

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
First Sunday after Easter, April 28, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 353, 319:1, 581, 370, 528:1-3.

Lessons: Psalm 110, 1 Corinthians 15:1-19. Luke 24:13-25.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 15:19-26.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What hope do you have that things – anything will get “better”? Things are terrible in the world. Crime is terrible. People are often just plain mean. The outlook for our nation and the world doesn’t look good. And maybe your personal life isn’t going so well, either. If you are going to look for hope, where would you look?

**“IF ONLY FOR THIS LIFE WE HAVE HOPE IN CHRIST,
WE ARE TO BE PITIED MORE THAN ALL MEN.”**

1. **IF** – a BIG if...
2. **Do we have any hope?**
3. **If the answer is “yes”, how do we have hope?**

Paul makes this comment about hope: *“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”* He talks about “hope in Christ”.

What kind of “hope” are we talking about? Paul is not using the word as when we say, “I hope to finish this job today” or “I hope it won’t rain.” The hope of which Paul speaks is not a fond wish, but a sure and certain confidence. It can be a sure and positive hope because it rests on God’s Word.

If – he proposes this condition, then goes on with “but”. This isn’t an “if ... then” conditional statement about something that must or will happen. This is an “if” statement that is immediately answered with “but”. This is the kind of statement that tells us ‘If you think this is true, it is not, and this is why’.

If it is only for this life – before we die – that we have hope from Christ and in Christ then we are really pitiful, miserable people.

In this chapter, Paul makes several “if” statements and that makes us think. He makes his first “if” in verse 12, as you heard in our Epistle lesson. *“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?”* Obviously, there were some people in Corinth who wanted to lead believers away from Jesus. Those were people who denied Jesus’ resurrection and who were trying to influence the Corinthian Christians that there is no resurrection from the dead. He repeats the “if” idea again in v. 14: *“And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless [in vain, empty] and so is your faith.”* Then he repeats the word “if” three more times before our sermon text and spirals down repeating attacks that have been made on Christianity, God, and on our faith. He makes the “If” very personal. *“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; in vain, useless, profitless, and you are still in your sins.”* *“If Christ has not been raised”,* your faith is futile, in vain, useless. *“If Christ has not been raised”,* you are still dead in your sins and you are without hope. Your sins have swallowed you up and devoured you, and you have no hope.

And now in our text, we read: if it is only for this life that we have Christ and hope in him, we become an object of pity more than any human. We are more miserable than any human. We will have nothing better than what now exists in our lives to look forward to. Others would feel pity for us, and think of us as miserable. In English, the word pity usually suggests that the person feeling pity is better off or in a superior position to the

person who is the object of pity. Paul says if Christ hasn't risen from the dead, we should be pitied "**more than all men**".

So he throws out the supposition, the idea, the theory, the fiction, the "fake news" that Christ has not been raised from the dead. But how do we know this is not fiction? He says "**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.**" That idea is critical to our Christian lives, both on earth and especially for eternity.

The argument has been raised by unbelievers that Christ has not "**been raised from the dead**". But this is not true. Christ has been raised and this chapter of the Bible has been called "the resurrection chapter". These verses especially assure us of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

How can we be sure that the idea of Christ being raised from the dead is not fiction? He says "**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.**" He asked "if" and then says "but"!

How can we be certain that this is true? He says "**But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.**" Indeed! Really! Truly! In our Epistle lesson Paul assured us that Christ "**appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.**" V. 5-8

Because Christ has been raised, you can have real hope in Christ. Paul calls Christ "**the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.**" Jesus is the first to be raised from the dead to live forever. Others in the Bible, that is, others in the history of mankind, were raised from the dead. Scripture lists eight other individuals and the fact that when Jesus died "**The tombs were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised; and coming out of the tombs after His resurrection they entered the holy city and appeared to many.**" Matthew 27:52-53 (NASB) But none of these humans are alive today, so they had to die an earthly death again. Jesus is the first to be raised from the dead to live forever.

Think about what "first fruits" means. If you have a garden or a fruit tree, you wait impatiently, sometimes anxiously, for the first fruit to be ripe. It tastes good because you have been waiting for it and it is better; some say the best of all, because you have been waiting for it to come! The firstfruit has a reputation of being "the best fruit".

When I think of first fruits, I'm reminded of Abel's gift to God. Although Abel was not a farmer, he brought the best part – the "**fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favor on Abel and his offering.**" Genesis 4:4 (NIV) When we think about that offering, we realize that even his offering of the best of the first born is prophetic of Christ. Jesus was the first born – actually, the "**only begotten Son**" John 3:16 (KJV) of the Father and he was also offered as a sacrifice to God in order to please God, as well as to pay for our sins.

And for the Christian, death is a "falling asleep". Jesus died. He, to use the euphemism of Holy Scripture, had "**fallen asleep**". What a beautiful way to think of the death of a Christian. That's why we pray for a peaceful end to our lives.

Then Paul reviews the whole history of sin and redemption. "**For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.**" We are reminded of the truth that "**the wages of sin is death.** Those words from Scripture are the Law of God that shows our sins and condemns us. "**But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.**" Romans 6:23 (NIV) That's the sweet Gospel that gives us a sure hope of life – everlasting life – after we die in this world. Hope!

Paul tells us about the wages, the fruit, the results of sin. Because a man had sinned, it was necessary that a man had to pay the price for sin. Death came to all because of the first sin. First of all, temporal, earthly death came to all. Paul repeats the horrible truth he told the Romans: "**Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned.**" Romans 5:12 (NIV) And then, immediately after that first death, comes everlasting punishment and eternal death – or, if you want to think about it in this way, eternal 'life' in hell – a 'living' in eternal torment which comes to everyone who does not believe in Jesus as his or her only Savior from sin.

But here we are reassured that resurrection comes from a man, Christ Jesus, true man as well as true God. He repeats it, and explains it again.

We see the past fact: Sin came into the world. We see the present fact just occurring recently, at the time this letter was written, that Christ was raised from the dead. And we see the future: ***“in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”***

Jesus rose from the dead and all humans who ever lived will rise on the last day. Then, Paul says, ***“the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after 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.”***

There will be death right up until the moment Christ comes to judge the living and the dead.

But all the dead will be raised. All who believed in Christ will be raised unto everlasting life. ***“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.’”*** Matthew 25:34 (NIV) But all who rejected and did not believe in him will be raised to be delivered to eternal torment. ***“Then [Jesus] will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”*** Matthew 25:41 (NIV) ***“Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.”*** Matthew 25:46 (NIV)

That will be the end of time, Judgment Day. At that time Christ will destroy ***“all dominion, authority and power”!*** He assured his followers with his resurrection and again before he ascended into heaven that ***“All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth.”*** Matt. 28:18 (KJV) ***“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”*** Matt. 28:18 (NIV) And he will destroy all other ***“dominion, authority and power”***.

This power of Jesus was also foretold in Psalm 110 when we read of David saying: ***“The LORD [that is, the LORD God,] says to my Lord [that is, Jesus Christ,]: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”*** Psalm 110:1 (NIV)

The joyous conclusion is that ***“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”*** When Christ comes again will be the end. No millennium, no 1000 years before the end of the world. At that moment death will be totally destroyed. We read in the book of Revelation: ***“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”*** Revelation 21:4 (NIV) In heaven there will be no more pain, no more anxiety, no more depression.

What marvelous pictures of the resurrection and its application to us! What grand words of comfort! What words of all-surpassing, eternal, great hope! ***“But each in his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.”***

While all this is sure and certain, it is, however, a promise for which full realization lies in the future. Paul writes to the Ephesians asking that the eyes of their hearts might be enlightened to see and comprehend it. ***“I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.”*** Ephesians 1:18-19 (NIV) An inheritance is not something earned or deserved. It's a gift; it's grace. And that's how God deals with his saints, that is, with the believers whom he has called, redeemed, and sealed with the Holy Spirit.

This hope and this inheritance both rest on a promise, and both lie in the future. In the letter to the Ephesians, too, Paul gives us the assurance that God can and will keep his promise. Paul prays that the eyes of their hearts may be opened so they might see God's ***“incomparably great power for us who believe.”*** Ephesians 1:19 Knowing about God's power is the basis for trusting that God can and will keep his word.

Our hope rests on what God has done in Christ. You have been told, not by a mere man, but by God, that ***“My hope is built on nothing less than Jesus’ blood and righteousness [so you can sing] On Christ the solid Rock, I stand; All other ground is sinking sand. “ (The Lutheran Hymnal 370:1) May we truly belong to him, not to ourselves, not to Satan, not to the world. Our hope in Christ is sure and certain because he rose from the dead. Amen.***