“Jesus the Victor”
Sermon Series on the Personalities of the Passion
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
April 20, 2014
(1Cor. 15:3-8,12-14,20-26,54b-57)

Introduction.

We’ve just come through March Madness, and if you’re a basketball fan like I am you’re probably going through a little withdrawal now that the NCAA tournament is over. Sure, the NBA playoffs are beginning, but it’s nothing like March Madness. My brackets were busted pretty early on, and my favorite teams were knocked out in the first or second rounds. But it was still an exciting tournament to watch. I always like to see if some Cinderella team can come through and win it all, and I was hoping the Wichita State Shockers would pull off the upset. But it wasn’t to be this year.

One of my favorite movies of all time is Hoosiers. It was inspired by the true story of a small-town high school basketball team in Indiana that won the state championship in 1954. Gene Hackman stars as Norman Dale, a new coach with a spotty past that leads this group of unlikely heroes from tiny Hickory, Indiana, to win it all in the championship game in Indianapolis. Jimmy Chitwood hits the winning shot as the clock expires, and everyone goes crazy. It’s such a great film.

There is something in all of us that loves it when the underdog comes out on top, when they overcome the odds and win the victory. That’s one of the reasons the story of the crucifixion and the resurrection is so compelling…and so unexpected. Who could have possibly imagined that God would accomplish His victory in Christ by means of this amazing miracle?

I. The Story of the Resurrection.

Paul begins his passage about the victory of Christ in 1 Corinthians 15 by writing about the people who actually witnessed the resurrection. He writes, “For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred at the same time. Then He appeared to James, to all the apostles, and last of all He appeared to me…” (1Cor. 15:3-8).

In this passage Paul cites the early Christian tradition which he learned from others, and he presents the heart of the gospel. In Paul's list of the appearances of the risen Christ we see a marvelous display of grace and mercy. First, we’re told that Jesus appeared to Peter. It’s amazing that one of the first appearances of the risen Lord was to the disciple who had denied Jesus three times and abandoned Christ in His most critical hour of need. This offers hope to anyone who has ever denied the Lord in their life. Forgiveness is offered by the risen Christ to Peter, so there is room in the kingdom of God for those of us who have blown it and denied the Lord.
We also see in the list that Jesus appeared to His half-brother James. The gospels tell us that Jesus’ own family didn’t understand Him when He was alive and that on at least one occasion they came to take Jesus home, because they thought He was out of His mind (Mk. 3:21). In addition, we read in the gospel of John that Jesus’ brothers didn’t believe in Him (Jn. 7:5). Can you blame them? I mean, what would it have been like to grow up as the brother of the Son of God?! I wonder if Mary ever said to James, "Why can't you be like your older brother, Jesus? He’s so perfect and always does the right thing." Talk about growing up in the shadow of a superstar sibling! It would have been easy to be resentful of your older brother, if you were James.

Here we see once again the amazing love and grace of God reaching beyond human jealousy and hostility and even doubt to bring forgiveness and faith. Jesus came to bring salvation to someone who thought He was crazy and doubted His claim to the Son of God. This gives hope to anyone who has ever doubted the Lord. There is room in the kingdom of God for those of us who struggle with doubt.

We also read in this passage that the risen Christ appeared to the apostle Paul. He refers to himself as one who was abnormally, or untimely, born. In other words, Paul didn’t have the opportunity to see Jesus during His earthly life but only encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. We read about this in Acts 9. Paul was on his way to arrest Christians and extradite them back to Jerusalem for trial and judgment, but on his way he was knocked off his horse by a blinding light, and the risen Jesus addressed Paul personally and asked him why he was persecuting the Lord.

It was the turning point of his life, and Paul would never be the same again. The man who had formerly persecuted the church became the primary architect of the theology and mission of the Christian faith. He who once opposed the gospel now became its champion. This offers hope to anyone who has ever rebelled against God. There’s room in the kingdom even for those of us who are rebels.

In these three witnesses to the resurrection, we see God's grace given to a denier, a doubter, and a rebel - Peter, James, and Paul. This passage should give hope to anyone who wonders if God can rescue them. None of us can fall so far that the grace of God cannot reach us right where we are.

**II. The Victory of the Resurrection.**

The apostle goes on to explain the victory Jesus won, and he writes, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep…. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive…. Then the end will come when He hands over the kingdom to God the Father as He has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death….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 sting of death
is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Cor. 15:20-26,54b-57).

In this passage we see that in the resurrection Jesus actually won three victories. It talks about His victory over sin, His victory over the devil, and His victory over death. This was Jesus’ ultimate trifecta! It was through the death and resurrection of Jesus that He overcame our sin. Just as in Adam all of us have been infected with the spiritual disease of original sin, so in Christ all of us can be forgiven because of His shed blood on the cross. Jesus lived the life we could never live and He died the death we deserved to die so you and I could be forgiven and have our relationship with God restored.

Jesus also won a victory over the devil. Paul writes about the way in which Christ destroyed the dominion of evil in this world and put all His enemies under His feet when He rose from the grave. It’s an image of conquest, and this conquest includes the devil. While it is true that Satan still has power in this world and evil affects us in many ways, it is a limited power the devil has, and evil will never have the last word. Satan is an angry dog on a leash, and he can only go so far. His end is sure, and his time is coming. The outcome is not in question, because Christ has won the victory.

In his classic book Paradise Lost, John Milton describes the fall of Satan from heaven with his host of rebel angels, and the author depicts this as a great war lasting three days. The first two days are waged solely between Satan and his demons and the angels under the command of the Archangel Michael. But on the third day, God the Father sends His Son in glorious power to do single handed combat with all the demonic host.

The following is a brief excerpt from the scene: "'Stand still in bright array, you Saints; and stand here, You armed angels; today you shall rest from the battle....To Me their doom the Father has assigned, that they may have their wish, to contend with Me in battle and prove who is the stronger.' So spoke the Son of God. And His countenance turned into terror, too severe to behold, and full of wrath that was focused on His enemies. They were astonished, and lost all their resistance, all their courage; and they dropped their idle weapons. All their strength left them drained, exhausted, spiritless, defeated, and fallen. Yet the Son did not put forth even half His strength in the effort."

There was one more victory Paul mentions, and it’s Jesus’ victory over death. We’re told in Scripture that the destruction of death will occur at the end of time when the Lord returns, and at the great white throne judgment death and Hades will be thrown into a lake of fire (Rev. 20:5-14). Death and decay will be no more, and we will enjoy eternal life with God forever. Therefore, with bold confidence Paul asks, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” Christ has overcome even this in His resurrection.
My mother, who we affectionately called the General when she was alive (she liked the nickname!), went on to be with the Lord nine years ago. One of the things that amazed me about my mother was her readiness to go to heaven in the latter years of her life. She had an unshakable faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and she wasn’t afraid of the future. She was ready to meet her Maker, and she made it clear that when her time came, she didn’t want any heroics to try to bring her back. She looked forward to heaven and the joy that will be hers for all eternity. How could my mother be so hopeful of the future? How could she be so unafraid? It’s because she believed with all her heart in the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, and she also believed that He will bring about her own resurrection one day.

The gospel of John says that when Jesus hung on the cross between heaven and earth, at the end of his long ordeal He said, “‘It is finished.’ And with that, He bowed His head and gave up His spirit” (Jn. 19:30). The phrase “It is finished” is a translation of one Greek word – tetelestai. Tetelestai is an interesting word. It doesn’t denote a mild whimper, but rather it’s the victor’s shout when the warrior has conquered his enemy. It’s the statement of a person who has completed a task. It’s the cry of an individual who has won in the struggle, and it’s what someone says when they have solved the problem. Jesus died a conqueror and a victor with a shout of triumph, for the work God sent Him into the world to do had been accomplished.

III. The Victory Is Already and Not Yet.

In his book Christ and Time Swiss scholar Oscar Cullmann says that the victory of Christ is both already and not yet, and he likens it to the correlation of D-Day to V-Day. Those of you who lived through World War II or have studied it will recall that in the spring of 1944 the allies planned for the invasion of Normandy under the leadership of Generals Eisenhower and Montgomery. The plan called for the American and British armies to invade the Normandy shore targeting Utah Beach, Omaha Beach, Juno Beach, and Sword Beach. Naval transports, amphibious landings, and air
support complemented the 5,000 ships and 156,000 men which comprised the invasion fleet. D-Day was designed as the day of invasion, and at 6:30 a.m. June 6th, allied troops touched down on Omaha and Utah beaches.

That was the beginning of the end for Germany. Historians of the war indicate that D-Day was the turning point of the war, and in a real sense victory was decided that day. The outcome of the war was never in question from that point onward, but the official victory didn’t take place until V-Day on May 7, 1945. And there was a good deal of mopping up to do. The staggering fact of the war is that there were more American lives lost in the 11 months between those 2 days that in all the war before. When it was realized that defeat was coming, the enemy dug in, and it was a bloody 11 months. But after D-Day, the outcome of the war was never in question.

For us as followers of Jesus, the resurrection of Christ was D-Day, and His return, the Second Coming, will be V-Day. And you and I are living in between those two dates. Do you see the strong spiritual correlation here between D-Day and V-Day? Already Satan has been dealt the decisive blow when Jesus rose from the dead. Already victory has been assured because of Christ’s work upon the cross and in His resurrection from the grave. Already you and I can taste the first fruits of our salvation and experience the power of God's Holy Spirit. We can know victory over sin in this life, and we can see God transform our lives as we are brought more and more in conformity with the image of His Son, our Savior, even Jesus Christ.

D-Day has already taken place for us as Christians with the resurrection of Jesus, but we yet await V-Day when Jesus will come again. The decisive blow has been dealt, but there is still a lot of mopping up to do. The battle continues, the enemy is frightened, and we’ve got a lot of work ahead of us. That’s why Jesus invites us to join Him on His mission of love to a lost and broken world. Hold fast in the battle. Don’t grow weary in the fight. Victory is assured. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Conclusion.

Tim Keller writes¹ that every Easter he thinks of Joni Eareckson Tada. She’s the woman who was injured in a diving accident when she was 17-years-old, and ever since then she’s been a quadriplegic, paralyzed from the neck down. While Joni was still trying to come to terms with this horrible accident, she would go to church in her wheelchair.

The problem with being in a wheelchair, she found, was that every Sunday at a certain point in her church’s liturgy, the priest called for everyone to kneel, which drove home the fact that she was stuck in a wheelchair. Once she was at a convention in which the speaker urged people to get down on their knees and pray. Everyone did except Joni. “With everyone kneeling, I certainly stood out,” she said. “And I couldn’t stop the tears.”

But she wasn’t crying because of self-pity. She was crying because the sight of hundreds of people on their knees before God was so beautiful to her – “a picture of heaven,” she said. And then she continued to weep at another thought. She writes:

“\textit{Sitting there, I was reminded that in heaven I will be free to jump up, dance, kick, and do aerobics. And...sometime before the guests are called to the banquet table at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, the first thing I plan to do on resurrected legs is to drop on grateful, glorified knees. I will quietly kneel at the feet of Jesus.”}
“I, with shriveled, bent fingers, atrophied muscles, gnarled knees, and no feeling from the shoulders down, will one day have a new body, light, bright, and clothed in righteousness – powerful and dazzling. Can you imagine the hope that the resurrection gives to someone who is spinal cord-injured like me?”

Only in the gospel of Jesus Christ do people find such enormous hope to live. Only the resurrection promises us not just new minds and hearts, but also new bodies. If you can’t dance and wish you could, in the resurrection you’ll be able to dance beautifully. If you’re lonely and wish you had someone to be with, in the resurrection you’ll experience perfect love. If you’re empty and tired and broken, in the resurrection you’ll be fully restored, and you’ll find all the rest you need. That’s what is in store for us in the victory of the resurrection.

This world is not the only one there is. It’s only a prelude to an even greater world to come. There we will be free from all the pain and brokenness of this life. Therefore, we can be brave and take risks in this one. We can face the worst thing that can happen to us, even life in a wheelchair, with joy and hope. You see, the victory of the resurrection means that we can look forward with hope to the day when our suffering will be over. Until then, we hope and we do His work, because Jesus has won the victory and He conquered the grave.

That’s the message and the hope of Easter.

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1 Tim Keller, *King’s Cross*, p. 222f.