

An Easter Message: 2019

So Paul's writing to the church in Corinth. It's an amazing church. Incredibly generous, and at the same time full of prejudice and terrible theology. They're earnest, but earnest meatballs, not angels.

The Corinthians have strayed from what Paul preaches, what he calls the "good news" that "they have believed." The past tense is important here. His message hasn't changed, but their belief has. Later on he says, "Sober up. Come to your senses. Stop sinning. When it comes to God some of you are clueless."

He reminds them of his message:

that Christ died for our sins...he was buried...he was raised on the third day...he appeared to Cephas...then to the Twelve...he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep...he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and...he appeared to me also...

Jesus died for our sins. Yes. We talk about it all the time, and can't ever stop. God made a way to be in redemptive relationship with humanity through Good Friday. To say Jesus died "for" our sins is no small thing, particularly because that "for" is just so loaded: It can mean Jesus died "on behalf of" our sins, he died "for the sake of" our sins, he died "on account of" our sins.

But when Paul is correcting the major theological bankruptcy of the Corinthians, Paul doesn't linger on the cross the way we do. He goes from Jesus' death, to his burial, then to the fact that he was raised from the dead, and then he spends a lot of time recounting all the appearances he made after he was raised from the dead.

And this is reasonable, you know? Death isn't something that typically stops. You don't catch death, and get better from it. It's chronic, persistent. And Paul wants to remind his audience that the resurrection of Jesus that they have believed in, while it may not be reasonable, or expected, or tidy: It's real. There were witnesses. Some of them are alive; you can go talk to them. Paul's one of them.

And if they doubt what he says about Jesus, then he's only got one message for them: "you're faith is a waste and you're still stuck in your sins."

For Paul, it's the fact that Jesus is alive and not still dead that makes his entire mission and ministry and life worthwhile. It's this fact that proves everything else about Jesus' life and work true, and the Corinthians are turning away from this fundamental truth: Jesus has been raised from the dead.

And because Jesus has been raised from the dead--and has appeared to so many people, so many people we could go see, talk with, like Paul himself--because of it, we who have trusted in Jesus and his resurrection--the first of all the resurrections to come, the first one raised from the dead

never to die again--we ourselves will be resurrected, too, along with the world itself, into a world in which there is enough, in which God is with us physically, in which there is no terror, retribution, or fear.

But there's a reason that over and over whenever Paul talks about the resurrection to come, and Jesus having been raised from the dead, Paul mentions the suffering that the world and God's People face.

I think it's because we, out of all people--we who are the Spirit-filled People of God--we have to face the suffering of the world head on. Because if we deny it, we cannot help work against it.

Until Jesus returns and Death is finally and completely overthrown and we are resurrected into a resurrected world we have to embody Christ. This isn't a surprise; we've talked about this a thousand times. Paul tells the Corinthians "Imitate me as I imitate the Lord." But how do we imitate a Lord who rose from the dead, when we are still stuck in a death-filled world?

I think we do this in a few ways, but all of them could be summarized like this: We take a stand against death wherever we find it. We take a stand against death wherever we find it. To do this well we do have to do a few things, though.

We have to remember that Jesus did die for our sins. This means we own our sin and sins, which have been and are being forgiven. We reckon ourselves correctly. We are

people in need of grace who have received it, and we are marked by an unshakeable love that powers our choices, our decisions, our attitudes like an engine that won't go out. If we can't grasp both how far we fall short of God's standard, and the truth that we are forgiven and loved and have been brought back to God, then we can't do much else. We'll be either paralyzed by guilt or, out of pride, depend on our own strength not the power of the Holy Spirit or the strength of one another.

To take a stand against death means that we acknowledge that our sin causes death. It caused Jesus', and sin causes the death of all those who die like he did: as scapegoats, as political enemies, as people who let us down, as the producers of things our own selfishness demands. If we can't own our sin and failure, and more powerfully trust in God's forgiveness of it, we can't ever have the courage to reject sin and death's pattern and advice.

If we are on the side of death--that is "for" death--because we believe someone deserves it, believe some enemy should get it, or for any other reason--then we are, I think, against the side of God.

I am reminded that Jesus didn't die just for our sins, but for the sins of those who we hate, and would see punished. We ourselves have all been someone's enemy, and together with others are considered enemies by strangers we have never met. When God asks people to forgive their enemies, and bless them, he's not just asking it of us.

To stand against death in the world is to never, ever

suggest that killing someone can make things right.

We have to remember that in this world there is suffering. And suffering is, simply, Death's great derivative. The hate and fragility and poverty and person-diminishing forces at play in this world get their great strength from death and its fear. Remember, the world to come is a world in which there is enough; there is nothing to feel anxiety or fear about, because whatever resources we need we will have access to.

This stands against the way our death-driven world works, which is built on scarcity and the threat of scarcity. We're taught to protect and hoard whatever we might think we might need for our maybe future. And that future is one we are taught to be anxiously distracted about.

The scarcest thing, the thing there is only one of, of course, is ourselves. Our lives and whatever resources we have. Believing that we will rise from the dead, because Jesus did, frees us from the death-ruled economics of scarcity. We become willing to suffer for others, so that others don't have to. We become suffering servants on behalf of our neighbors, our friends, our enemies, and strangers.

Just as Jesus took up the sins of the world, and died so that we wouldn't suffer the consequences of our sin, to take a stand against death is to say that we will be like Jesus in this way: We will suffer so that others don't have to. And if we can't do that, we'll suffer alongside them.

An author I love, N. T. Wright, has said that the church

must “bear the pain and shame of the world in its own body, that the world may be healed...The church is called to do and be for the world what the Messiah—Jesus—was and did for Israel. The Church must find out the pain of the world, and must share it and bear it.”

Jesus, when he was raised from the dead, appeared to many: to encourage them, to strengthen them, to build their belief. And we’re called to do the same: to appear to people, go to them and be with them in whatever suffering they happen to be in the middle of, with encouragement and love.

But Christians cannot find out where the world is hurting, we can’t find out where the world is ashamed, can’t find out what is going on with the world around us unless we reject Death’s fear-and-anxiety-filled whisper to protect ourselves and our resources at all costs.

We cannot find out where the world is hurting if we don't attend to the world. We can't live into the challenge our future resurrection mandates for us now if we are senseless. Instead, we have to use all our senses, whatever they are to attend to our own lives. We have to pay attention, attention to the real life of the world around us, our homes, our works, our places of play and rest and escape, even: all the places we do our living.

We have to cultivate such a deep sense of the world right at the edge of our fingertips, right up close with ourselves, so that we can close our eyes and taste, and touch, and smell, and hear, and feel wherever it is we go, doing all the

different things we do. Some of us are strangers to our own bodies, strangers in our own neighborhoods, ghosts in our own workplaces, and we are haunted not by the Holy Ghost, the proof that resurrection will come upon us, but haunted by distraction.

A distracted person can never, ever ease the suffering of someone else, because they have nothing to offer. The power of Easter is weak among those who won't offer whatever attention they have to give.

This is what it means to be saved. It means to be saved from death. Not saved from our sins so much as saved from their permanent effects. It means to be saved for the suffering of others: To lessen it in every way we might. It means to reclaim our attention, for others and ourselves, and return to our senses, so we might sense where God needs us to turn.

We'll all catch death, barring Jesus' return; but it won't be fatal for us. We'll come back to life again, fully ourselves, raised into a world that has also been raised, where God is present and there is enough of everything for everyone. A world where Death has been put to death, and all the terrors of chronic sin--illness, fear, anxiety, self-protection, war, death, murder--they've been healed away.

And until Jesus comes back, we appear to those in their grief, those who are reaping sin and Death's great life-killing effects, and we bear with them and bear them--carry them--as long as they need carried through God's own power, and the help of each other. We grieve with hope in

the face of death, knowing it will die. We align ourselves with the weak, not the powerful, choose self-sacrifice not self-promotion. We stand against death's-ever creeping onslaught against humanity, and whatever stinks of death: vengeance, violence, murder, hate, evil, stand against it as we stand with those who suffer, and suffer with them rather than cause suffering. We look toward what's internal, and do greater things than we could ask or imagine, standing against evil in solidarity with the broken, even as our own bodies break down.

We must be the voice of those who cannot speak, just as the Spirit gives voice to all creation's great desire to see death end. By fixing our eyes on what will come upon us and the world, we stand against any light and momentary trouble.

This is what the church is supposed to be and do in the world. This is what we, God's People, were made for when we were made into "little Christ's," Christians.

Who around us is suffering, I wonder? Who around us needs some hope that the world as it is, which chews up anyone and anything it can, won't always be this way?

The death we're all used to, the failure of things: the way we have gotten older, and gotten sick, and the betrayal of these bodies of ours that we feel to cancers, illness, aches, and troubles, bad backs and bad biochemistry: It will end. Paul cries out, boasts, crows:

For the perishable must clothe itself with the

imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. 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."

***Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"***

The great hope of Christianity is Jesus' return, and the end of death. The end of things that go stale, wilt, die. And this is the promise on which we stand. When hard-pressed, we're not crushed, when confused, not hopeless, when harassed, not abandoned, struck down, not destroyed. "We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body." If resurrection isn't true, then death still wins. If Easter didn't happen, Death won. Even if we end up ghostly, floating on clouds with harps: death still got us in the end. But Death will die.

When Jesus' Resurrection gives way to the Resurrection of all of us at his return and the judgment of the world, we'll gather with those we have lost to death, and the pain of that loss will be fully undone. The sting will be fully gone, replaced, instead, with the touch and scent and presence of those who we have so deeply missed.

Death is an enemy. But Death will die. And until it does, we are death's enemies now and Easter is both our mandate and our promise. Its great hope drives us to offer hope in

all the places we do our living, and the people we're meant to attend to there. We are the ones who have come to our senses, who fight Death and its doings in all the places we live. We live up to resurrection now, even as we wait for it.

Let's pay attention to our places and their people. Let's bear whatever suffering we discover around us. Let's groan alongside those who groan. No death-driven power can overcome us, if we only lean into the life-giving power Easter has already set out for us.