do so casually or lightly, especially in conditions like the present. The war in Ukraine, coupled with the pandemic experience of the past two years, keeps us aware of death’s reach across borders and boundaries. Think not only of the casualties of war but those whose lives have been taken by COVID-19. Moment by moment, day by day, the numbers are compiled and displayed on the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center page. As of earlier this morning, global deaths: 6,197,535. U.S. deaths: 988,609.

Death on such a global scale. But according to Paul, even that doesn’t capture the full scope of the situation. In today’s text from 1 Corinthians, Paul speaks of death on a cosmic scale. Apparently some of the Corinthians are denying the resurrection of the dead. We don’t know exactly why they object to the rising of the body, corpses being given life. But we do know that this is one of those foundational convictions where Paul must draw the line. He reminds the Corinthians that the resurrection of Jesus can’t be separated from the resurrection of those who believe in Jesus. The latter follows from the former. In other words, the raising of Jesus wasn’t a one-of-a-kind miracle that God performed in order to impress the world or to show that Jesus was special. The raising of Jesus was, as Paul describes it, the beginning of a much greater harvest (15:23). It’s a preview of the ultimate reality of God’s reign. Jesus’ resurrection means that God’s judgment of the world, God’s intervention to set things right, to sort out good and evil, is underway. God is bringing his purpose for humankind, and for the whole creation, to completion. Having conquered death, God is drawing all reality, the whole cosmos, to a different destiny, life. I like the

way that author Philip Yancey puts it when he says, "Easter hits a new note of hope and faith that what God did once in a graveyard in Jerusalem, he can and will repeat on a grand scale."²

That kind of hope about the future requires facing the truth about both the past and the present. Paul reminds the Corinthians that Adam's sin brought death upon all humanity. Apart from Christ, we're all under the power, the reign, of sin, and subject to death. Philip Yancey tells about a painting in a museum in Spain. The painting is titled "The Stages of Life with Death." As one preacher describes it:

On the ground is a newborn baby. The baby is surrounded by three elongated figures. In the left of the painting is a beautiful young woman—alabaster skin, hair flowing down her back, the perfect picture of classical beauty.

Next to her in the middle is an old hag, a shriveled old woman with a hard, angular, mean-looking face. With one arm she is reaching out and grabbing the shoulder of the beautiful young girl, and with a sneer she is pulling her toward herself. With her other arm she is interlocked with a third person, a creature—man or woman you cannot tell, for all features have been melted down into a rotting corpse—holding an hourglass. There it is—birth, youth, old age, lived in the presence of death.³

We all live in the presence of death, the reality of death. "In Adam all die" (v. 22). But that's not the end of that sentence. "So in Christ all will be made alive." In the gospel there's a great reversal. By raising Jesus, God has transformed our ultimate destiny from death to life. And that changes everything about the present. It means that between now, and the full revelation of our destiny, when Christ comes again, we live in what commentator Richard Hays calls God's "assault on death." First, the resurrection of Christ. Then, a second line of attack, the resurrection of those who belong to Christ.⁴ That's God's battle plan for conquering the powers that have intruded into his world.

Notice how Paul speaks of death as an enemy. Within this vision of life and the future, death, and its ally sin, can even be capitalized. Death. Sin. These aren't just theological ideas or concepts. They're powers, forces, at work in God's world, trying to thwart and defeat God's purposes. So Paul speaks of death in a personified way. Death lives and acts in opposition to God's will for humankind and the whole cosmos.

Sometimes we speak of death in gentler, less combative terms. Death, some would say, is a "friend." That kind of terminology should be used carefully and cautiously, considering the sorrow that the deceased's family and friends are going through. But speaking of death as a friend does capture some of the sense of how death can be a kind of release from pain and suffering, and especially for the believer, a doorway to something better in the presence of God, an even deeper fellowship with our Lord.

Sometimes people will speak of death as just a part of life. It's an inevitable part of the experience of being in this world. Birth and growth, and eventually aging and death, are simply stages in the process that each of us must go through. Rather than trying to evade or ignore this reality, we need to face it squarely and use it to help us make the most of the time we're given. "There is a time for everything," says the writer of Ecclesiastes. "And a season for every activity under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die" (3:1-2).

Death as a friend. Death as a teacher. Death as an entrance to life with God. Death as a part of the cycle of life. Death as an inevitable end that can give meaning to the present. Granted, there's certainly some truth in these ways of characterizing death and making some sense of what can seem senseless. But from a Christian perspective, we also need to

view death as an enemy. Death is an ugly intruder into God's creation. It wasn't meant to be here as just a natural part of how things work. Orthodox bishop Kallistos Ware writes, "Death is not part of God's primary purpose for his creation." He goes on, "He created us, not in order that we should die, but in order that we should live."⁵

In his book *Christ and the Meaning of Life*, German theologian Helmut Thielicke tells the story of a young soldier who reached out to pick a bouquet of lilacs and discovered the half-decayed body of another soldier beneath the bush. According to Thielicke, "He drew back in horror, not because he had never seen a dead man before—he drew back because of the screaming contradiction between the dead man and the flowering bush." Imagine how the soldier's reaction would have been different, says Thielicke, if he had come upon a dead and faded lilac bush instead. "A blooming lilac bush will one day become a withered lilac bush—this is really nothing more than the operation of the rhythm of life—but that a man should be lying there in decayed condition, this was something that simply did not fit, and that's why he winced at the sight of it."⁶

Death does not fit, and does not belong, in God's creation. Death is an enemy, a destroyer. It takes away our loved ones and friends. It upends families. It isolates us. It leaves us lonely. It destroys futures. It steals dreams. It weakens churches. It ravages neighborhoods. It disrupts economies. It throws nations into turmoil. Death resists God's dominion. It opposes the sovereign love of God. And in what looks like its supreme victory, death leaves God's own Son nailed to a cross and sealed in a tomb.

But praise the Lord, death doesn't have the last word. Life, and resurrection, have the final say. Easter is our annual celebration that death's invasion has failed. No wonder we hear Paul, later here in 1 Corinthians 15, dancing on death's grave and quoting Old Testament prophets: "'Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?'" (v. 55). Then Paul turns from mocking to singing: "But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 57).

Philip Yancey tells about attending the funeral of a child in Chicago. During the service the pastor shocked the mourners by suddenly interrupting his eulogy, glancing down at the casket and exclaiming, "Damn you, death!" He caught himself, and quickly added, "Not God—it's death I'm damning. And God, too, has promised to damn it."⁷

God's plan for damning death has already been set in motion. As Paul says, "Each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him" (v. 23). Christ will destroy all that stands in opposition to God's will for life, justice, peace, and wholeness. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death" (v. 26). And once Christ has handed everything he has liberated over to God, then the final goal of all this will be realized, that "God may be all in all" (v. 28).

One commentator has pointed out that for Paul the ultimate theological question is, "Who has final say about the existence of everything in the cosmos, Death or God?"⁸ Today, we gather on another Easter Sunday to reaffirm and re-preach our answer: God reigns. Sin and Death have been defeated. And what we proclaim in here, on this day, has to be proclaimed out there, every day, in a world afflicted by disease, war, spiritual lostness, environmental disasters, personal addictions, racial divisions, economic inequities, and many other signs that death will not go quietly. So we live our lives in light of the resurrection of Jesus, as a sign of what is to come for humankind, and as a victorious witness to what God has promised for those who belong to Christ.

¹ "On Palm Sunday, pope calls for Easter truce in Ukraine." The Jerusalem Post. April 10, 2022.
<https://www.jpost.com/christianworld/article-703794> (April 13, 2022).

² Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995) 211.

³ "Now Is the Time." Preaching Today, Tape No. 73.

⁴ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation: A Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) n.p.

⁵ Quoted in Rob Moll, *The Art of Dying: Living Fully into the Life to Come* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2010) Kindle edition.

⁶ Summarized by John Koessler, "Death: Our Enemy and Teacher," on his blog, A Stranger in the House of God (June 30, 2010).

⁷ Philip Yancey, *The Question That Never Goes Away* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014) n.p.

⁸ Richard Carlson, Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:19-26. Working Preacher. March 27, 2016.
<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/resurrection-of-our-lord-3/commentary-on-1-corinthians-1519-26> (April 14, 2022).