

NEVERTHELESS
I Corinthians 15:3-27a
Easter 4/21/2019

It has been a hard winter, hasn't it? I think of that line in C.S. Lewis' book *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Lucy enters the land of Narnia, and it's always winter there.

Always snowing. Always cold. Always frozen. Always . . . says Lewis. Always winter, and never *Christmas*. Imagine! Winter with no Christmas?! Imagine! Winter and no Spring?

And Spring without any Easter? Horrible, right?

Now, says Paul, that's what life would be like, if Christ had not been raised from the dead on Easter. Always Winter, and never Spring. Always dying, and nothing beyond. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile!" he says. You're stuck in the Winter. You're always surrounded by death and dying. You're to be pitied, says Paul. Pitiful people. Winter people. People of no hope.

And then came Easter morning! And Jesus came back to them! He was God's gift to them. Something they'd lost was found. Something they'd missed was returned. Someone they'd loved was restored. And the winter was over! The time for singing had come!

Now, says Paul, one thing more. He says that when Jesus came back to them that morning, they received even more than they'd lost. What did they receive on Easter?

Well, for one thing, they received themselves. Who was Peter? Who was Matthew? Who were John, and Mary, and Thomas? They were the friends of Jesus. And when Jesus died that Friday, something inside of them died as well.

A newspaper editor once asked his daughter to write a feature article. A story about David Livingstone, the great missionary to Africa. But this editor had left his

religion behind him, long ago. He wanted a story of the *man* Livingstone, the *humanitarian*, the *doer-of-good*. He didn't want it colored by all that missionary stuff. "Leave his Christianity out of it," he told his daughter. "Don't mention his religion." And she set off to research her assignment. But she came back, almost at once. "It's impossible!" she said. "It can't be done! The man and his faith are one and the same thing. You can't speak of Livingstone without speaking of his Christ."

And that's the way it was with the disciples of Jesus. He was their life, their identity. They had left everything and followed him. He taught them how to think, how to feel, how to understand God. One time, when his words seemed particularly difficult, the gospel writers tell us that many in the crowds turned away. They decided to go home. This man had no more for them. And then, says John, Jesus turned to them as well, to the Twelve, and He said to them, "Well, are you going to leave me too?" And this is what they said:

"Lord," they said, "to whom shall we go? You alone have the words of eternal life." Their identity was bound up in Him. You can't understand them (these disciples) apart from Him. The Twelve without Jesus? You just can't *think* it.

Author, Aleksy Peshkov, greatly, GREATLY indebted to Leo Tolstoy, said of him, "So long as that man lives, I won't be an orphan on earth."

And that's what the disciples felt about Jesus. So long as that man lives, we won't be orphans on earth. And then he died. And they became orphans. Do you know what "orphans" means? It means "bereft," "alone," "without family or resources or an inheritance." And Paul sees it so clearly here. If there's no Easter, if Christ is not raised, if you've really lost him, then your gospel is void and futile, and so is your faith, and your life means *nothing*. You're an orphan.

But then, says Paul, it started to happen. It started with Mary at the tomb. He spoke her name. "Mary!" he said. And she knew He was alive! And then it was John and Peter at the empty grave. And then the disciples hiding in the Upper Room; and

the two on the way to Emmaus; and the gathering of 500 souls; and James; and the Twelve again And then, says Paul, “He came to me, too! I say Him! I knew He had died. But then I saw Him. And nothing’s been the same since!”

You know, people can say what they want about these stories of the New Testament. I mean, you can try to read around them, and behind them, and underneath them, and you can read the resurrection right away, pure fiction, if you want. But the best evidence for the resurrection isn’t what the New Testament says about it, not even the description of the empty tomb. The best evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is that the New Testament itself exists. It came out of their experience of a living Lord who not gave them Himself, but who gave them back *themselves*, so that they had a mission, and the disciples became apostles and martyrs and heroes and saints! They found themselves in the gift of Himself that Easter morning.

Well, that’s the first thing: they received themselves back again. Here’s the second. When Jesus came back to them that Easter morning, he not only gave them back their own selves, but he also gave them back their dead. The ones they had lost. The ones they had put in other graves.

Sometimes people say that eternal life simply means that we live on in the memories of our children and friends. Never despair they’ll keep our memory alive! If this is all we hope for, we are most to be pitied.

A few years ago, John Timmerman, retired Professor of English at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, MI, wrote a little book about his life. He called it *Through a Glass Lightly*. And he says, near the end, “I am the only one who remembers my mother’s father,” he says. “It is illusion to believe that we (the perspective is now we, the dead ancestor) [it is illusion to believe] that we live on in the memory of our descendants. We die with their memories. The tiny marks we make on life erode before the lettings on our tombstones do; the wind and rain beat upon them, and they are gone.” And

he's right. There's no eternal life in memories that are passed on. They will fade away and die out, too.

But then comes Easter, says Paul. Then comes Jesus, back from the grave. And He speaks Mary's name, and she knows He's alive. And she knows that dear ones can never be lost again. *Jesus* gives them back to you. They are alive with Him in His resurrection. Your dear ones you've laid in their graves? They're not gone forever. And you can look at your friends here with you in these pews this morning, and you can look at your child, there in your arms or in the pew next to you, and you can look at your spouse, and you can say, "Easter just means that I can love you forever and forever."

And that brings us to the third thing about this morning. Easter gives us back to ourselves. And Easter gives us back those whom we've loved and lost, if not in this moment, then in the eternity to come. And Easter gives us back to our God.

You see, sometimes we think of God too lightly. Sometimes we think of God as all lightness and laughter, all peace and bliss. And then our world turns dark on us, and we see the pain, and we feel the grief, and we experience the terror, and we say, "Where can God be in all of this" and we lose our faith.

But the message of Easter is not that there is no death. The message of Easter is not that God won't let you die. The message of Easter is not that faith is easy. The message of Easter is this: that above the great storms of your soul, one word is etched forever in the heavens. And the word is ***nevertheless***.

Henrik Ibsen, the Norwegian playwright, was a great debater. He would listen to all the arguments, and then he would counter with his own thought. And they say that he would begin, time and again, with this little word: *nevertheless*. I heard what you said; I know what you're trying to argue; I understand your reasoning. Nevertheless . . . And then would come his new insight.

When Ibsen lay dying, that was his last word! Can you see it? Here's the man on his bed, feeble and pale. He's debating with death, and death's got all the winning arguments. And death makes its final case, and then the judges offer Ibsen one last rebuttal. And this is what he says. One little word: *Nevertheless!* Powerful, isn't it?

Now, get this straight, because it's the most important thing I'll say to you this morning. Easter is not great for us because it makes us feel good, with all the singing and sunshine and flowers. Easter is great for us because it is God's great NEVERTHELESS! And you and I need that NEVERTHELESS today. Is it in your career? Or your marriage? Or your relationship with your children? Or your parents . . .?

Paul says NEVERTHELESS here. He says that I'm the least in the church. I shouldn't even be called an apostle. He says, you what comes to haunt me in the wee small hours of the night? It's this: that I persecuted the church! I've got blood on my hands I wanted them dead! And then Jesus came to Paul and Jesus said to Paul, "*Nevertheless!*" And Paul said, By the grace of God, I am what I am. Not what I should be. Not what I could be. Not what I ought to be.

But Christ came to me from Easter, and he loved me to life. And over the failures, the misconceptions, the tragedies of my life, God has set up His great word of blessing: NEVERTHELESS!

And this is what we preach! He says. And this is what you believed! On Easter morning, Jesus gives us back ourselves. And Jesus gives us back our loved ones, lately died. And Jesus gives us back *Himself*, God's great NEVERTHELESS, shouted from heaven to earth! Amen.