



Sermon Thoughts for Easter Sunday

Some Sermon Thoughts on 1 Corinthians 15:51-57

The Context

These verses are part of Paul's long answer to the question he anticipated people asking about the promise of the resurrection. In verse 15:35 Paul wrote: "But someone may ask, 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?'" He answers this question by pointing out that our resurrected bodies will be different from our earthly bodies just as plants are different from the seeds from which they grow (vv. 37,38). He goes on to explain that not all bodies are the same—animals, birds, fish for example (vv. 39-41). So, it should not surprise us that our resurrected bodies will differ from our earthly bodies in the following ways:

1. Our earthly bodies are perishable. Our heavenly bodies will be imperishable (v. 42).
2. Our earthly bodies are dishonorable. Our heavenly bodies will be glorious (v. 43).
3. Our earthly bodies are weak. Our heavenly bodies will be powerful (v. 43).
4. Our earthly bodies are natural. Our heavenly bodies will be spiritual (v. 44).

Finally, in verses 45-50 Paul explains that, just as we now have bodies like "the earthly man" (Adam), in the resurrection we will have bodies like "the man from heaven" (Jesus).

Now come the words of our text in which St. Paul describes the remarkable experience Jesus' followers will have on the Last Day and the ultimate victory we will achieve through Christ.

Approach to the Text

A preacher whose congregation has participated in the E20 program will have been praying for God's blessing on its efforts and will anticipate the presence of guests at its Easter worship. This will affect, in some ways, how he approaches the preaching of this text. The truths, of course, do not change regardless of who is hearing his message. But he will want to keep his listeners in mind as he determines how best to express those truths. As he prepares his sermon, he is encouraged to be thinking of the unchurched guest as well as his faithful, mature members.

Main Point

The main point Paul makes in this text, and the glorious message the preacher has to share is the promise that Christ rose from the dead and promises that all of his followers will one day rise from the grave. The theme of E20 is *“Victorious!”* On Easter Sunday, the preacher is afforded the opportunity to proclaim just what Christ’s victory was and what victory he promises to his people. He promises nothing less than a literal victory over death and an eternal life with him. This is no figurative victory. We will not “live on in the memories of our loved ones.” We will not “live on in the legacy we leave behind.” We will not even simply live on spiritually. We will be physically raised from the grave to enjoy an eternal physical, glorified life in the new heaven and new earth our Lord will provide. This is the message of victory the preacher will want to clearly proclaim to member and guest alike.

Introduction and Body of the Sermon

The message of the text is Christ’s victory over death that assures us of victory over death. Why not introduce the sermon by talking about the awful, looming, unavoidable reality of death? This may seem too “negative” a start to an Easter sermon. But the preacher could mitigate this criticism by anticipating it, by coming alongside his listeners and saying something like:

“What a glorious morning! It’s Easter! The sun is shining (if it is)! The children are smiling! Spring is springing! Everywhere we look there is beauty—beautiful Easter dresses, beautiful Easter lilies, beautifully decorated Easter eggs, a beautifully baked Easter ham. Along with the beautiful sights are beautiful sounds—joyous music, worshipers shouting, “Christ is risen!” and singing, “Alleluia!” What a glorious morning!

It would seem strange to introduce something sad, something scary, something somber into a morning like this, wouldn’t it? But, my friends, that is precisely what we are going to do. Not because we want to be sad or scared. But because we need to understand and appreciate just how sad and scary this “something” is if we are truly going to appreciate what we are celebrating here this morning. Only then will we be filled with the level of joy Easter affords us.

What is this “something” that is so sad and scary? It is...the end—the end of breathing, the end of a beating heart, the end of living. It is death. And we all, young and old alike, are facing it. We don’t much like to think about it. It is too sad. It is too scary. But there it is, waiting for us, somewhere in our future.

So, what are we going to do about it? We can, and should, do all we can to take care of our bodies, to keep them as healthy and whole as possible. By doing so we may delay death. We MAY delay death. But there is no guarantee. There are innumerable ways our lives might end other than poor health. And, even if we avoid these other death dealers, eventually our bodies will wear out and the end will come. No, taking care of our bodies is not enough. It will not allow us to avoid the inevitable.

So, what do we do? What can we do? We can listen to the amazing, remarkable, glorious promise God gives us in the verses of the Bible we read earlier from I Corinthians 15 (this assumes the preacher uses these verses as the epistle lesson for the day or has read the verses

at the outset of his sermon). *His promise is that because Jesus was victorious over death, he promises to give his followers victory over death.*”

The preacher might now explore the question of what makes death so scary. He would do so with a view toward verses 55-56 where Paul makes the point that death no longer has any sting. As a way of setting up the “punch” of that reality, the preacher might say something like:

“So, what is it that makes the thought of death so scary? In our text, St. Paul mentions the ‘sting’ of death. What makes death sting? What makes it so scary? If death were merely the end of our existence, if we simply stopped BEING at the moment of death, it might be sad because we would no longer be with our loved ones, it might be disappointing because we would like to live longer, but there would be nothing scary about it.

The reason death is so scary is that we know that when we die, we will face our Creator. We know there is someone to whom we will give an account. And, our conscience tells us that we have not lived up to his expectations. If we read what he says in the Bible, we will only be more scared because it will show us that we are even further from living up to his expectations than we thought.

But this is precisely what makes Easter so exciting! Easter changes this! Listen to what St. Paul says, ‘The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ’ (vv. 56,57). Jesus was victorious over sin when he died on the cross. He took all the punishment our sins could dish out. ‘And now,’ Jesus says, ‘You don’t need to be afraid to die because when you face your Creator, he will welcome you with open arms. Through me your sins are forgiven. There is nothing to be afraid of.’ This is why St. Paul wrote, ‘Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ Death no longer has any sting! There is no reason to be afraid.

In fact, quite the opposite is true. Because of what Jesus has done for us, death is merely another event along the way to the perfect world God says he will one day create for his followers. When we die, our bodies will be placed in the ground while our souls go to be with God. And then, on the day this world ends, listen to what will happen: ‘...the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed...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.”’

Did you catch that? Our weak, mortal bodies will be raised back to life. But this time, we will be immortal. We will never again die. In fact, the Bible says that we will never again be weak or injured or sick. We will live in a perfect, glorious, sinless and sick-less new world.”

If time allows, the preacher might explore some of the specific ways our eternal life in heaven will be better than our lives in this world.

Conclusion

The conclusion of the sermon might be a good time to tie the message directly to the theme of the E20 campaign. The preacher could mention that some of those in attendance may be there because they received a postcard in the mail or an invitation from one of the congregation's members. On the postcard or invitation, the word "Victorious" was prominent. (He may even wish to hold up one of the postcards at this point.) He could then ask something like:

"What is the best possible victory that I could have shared with you this morning? A political victory? An athletic victory? A victory over a disease? All would be wonderful. All might make us smile and celebrate. But none of these would last. None of these would matter to us in the end. But the victory God has told us about, the victory Jesus won for us when he walked out of that tomb, the victory he will give us one day when he raises us from the dead to eternal life – that victory will last forever and ever."

Sermon Hymn

After the sermon's "Amen," the preacher could say (if the church is blessed with a good soloist or choir): *"Now to express the thanks for victory that is in our hearts, we hear a beautiful musical expression of our thanks."* Then follows CW 147:2, set to Bach's familiar and well-loved "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." (The E20 worship folder currently places this stanza after the offering for the entire congregation to sing. A longer option is the concertato with a different tune by Benjamin Culli, mentioned in "E20 Worship Planning.")