

Death is Swallowed Up

Isaiah 25:6-9 (NIV)

⁶ On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. ⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; ⁸ he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people’s disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. ⁹ In that day they will say, “Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

Did you catch breakfast here this morning? We have a cool tradition where all the food is donated by the people who come to here to worship, and then the men of the congregation get their aprons on and prepare and serve a nice Easter breakfast with pancakes and sausages and eggs and hash browns and fresh fruit and lots of other good, delicious breakfast items. So, I got to enjoy a nice breakfast with my family and many of you this morning here at church.

Thinking about Easter breakfast, I wonder what kind of breakfast Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome had on their very first Easter Sunday morning? Sunday for these ladies was the beginning of another week. The weekend was over. The Sabbath day of rest was done. Time to get back to work. We’re told that “very early on the first day of the week, just after sunrise, [the women] were on their way to the tomb.” (Mark 16:2) I’m guessing because they got going so early that they didn’t have a breakfast like we did this morning. Maybe they grabbed a quick bite to eat, a piece of leftover bread, something like what I do on a morning where I don’t enough time to sit and eat breakfast but instead want to immediately get going on my work day.

As I think about what they might have had for breakfast on an Easter Sunday morning some 2000 years ago, I start to realize I’m living in my own little world where things are pretty great. I forget what was most certainly on their minds. Their whole world had been rocked. Not even 48 hours ago they were standing on Golgotha hill, their eyes were fixed on a man nailed to a cross, dying like a notorious criminal. Tears ran down their cheeks. Their whole world was being turned upside down.

This was Jesus! He never did anything wrong, never broke any laws. He made everything better. Mary Magdalene had seven demons driven out of her by Jesus. No doubt the other Mary and Salome had seen some of Jesus’ miracles: sight to the blind, making the lame walk. They probably even met Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. These wicked men tried Jesus illegally with an illegal court with an unjust sentence of death. This was supposed to be their Messiah, their Savior, their God. He was the one that they had been waiting for, the one they trusted in to save them, but now he’s dead! Had their faith been placed in him in vain? Was the trust in him worthless? Had death taken away their Savior?

The women had one main thought on Sunday morning: we have to give Jesus’ body proper preparations, proper spices and oils and the like. We will honor him, even in death. Through Saturday and up to Sunday morning, they probably had little to no appetite. They felt sick having just seen what they saw. The grief still panging them Sunday morning. Their food, their Easter breakfast, was mostly likely their tears.

It’s maybe odd to think of anyone being sad on Easter, one of the most joyous days of the whole year, maybe the most joyous day in the life of a Christian. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! See. Sad people wouldn’t respond that way. But am I too much in my own little world thinking that no one should be or can be sad on Easter? As I am getting older, the more I realize that holidays (holy days) that are built on so much reason for joy can also be overshadowed, shrouded in sadness.

Is this your first Easter without a loved one? Is there a place next to you that’s empty, that there is someone who should be sitting there beside you, but they’re not? Did you have to talk yourself into coming this morning because you didn’t want to do anything, you wanted to just stay in bed and hide your tears and your grief from the world? Did you want to stay in bed this morning because you knew that everyone was going to be cheerful and you knew that you couldn’t muster the same cheery attitude? Did you have tears for your Easter breakfast?

Death is a stark reminder that something is terribly wrong in this world. It doesn’t matter if the person lived a long life and then passed away or if they were taken suddenly at a very young age. We sometimes say death is okay, death is natural, death is an escape, death is an end to all the pain. Even when those things are said, there’s still a big resounding feeling inside of us that this shouldn’t happen. This shouldn’t be the way that I feel. Death is wrong. Death is unnatural. I know this because of how sad I am.

The truth is that death is not a friend but an enemy. Death takes loved ones away from me, separates me from them, takes a piece of my life with them. Death swallows up the joys I have with other people. Death does not leave me alone. Death is stalking me. Death is an enemy to life that we all need rescuing from because all of us have sinned. "The wages of sin is death," God says. It's a humbling and sad reality that I deserve to have death tear apart my life and drag me down with it.

Today, because it is Easter Sunday, we hear what God does with our enemy of death. He saw it as an enemy of life, not something that should be embraced. He saw the casualties. Adam, Eve, and then their children starting with Abel. Genesis chapter 5 is a genealogy of humanity with a resounding refrain of death. Adam lived so many years and then had this son. He had other sons and daughters, lived so many more years, and then he died. The same happened to his son. He lived so many years, had a son, had other sons and daughters, lived so many years and then died. Over and over again in the Bible the death bell tolls. Death rampaged. Every person in the world has at one time had tears for breakfast.

But God's Word, the Bible, is not just death bells. Even in that first genealogy in Genesis chapter 5 we hear Enoch escape death. He didn't die but walked with God. Many years later the prophet Elijah did not die but God took him to heaven by means of a whirlwind. Sons were raised from the dead during the time of Elijah and Elisha. Jesus raised dead people back to life: a widow's son in a town called Nain, a church leader's daughter, and his own friend Lazarus. All of these events were victories leading to death's fatal blow: Jesus' resurrection!

Instead of a breakfast of pancakes and sausages, the women that first Easter Sunday morning had a much different breakfast. They came expecting the stone to still be standing there, sealing the entrance to Jesus' tomb. Instead, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome saw that the very large stone had been rolled away. They peered inside the tomb, and saw a heavenly being, an angel dressed in shockingly white clothes. They were terrified on top of all their grief! But the angel gave them a message they weren't expecting: "Don't be alarmed. You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him." (Mark 16:6) The angel gave these women an Easter breakfast of words, a message that began to dry their tears. Their Lord, their Savior, was not dead. No, he instead had struck a fatal blow to death by rising from the dead himself. He was not in that tomb because he defeated death. He was crucified, yes. He did die, but he was not there; he has risen! Death is defeated! This means that death will come to an end!

Jesus' resurrection from the dead on Easter Sunday is a preview of what God will do for all of us. Paul explained this in our second Bible reading: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 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." (1 Corinthians 15:20-22) Since Christ came back to life after he died, he will also raise us from the dead. Christ's resurrection handed death its own death sentence. The day will come when God will raise all the dead back to life because Christ came back to life on Easter. This is what God will do on the Last Day.

On that day when the risen Christ returns, death itself will die. God tells us what to expect through the Prophet Isaiah: "On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth. The LORD has spoken." (verses 7-8) Death has swallowed up so many people that we love and cherish, but the Lord himself will swallow up death that we never have to experience again.

After that time, death will never stalk us again; it will never separate us from a loved one again. Death will be dead. God will personally wipe every tear from our eyes and we will never have another breakfast of tears. Instead, we will enjoy the best breakfast, the best meal we will ever have. The joys of heaven, this feast, will last forever! God describes it this way: "On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine— the best of meats and the finest of wines." (verse 6) As he swallows up death, he also gives us heaven. In heaven, God has the finest in store for us, the best of the best, spared no expense. This feast that he has prepared for us in heaven is a feast that will have no leftovers of sorrow, no grief to spoil our appetite because the Lord will have swallowed up death forever!

This is what we put our hope in today, even if we had tears for breakfast this morning. This is the hope and truth that we hold on to until that blessed day when death is swallowed up by God. In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God; we trusted in him, and he saved us. This is the LORD, we trusted in him; let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation." (verse 9) This is our hope. This is what sustains us. This is our food. This is our Easter breakfast: God's guarantee that he will swallow up death forever because Christ is risen, he is risen indeed. Alleluia! Amen!