

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Fourth Sunday after Easter, April 28, 2013

✠ ✠ ✠

(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 207:1-4, 198:1, 206, 196, 207:5-6.

Lessons: Lev. 23:9-21, Rom. 5:12-21, John 15:1-8.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 15:20-24.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

Last week we concluded with the marvelous fact that *“Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* Paul goes on to emphasize that Christ is the first fruits of the Scriptural doctrine of the Resurrection.

Most crops do not have every single tree, or plant, or stalk produce ripe fruit on the same day. Some is ready before others. If an entire field is to be harvested all at one time, the grower tries to pick a time when most of it would be ripe and before too much of it would be overripe. Some plants, like many fruit trees, are picked repeatedly during the season when the fruit ripens. But the first fruit is usually the largest, sweetest, and generally the best.

God had an interesting way of letting his people celebrate when the first of a crop was ready. As you heard in our Old Testament lesson, the people were to bring the very first fruits to the Lord. And that very thing is a picture of the fact that

JESUS CHRIST IS “THE FIRSTFRUITS OF THOSE WHO HAVE FALLEN ASLEEP”

- 1. Jesus Christ rose from the dead.**
- 2. All mankind will be raised from the dead,**
- 3. The unbelievers to eternal damnation,**
- 4. The believers to eternal life in heaven.**

We are generally quite young when we first learn about death. Death means that a person or some other living thing no longer has life. It means that it will decay and return to the dirt and dust of the earth.

Christians have a wonderful way of talking to children about the death of a Christian. We can say that person is with Jesus, or is in heaven, or is with God. We can say that only because Jesus rose from the dead.

There was no death at Creation. But death came with sin and after sin came into the world there was no longer any hope of living forever on earth. Every human must die an earthly, temporal death. Oh, sure, there are some resurrections in the Old Testament and New Testament miracles. People were brought back to life. But those people died again. If they had not eventually died an earthly death, they would still be alive today. Jesus is unique in his resurrection. He rose from the dead never to die again.

But sin didn't just bring temporal death; it brought eternal death and damnation, too. That is eternal suffering, eternal pain, and total separation from God and from all that is good.

It is plain from this scripture, too, how death came into the world. *“Death came through a man.” “In Adam all die.”* It is because of Adam, the first human being, who was created good, perfect, and to live forever, that death came to all humans. No one is exempt. It is impossible to comprehend a world without death. God had warned Adam – and it is really the only law, the only command God gave to Adam – that he would die if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil which was in the middle of the garden of Eden.

Listen to scripture remind us again. In Genesis 1 we read: *“The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are*

free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die." (Genesis 2:15-17)

Then we read: *"Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals the LORD God had made. He said to the woman, 'Did God really say, 'You must not eat from any tree in the garden?'' The woman said to the serpent, 'We may eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but God did say, 'You must not eat fruit from the tree that is in the middle of the garden, and you must not touch it, or you will die.'" "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* (Genesis 3:1-5)

Very simply, Adam disobeyed God. Previously, Adam and his newly created wife, Eve, had not known death. Now they were subject to God's eternal damnation and death as well as physical death. Previously they had known only good. Now they knew both good AND evil. Satan's lie – *"You will not surely die,"* (Genesis 3:4) – and his half-truth about being like God, knowing good and evil, which, when it really comes down to it, is a lie – had come true.

But God promised a Savior in this very first Gospel promise in Genesis 3:15: *"And I will put enmity between you – Satan, that is, the serpent – and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."*

Now there was hope. This hope was so important to Eve and so much a part of her life, that she thought that her first-born son was the Savior.

And now, finally, several thousand years later, God sent the Savior. *"God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons."* (Galatians 4:4-5 NIV)

But the Savior came to earth and lived in a very humble way and died in an especially humble, horrible way. He was born in a barn, of a virgin, and raised in a town which was scorned by the Jews of his day. Mocked, cursed, beaten, and finally crucified, not just by the Romans, but also by his very own people to whom God had sent him, he died, and was buried.

But death wasn't the end, as it appeared to be for every other true man.

The Word of God assures us that *"the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive."*

We read in Romans 6:9: *"For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him."* Our text tells us *"But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."* There's that picture of first fruits, the firstfruits of eternal life. Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. His resurrection is not a fact that can be denied. It is a reality which is the foundation of a sure and certain hope. Christ himself is the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

We read in Exodus 34:26 this command: *"Bring the best of the firstfruits of your soil to the house of the LORD your God."* Like the first sheaf of grain God's Old Testament people were to offer to the Lord as a thank offering for the rest of the harvest that was ready to be gathered in, so Christ is *"the first in the harvest of those who are sleeping in their graves."* (Beck-AAT) *"Because I live, you also will live"* (John 14:19) is our Lord's promise.

Just as death came by one man, so life has also come by one man. Because Adam died, all mankind, including believers, must die an earthly, temporal death. Because Christ rose from the dead, all mankind will rise from the dead, and all who believe in him as their Lord of life will receive everlasting life. This is a sure hope. Just as the first sheaf of grain gave hope that there would be an abundant harvest, so Jesus' resurrection gives us, and gives all who believe, hope – and even assurance – that we, too, shall come back to life.

But all who do not believe in Jesus Christ as their Savior will be damned eternally. That is plain from Scripture, as God teaches in Mark 16:16: *"Whoever does not believe will be condemned."* God gives faith, and he gives the means by which that faith can be created. But, as he told Martha at Lazarus' death, *"He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."* (John 11:23) Jesus' sheep will not suffer everlasting death in hell.

Because Christ rose from the dead, so we look forward to the resurrection of our bodies. ***“In Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”*** All who believe in him, accept him, trust in him as their Savior from all their sins are those who are “of Christ”, those who belong to him.

Paul simply says by God’s inspiration that the Lord is observing a proper order according to his plan. Christ, as the first-fruits, has entered into the fullness of life. He has in his human nature assumed immortality, an incorruptible body. And those who belong to Christ by faith will enter into that same glorious state when he returns on the last day. Christ has been raised from the dead as a first-fruit of those who sleep in death. The fact of his resurrection is beyond doubt and dispute.

Christ is set forth before us as the first-fruits, the first offering, of the new harvest, a sign and token that the entire harvest is sanctified to the Lord. Jesus was the first dead person to lay aside all mortality and to assume a spiritual body which would not be subject to death throughout all eternity. And so those who fell asleep in Christ believing in the hope of eternal life will also arise from the dead. The first harvest-sheaf will be followed by all the other sheaves. The bodies of all believers will lay aside mortality and they will become partakers of that same immortality, following Jesus Christ, as we read in Colossians 1:18: ***“He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.”***

Just as all people have become sinners through the disobedience of Adam, so all people have been made righteous through the obedience of the one man Jesus.

“Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.”

When Christ comes suddenly, on the last Day, to judge the living and the dead, then is the end. His return for the final judgment means the conclusion of the world's history, when he delivers up the kingdom to his God and Father, when he has put down and abolished every rule and every authority and every power. Christ is now at this very moment the King in the Kingdom of Power and in the Kingdom of Grace. And he is performing the duties of this office continually. He is adding further souls to his Kingdom of Grace. He is making intercession for those who have been admitted under his rule by faith. This work of mercy continues to the last day, when the history of this present world will come to an end, when the last believer will be added to the number fixed by the Lord. By that time he will also abolish all the forces of evil that oppose his work of grace, no matter how firmly fixed their rule, no matter how extensive their authority, no matter how great their power seems to be at the present time. And then Christ will lay at his Father's feet the kingdom. That will be the end of the Kingdom of Grace, since the Church Militant on that day will be changed to the Church Triumphant, and the Kingdom of Glory will have its beginning. This is not the end of Christ's rule, but the inauguration of God's eternal kingdom. As the victorious Prince of Life he lays the spoils, the power and reign of all his enemies at the feet of the Father, and then proceeds with the Father to reign to all eternity, in perfect unity of essence of the Godhead. Then will be fulfilled the words of Psalm 110:1: ***“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”*** With Luther we rejoice that Jesus Christ “has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” Amen.