"Are You Dying to See God?"

1 Corinthians 15:19-20

15 February Anno Domini 2004
Our Redeemer Lutheran Church of Emmett, Idaho
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Grace, mercy and peace to you, in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Dearly Beloved,

There is a philosophy of life that has echoed down through the centuries and is proclaimed in every age. It is based upon the assumption that this life that we live now is all that there is - that there is nothing after you die. This philosophy is expressed and heard in the writings of thinkers, the songs of humanity, and the commercials of the advertising world.

In many and various ways, the phrase, "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die" has been expressed. Roman poet, Horace, wrote "Carpe Diem" - "Seize the day." A song from the 1960s reminds those of us of that vain philosophy, expressed from that age of the Golden Oldies when the female vocalist sang the question according to this world's catechism, "Is That All There Is?", and then answered it, "If that's all there is, my friends, then let's keep dancing -- let's break out the booze and have a ball, if that's all there is." Commercials and advertisements tell us to live for the now and grab for all the gusto you can. "Live for the day," we hear and reply with, "It's all about ME, right?"

The common theme running across the nations and down through time, is based on the assumption that when we die, everything ends - that the body begins to dissolve into its basic elements, the spirit evaporates into the nether winds of this world, and the soul ceases to exist after the last heartbeat. Nothing and no one, according to this belief system, experiences any sort of afterlife. Neither heaven nor hell exist. It all just ends. As a result, we should simply enjoy this life that we live by indulging ourselves. Or, "Eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

We may be surprised to discover this possibility being offered in the Bible. The Apostle Paul writes to the people of God at Corinth: If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." If there is no Paradise, no heaven, no hell, no resurrection, then we might as well just live for today. That may surprise us until we realize that it is in a conditional statement ... a contrary-to-fact statement. Paul's words, in the famous 15th chapter of 1st Corinthians, focus on the teaching of the Resurrection ... a foundational doctrine of Christianity ... a truth sadly and tragically and cowardly denied by many who are called to be pastors and preachers.

Every day we are confronted with death and we are able to hear of with the ear, or to read of in the newspapers, or to be sent an email, the word of people who have died. Each day, when we are reminded of death and the departure of loved ones such as we hear last week with Pastor Hrachovina's mother, and as we will hear next week with ... well, with only God knows who ... we do well to hear the Good News of everlasting life and reaffirm the truth of the Easter Resurrection of the LORD Jesus and, consequently, our own resurrection. This morning we do so on the basis of the sermon text 1 Corinthians 15:19-20. Please listen to those two verses and ponder your answer to this
"Are You Dying to See God?"

If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Thus far the Word of the LORD our God.

First, we consider the word, IF. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. In this discussion of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, the IF is absolutely huge -- a balance upon which the hangs. If Christ has not been raised, then the message of Christianity is empty. Churches have no proclamation to make except, well, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." If Easter morning is a lie, then this congregation, Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, has no reason for existing. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then I have no words of comfort for you people today at all. If the Incarnate Son of God is still buried in a tomb, then the confession of sins that you have made was futile, as also would be the announcement of complete and total forgiveness that you heard this day.

Today you have proclaimed a confession of the Christian faith ... the Nicene Creed ... a statement of faith which includes the words, "I believe ... in Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God, ... Who was incarnate by the Holy Ghost, born of the virgin Mary and was made man; And was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, He suffered and was buried; ... And the third day He rose again." Then you confessed a foundational doctrine of the Christian faith in the confident words, "I look for the Resurrection of the dead and the Life of the world to come." However, If He did not rise again from the dead, then your faith is futile and we might just as well hang our heads in despair and depart from this sanctuary.

Paul summed up what the consequences are in our sermon text. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. Permit me to paraphrase that rather roughly.

"If, in this life that we Christians live on this earth that lasts some 80 years ... a few less for men ... a few more for women ... a life in which we have invested ourselves in believing and trusting the Incarnate Son of God as our Redeemer and Savior, ... if it is only for this life of strokes and phlegm, heart attacks and fever, cancer and car crashes, abortion and ebola, pall bearers and Parkinson's ... if it is only for this life that we have placed our hope in Christ, we Christians are the most miserable men and the most pitiful people and the most ridiculous bipods who ever walked the face of this earth. We might as well throw up our hands and join the others who encourage people to eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."

If Christ is not risen, then what silliness we are advocating. The height of such futility and folly for us Christians is when we ascend to our deathbeds and in the last hour inhaling our final breath while holding onto an illusion. A Christianity without a risen Christ and without the sure and certain hope of our own resurrection from the grave, whatever people may say praising Christianity's moral influence and lauding Christianity's good works, is the worst.

Second, we consider the word, BUT. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead. This is the "huge however" that makes all the
difference in this world as well as in the next world; the "marvelous however" that causes everything to turn completely around. Christ is risen! The Son of God, Who died the sin-atoning death on Calvary's cross for all people, is alive! The tomb, where they placed the lifeless Body of the LORD God Almighty, is empty! This is objective truth, dear people ... it is historical fact ... and whether it is believed or not, it is true. BUT now Christ is risen from the dead.

But Christ is risen and we are no longer in our sins. His death paid the eternal price for every one of your sins, everyone of mine, as well as each and every human being who ever has, who ever is now, and/or who ever will live. The crucified Christ's Resurrection from the dead demonstrates the victory over death, the conquering of the grave and demonstrates that our faith in the Holy Trinity is not futile. The Gospel of God, the Good News of Jesus, is that salvation is yours and mine by the grace of God through faith in His Son as our Redeemer. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the LORD. In other words, we ... that is ... you and I, end up dying to see God.

Christians pray the LORD's Prayer, including the petition requesting God to deliver us from evil ... "that our Father in heaven would deliver us from every evil of body and soul, ... and finally, when our last hour has come, grant us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this vale of tears to Himself in heaven." For each one of us ... day by day ... one at a time ... God answers such a prayer and we fall asleep in Christ.

But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Our resurrection from the dead is dependent upon Christ's Resurrection. What Jesus said in the Gospel of St. John is absolutely true. You remember the words. Inscribe them on your soul as you daily prepare for your own death.

O dear soul, your Savior Jesus said, "I am the Resurrection and the Life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Because He lives, you also, dear soul, shall live.

Job declared not only that he knew that his Redeemer lived, but that he, Job, would be raised from the dead and his eyes would behold the LORD. The third word is THEREFORE. As a result of Christ being risen, therefore we have hope ... not a hope-so hope, but a know-so hope. Therefore, we know that this life is not the end of existence, but rather, the prelude to eternity. Therefore the Christian may face the future knowing that God is there and has taken care of all things. Therefore, each of us may commend our bodies and souls and all things into the hands of the LORD ... and say in bold faith, "Lord, now lettest Thou, Thy servant depart in peace, according to Thy Word, for mine eyes have seen Thy Salvation which Thou hast prepared before the face of all people. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

The Apostle Paul wrote of this Spirit-wrought confidence in these beautiful words: I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Therefore, the message of the Church is Christ crucified and risen for you, and therefore, is one of inviting truth, and today you are being encouraged to consider it carefully.

If you are not a Christian, then please think carefully about all that you have seen and heard this day, as it has been told to you. Are you going to live with the philosophy of eating and drinking for
tomorrow you die? Or, will you abandon the manmade -isms of this world and take refuge in Jesus and His glorious cross and His sin-atoning wounds suffered on your behalf and for your eternal good? The Church of Jesus lifts high the cross and proclaims the message of peace and hope to the world, you included.

If you are already a Christian, then your call is to do what Christians have done throughout the centuries ... to remain faithful unto death ... to believe, trust, hold dearly, confess, and proclaim the Good News until you are called to be with the LORD in Paradise ... to hear and trust in the truth that you are forgiven of all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit and now called to remain steadfast in His Word and work. Indeed, if in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

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