

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on April 12, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb on 1 Corinthians 15:12-20.

Series: Easter Impact
Today's Focus: Signed, Sealed, and Delivered

“Easter Guarantees the Only Certain Celebration”



Monday night I got to attend the NCAA Men's Basketball National Championship game in Indianapolis. It was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to cheer on my favorite Wisconsin Badgers team. When we arrived in Indianapolis this was the sign that greeted us everywhere: The Road Ends Here {pic}. Unfortunately the road ended in a crushing loss for the Badgers. And even though at least 2/3 of the 71,000 fans in attendance were wearing Wisconsin red, it was blue streamers shooting out of the cannons at the end of the game. The Duke fans were the ones celebrating. The Badgers fans were in shock. After a great season, what could you say? I think I just stood there like this (arms crossed) for 10 minutes. The Duke players got their one shining moment. They were the ones celebrating while we Badger fans were left commiserating.

Can you imagine what it would be like to come to the end of life (instead of a basketball season) and find that instead of a celebration there was only the agony of defeat? At least with basketball you can always hope there will be another special run—like if you're a player (I'm talking about you Sam Dekker!) you could come back for another year—although if you're a fan you might have to wait another 74 years to see another championship! Yet when it comes to the end of life here on earth, when the final buzzer of your life sounds, you don't get a second chance. There is no next season. Only eternity awaits. Heaven or hell. Celebration or suffering. Can you even imagine coming up short of the celebration? There will be no comfort in thinking, “Well at least I got to enjoy lots of nice things.” Or, “At least I did it my way.” Or, “At least I had as much fun as I could while it lasted.”

This is exactly what our sermon text today highlights. Friends, how important is Easter? Today we're going to see as we continue studying 1 Corinthians 15 that Easter is the main event, like the National Championship Game. Because as we'll see, faith in Jesus Christ isn't some crutch to just help people cope with loss and the challenges of life. It's the source of all our hope itself. What we're going to see is that **Easter guarantees the only certain celebration.**

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.

¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*



Earlier I showed you a picture: The Road Ends Here. Well while walking to Lucas Oil Stadium there was another sign I got a picture of: The Road to Heaven Begins Here {pic}. This was the sign outside a Catholic church on one of the main streets near the stadium. I give them credit for their creative marketing. Their doors were also wide open. But that begs the question, Where does the road to heaven begin? By going to church? By trying hard to be a good person? By starting to pray or trying to make amends for your past sins? Well not exactly. It's not as if there's anything wrong with any of those things in and of themselves but here's the problem. The Road to Heaven does not start with anything in ourselves. There is no hope in going to heaven if the road there is based on anything we do. This is what the Apostle Paul is teaching us in these verses today.

You see, if the road to heaven is based on your efforts you'd need a perfect record. I'm not talking something *close*—like 38-1. You'd need to beat every opponent—every prejudiced thought, every temptation to say something mean, every time you were tempted to disregard any of God's words in the Bible, any time you were tempted to sleep in instead of coming to church. You'd need an undefeated run all the way through the single elimination tournament of life to win that grand championship trophy.

Can you imagine if that was the road to heaven—that you had to go through life undefeated against the Devil? Never losing a single battle to temptation? Never succumbing to sinful temptations not even once? I mean any of you ever wonder whether your prayers are heard by God in a moment of weakness? You'd be out of the game for the sin of doubt. Any of you ever let your eyes linger too long on someone who is not your husband or wife? You'd be out of the game for the sin of lust. Ever smudge the truth just a little bit to make someone else look bad so you could look good? Out of the game for lying. Ever play with the numbers on your taxes just a little bit so the bottom line looks a little better? Out of the game for greed.

So the truth is none of us could maintain a perfect record in life that the road to heaven requires. That goes for pastors too. The Road to Heaven does not and cannot begin right here (inside). That's what makes Paul's statement so scary, ¹⁷ *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.* In other words...If Jesus *isn't* who he claimed to be, if the tomb was *not* empty, if he did *not* rise from the dead, then the road to heaven actually does begin and end with you and me on our own. Jesus is no Savior of the world much less a Savior of anybody *if* his bones lie buried in a tomb. Easter would have no lasting impact beyond being a happy myth believed by a few delusional people. And the worst part is that the road to heaven would be a hopeless journey. Might as well then just live however you want, believe whatever you want, do whatever you want. ¹⁷ *And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*

²⁰ *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

In other words, what we could never do on our own, Jesus could. He did! He lived without ever giving in to sin. He won the victory over every temptation common to humanity. And by rising from the dead on that first Easter morning, Jesus thereby guaranteed one shining moment for us all. Why? Because Easter impacts

us through the forgiveness of sins. This is important, friends. The empty tomb of Jesus Christ guarantees that your sins are gone. All of them. Jesus took them away on the cross upon himself. And on Easter, God the Father shows he took them away from Jesus because he accepted the sacrifice Jesus made for us all. Easter is proof that your sin debt and mine has been paid and that payment has been accepted. The sinless Son of God wrote a check with his holy, precious blood. He did this on our behalf. So one way to think of it is like this: on Good Friday—when Jesus died on the cross, he paid for the sins of the world in full. On Easter Sunday morning when Jesus rose from the dead—that’s when God handed us all the receipt. Jesus has reconciled us to God. God wants you to know this, to believe this, to trust in Jesus! All of you!

Going to church is important because here we get to listen to the message of our forgiveness in Christ through preaching and God’s Word. Here we celebrate the washing of rebirth and renewal in baptism. Here after studying God’s Word we receive the body and blood of our Savior in, with, and under the bread and wine of Holy Communion for the forgiveness of our sins. This forgiveness, so precious and so sweet, is what Easter guarantees and what these means of grace give.



Where does the road to heaven begin? It begins right here {pic: open tomb}—not with your hard work, but right here with the proof that Christ’s completed work was accepted for you. *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification* (Romans 4:25).

In other words, God has forgiven our sins. To have faith it simply to cling to this fact. It is objective, certain, and true. We had nothing to do with it. Jesus had everything to do with it. **Easter guarantees the only certain celebration.**

But one last thing...if this celebration is only for this life, that would be kind of an empty hope. Did you catch this? ¹⁹ *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.* But the good news is that our hope in Christ is bigger than just wishing for a bigger pile of money in the bank. It’s bigger than just wishing for a better job. It’s bigger even than beating sickness or finding happiness...or sometimes wishing that your team would beat Duke. Because even bigger and better than beating Duke...is beating death and the devil. And that’s what the empty tomb of Easter guarantees. The curse of sin is death. That’s been true ever since Adam and Eve first held their lifeless son Abel in their arms. But that’s why the proof that the curse of sin has been removed is that Jesus came back to life. He is the firstfruits of those who’ve fallen asleep in death. We’ll talk about that more next week.

In the meantime there is now nothing that can separate you from the promises of God—no trouble, hardship, or loss. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed! His resurrection proves he’s God and therefore we should take him completely at his word. So let God’s Word shape and guide your life. You know how after the championship game the winning team gets interviewed, especially the most outstanding player? So now we go to Jesus—the ultimate winner, our most outstanding Savior who shares his victory with us because we’re on his team, and the Bible is the interview by which we live our lives in hope. That’s why the Road to Heaven begins right here—with Jesus. Trust in Jesus and one day you won’t have to take my word for it. **Easter guarantees the only certain celebration**—your sins are gone and one day you will see God in heavenly glory. Amen!