

Undeclared by Death

I Corinthians 15:12-26, 51-57 (NIV)

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ⁵¹ 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.

In every game, especially the greatest ones, there's a turning point when it becomes clear that the victor has arisen and won't be beaten. The NFL picked up on this and does a whole film series highlighting the moment the game shifts to the winner's eventual triumph. Looking back to Super Bowl LVI, Bengal fans thought they had the turning point with a second half opening play: a 75-yard touchdown pass from Joe Burrow to Tee Higgins. Then the scoring stopped as both defenses stepped up...until the fourth quarter. With 6:13 remaining in the game, the Rams drove 79 yards down the field for a touchdown, taking the lead 23-20 and leaving only 1:25 for the Bengals to respond. Seconds later, a 4th down stop as Aaron Donald of the Rams almost sacked Joe Burrow sealed the Rams' victory. The Rams' touchdown drive in the 4th quarter was the turning point of the game. (Apologies to Harry and our other Bengals' fans for making you relive that moment.) But that's what we are here to celebrate this morning: a turning point.

When you turn back the clock, watching Jesus from Thursday to Friday, it was bleak. The Kingdom of God had been advancing. Jesus had been preaching and teaching and doing miracles. After raising his friend Lazarus, the Jewish religious leaders got together and made plans to kill Jesus because they rightly determined that it was better for one man to die than for the whole nation to die. They recruited one of Jesus' 12 close followers, Judas, to betray Jesus into their hands.

The mob that arrived on Thursday evening while Jesus was praying on the Mount of Olives shackled Jesus illegally and led him away to what was essentially a mock trial. When false witnesses couldn't get their stories straight, they condemned Jesus for truthfully telling them that he is the Son of God, the Messiah. Then they changed the charges in front of the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, saying that Jesus opposed Caesar and was subverting the Roman government. Although Pilate found no basis for these claims and was ready to set Jesus free, he caved to the pressure of the Jewish religious leaders as they shouted for Jesus' crucifixion.

Nails were driven into Jesus' hands and feet. He was lifted up on the cross. He endured the beatings, the trash talk. He died, pierced by a spear into his side to confirm this. Then he was quietly buried. The game, so to speak, was over. Jesus was seemingly defeated by death.

Death has touched every single person here today. We have widows and widowers here. We have children who have lost their parents and grandparents, parents who have lost their children. You have friends who have died in tragic accidents. We know people who have committed suicide.

How do we cope with death? We try to dress it up, make death look like a friend. We call death natural. We hope for a peaceful death in our sleep when we're old and ready to be done, imagining death as an old friend that we've been waiting to see. Yet every single time someone dies, we know that something is not right. This is not natural. We weren't designed to die.

The ugly truth is that death is not our friend. It's our opponent, an enemy who's pursuing us and stalking us – every single one of us. We would cheat it if we could, but we can't. God tells us why death is coming after us: The wages of sin is death. Just one outburst, one hit, one anxious thought, one mistake, one unkind word, one slanderous thought means that death is coming for us and we can't stop it. Everyone who sins, everyone who does even one thing wrong in life is in a seemingly losing fight with death.

To combat death, some want us to believe that there is no life after death, that there is no resurrection of the dead. They were saying it 2,000 years ago, and they're still saying it today. If we buy into the idea that life ceases at death and that there is no life afterwards, the ramifications are huge. The Apostle Paul tells us: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless... If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." (verses 13-14, 17-19) If Jesus did not rise from the dead, if there is no life after death, then death has won. The turning point would be his death on the cross, that Jesus stayed dead. If that were true, every sin we've ever committed clings to us and we can't shake any of them off. We're lost to our sin; everyone is. The score would be something like 100 billion and counting for death and 0 for life, if Jesus is still dead.

But this is why today is so important Easter is the turning point. You're not here because some nice guy is dead and decayed to dust some 2,000 years ago. You're here because of the fact that Paul confirms for us, something he saw with his own eyes: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." (verse 20)

Christ is called the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. As the name implies, firstfruits are the very first fully mature harvested fruit, pointing ahead to the ensuing bounteous harvest. Jesus is the first to be raised from the dead in this special way. He's not just here to live again and die again like other people raised from the dead did such as Lazarus, Jairus' daughter, the boy at Nain, and the other resurrection stories from both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. No, the risen Christ is changed. The perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, the mortal with immortality. Jesus lives on Easter Sunday in his body, a body that is incorruptible, a body that will never die. Jesus stands undefeated by death!

Jesus' resurrection is not just a turning point for himself, for his battle against death. It's not that the final score against death is going to read 100 billion and counting to 1. No, this is the turning point for all of us. This day when Jesus rose from the dead marks the future outcome of the whole contest between death and life. This is where the tide has changed and there's no going back. Even as we see death score more points, so to speak, with every death, death does not keep the points. Death does not win. "For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him." (verses 21-23)

Because Jesus has been raised from the dead, this means that his life substituted for us was accepted as payment for us. He took our sins, every single one of them – past, present, and future – and exacted the payment required by God's wrath. The very things which would cause us to die have been paid for and removed from our accounts by Jesus. His resurrection is the receipt that our sins have been paid in full. Nothing more is owed. No other payment is accepted. We are saved from our sins because Christ was raised from the dead. This is the turning point, the start of death's eventual and total loss.

Jesus is the first point in this game of life, the one whose mortal body once laid dead but now is alive and made immortal. He cannot ever die again. Death is defeated for him by him. Because he is God who did this, death is also defeated for us. On the Last Day, the day Jesus returns bodily to earth, we will see that scoreboard change. All the points, all the lives, that seemingly went to death will be taken away and will instead be added to the life column. All the dead will be raised back to life because Jesus defeated death. "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 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." (verses 51-52, 54) Because Jesus was raised from the dead, death is defeated!

We still battle with our enemy death every day. But today on Easter with Jesus being raised from the dead, we have our turning point. We know the outcome. "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." (verse 26) Death's day of final defeat and annihilation is coming. We know how the rest of the game plays out. "Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (verse 57) Today with this turning point, we are undefeated by death because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen.