

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on 1 Corinthians 15:20-34 on April 19, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Easter Impact
Today's Focus: The Final Stomp

"The Final Stomp On All That Frustrates"

When I was a little boy about 5 years old I once thought it would be a good idea to play with fire. I was sitting alone at the kitchen table because I refused to eat my peas. Everyone had gone into the living room except me. I had to finish my cold, mushy, green peas. But instead I looked at the candle sitting in front of me in the middle of the table and I thought, "I wonder if I could put that out with my napkin." It turns out that wasn't such a brilliant idea. Before I knew what to do next, the napkin in my hand started on fire. So I threw it on the carpeted floor. You can guess what happened next. The carpet started on fire. And I felt helpless and scared. I imagined the whole house going up in flames. So I screamed for my dad, "Help, fire!" And he sprang off the couch, came into the dining room, and you know what he did? He stomped it out right under his feet.

Well today as we continue our study of 1 Corinthians 15 we're going to talk about how death is kind of like that fire. Our sermon text today actually calls death, "The final enemy." It's kind of scary. Once set loose it now consumes. It comes after all of us everywhere. It doesn't care whether you're rich or poor. It doesn't set up an appointment to ask you about your retirement plans. And deep down we know it's just not the way things are supposed to be. It causes grief and frustration. Even in the bright light and joy of Easter, the dark, gloomy shadows of the grave still loom somewhere in the future for us all.

And have you been following the news here in Milwaukee this year? There have been almost 50 murders already this year. That's up from about 15 at this same time last year. Three times as many! Little children in some cases, teenagers, grownups. Slain. Solemn press conferences are called after the fact. Politicians and citizens both call for changes. There are no simple solutions. Same old story. Death seems to rule on the streets, cold blooded, ruling like an unpredictable tyrant. Is there any hope in this gloomy world?

Well here's what the Apostle Paul shares with us today as we continue our study of 1 Corinthians 15. Like my dad stomped on that fire that I caused—putting it out, so one day Jesus Christ will come back to stomp out all that causes frustration—to stomp on that final enemy, death itself.

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

What's he talking about here? Let me explain. With the broad stroke of his inspired pen, the Apostle Paul takes us all the way back to the time of Adam—the first human being God created. Of course in the beginning, Adam lived in a place that was nothing less than Paradise. The Garden of Eden. It was perfect.

There was no sin. So you understand what this means? There was no such thing as getting sick, no such thing as a homicide, no such thing as death or decay in all creation. But the devil tricked Adam and his wife Eve into thinking, “Yeah we’ve got it pretty good, but if we disobey God then maybe we’ll have it even better,” except what they discovered wasn’t anything better at all. Instead it was death which had piggybacked into this world on the back of sin. Ever since, death has reigned like a cruel tyrant. The continuous fact is that ever since the Fall into Sin in Adam’s day, people have been dying. We too are in the process of dying because we are connected to Adam. We inherited a faulty nature from our parents right along with our DNA. This is the real reason why people die. It’s frustratingly so yet it’s because of sin.

But here’s what God’s Word says: We who believe in Jesus Christ will be made alive because we are also connected to him who has conquered death! *Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.* ²¹ *For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.* ²² *For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.* ²³ *But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.* We will be made alive! Did you catch that?

I told you last week I’d explain a little more about this word we hear a couple times—*firstfruits*. Let me ask you this. Any of you have tulips in your yard? We do. And they’re just starting to come up by us. Ours are in the front yard which is on the north side of the house so it takes a little longer than everyone else’s that get full sun. But each spring I look forward to that day when I see that first green leaf from the tulip bulb shoot up from the ground. Because what is that a sign of? More are soon to come!

That’s the big idea behind the *firstfruits*. The first tulip to peak out from the winter ground is a sure sign that the rest will come up and bloom in due time. You see in the Old Testament, *firstfruits* was an offering that the people were to give at harvest time. They were to take the first part of their crops to come up and offer it up to the LORD. It was an offering that therefore required trust that God would provide more to come. It was a way God was teaching his people, “You give me the first and the best, and I will supply the rest.” In other words God was teaching the people to trust, “More is a’coming!”

So you get what Paul is saying? Right now as we look around at the world, it seems like sin and death are winning a lot of times. In addition to the homicides in Milwaukee perhaps you’ve felt overwhelmed by all the reports coming in from around the world of Christians being killed for their faith—many living in the very cradle of Christianity where the message of Christ first rang out. And it’s hard to watch. It seems scary and kind of hopeless, doesn’t it? And what can you or I do to stop it besides pray? That’s how I felt as a little boy in the dining room watching carpet burn.

But you remember how that story ended? My dad came and stomped out the fire. You see friends, what God wants us to know here in this section of 1 Corinthians 15 is this: the impact of Easter isn’t over yet! The end goal is yet to come. Jesus Christ is the firstfruits from the dead who guarantees that the grave will not be the final resting place for those who believe in him. So death will not get the last laugh in the end. Evil will not prevail in the end because Jesus Christ, our risen Savior, is coming back. And when he returns on the Last Day, he will put his foot down once and for all. He’s coming to stomp out all that

frustrates. He's coming to stomp out all who murder. He's coming to stomp out death itself. And this will happen at the resurrection on the Last Day when he raises up our dead, lifeless bodies and glories them for eternal life never to die or decay again. This is the goal towards which all history is heading. Christ has won the victory through his death and resurrection. He is ruling over all things for the ultimate, eternal good of his church. Right now we see it with eyes of faith. But one day we will shall see it as it really is. More about all this next week!

²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For he "has put everything under his feet."^[a] Now when it says that "everything" has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸ When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

²⁹ Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them? ³⁰ And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? ³¹ I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. ³² If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised,

*"Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die."^[b]*

³³ Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."^[c] ³⁴ Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.

You know I never once thought I'd preach on this strange verse about baptisms for the dead but I'm going to do it today...if you want me to that is. You want me to tell you what I think this means? Ok, so let's understand Paul's line of thought. If death is simply the end and there is no resurrection from the dead, no life after death...Paul's saying it would be really pointless then for anyone to be baptized for the dead. Now the word in Greek "for" often has the idea of "on behalf of" or "with a view toward" / "concerning". This is in fact how the ESV translation of the Bible handles the verse. It says, "*What do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?*"

So here's what I think this means taking Paul's words in the best light. Perhaps imagine it in this way. An uncle who is a Christian is on his deathbed. His nephew comes to visit him as he's dying. The uncle tells his nephew who has not been baptized, "My dear nephew, I am soon going to die. But I want you to know that I will not remain dead forever. Because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and my baptism which connects me to Him through faith, I will live. My nephew, I desire the same for you." Then he dies. One day then that nephew goes about being baptized "for his uncle" / "on behalf of his uncle" / "with a view towards" his uncle because he too desires the blessings that Christ's resurrection gives through Baptism.

You see, friends, the resurrection of Jesus Christ has a profound impact when it comes to how we can face death. In this way already death has lost its power, its authority, its ability to frustrate. Christ has rendered it inoperable through the preaching of the gospel. I have seen it too being with people as they're dying in hospice. The gospel message of Jesus Christ gives people peace and a supernatural strength. In this way death is losing its power already through the Gospel in the lives of believers. It sets us free to face the future. Like the song we sang here on Easter says, "Because He lives, I can face tomorrow."

To that Paul would've said, Amen! And that's why Paul says he faced danger and death daily. Why? So he could share the message of the Gospel with others. Nothing was as important to him as communicating the one message that can deliver people from eternal death.

Maybe that's why he closes this section with what is a very stern warning about sin. ³³ *Do not be misled: "Bad company corrupts good character."* ³⁴ *Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.*

You get what Paul's saying? If death is the end, and this life is all there is, then the only point to life now is basically "Eat, drink, party." You might as well live the spring-break-in-Cancun lifestyle; it's at least as valid as any other in that case. And a lot of people do, don't they? That's one thing our American culture has in common with the Corinthian culture. Eat, drink, and party-hearty because tomorrow we die and that's it. That's the world's motto. And maybe that describes your outlook on life right now and you need to take these words of God to heart. *Come back to your sense as you ought, and stop sinning.* Because if there is a resurrection from the dead (and Paul's point is that there is!), then friends, we have a higher and greater and more eternally significant purpose for living than just, "Eat, drink, party." We have an entirely different outlook on life itself. We don't want to be shaped and influenced by the world. We want to influence it with message of a Savior who has delivered us from the power of sin, death, and hell. To live here on earth like this we need a proper perspective of eternity. Christ died for our sins. He rose from the dead. Christ is coming back to raise us up also to live forever. And when he comes, he will stomp out all that frustrates. That's why Easter has an impact not just on how we face death, but how we live life right now. Amen.