

Easter Sunday
April 4, 2021
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
1 Corinthians 15:19-20
Certain Hope for Uncertain Times

Dear Friends in Christ,

What do you have planned for this year? Maybe it is a year with big events and milestones and long planned trips. Or maybe it is year with little planned and you like it just the way it is, with no surprises. How certain are you that your planned big events or planned no events will happen as you expect? We can never be 100% certain that our plans will happen. All we can do is hope it doesn't storm during the outdoor wedding planned for the fall. We can hope international borders are open when we want to travel abroad. We can hope our loved one recovers from their sickness. We can hope our company has plenty of work to do. We can hope for many things in the world but almost none of them are certain hopes. We live in an uncertain world.

The uncertain times began not longer after the world was created by God. For a short time, the first humans lived in complete certainty. Adam and Eve did not have to worry about storms and dangerous weather. They did not have to worry about illness and disease and death was not even in their mind. Food was readily available and free. God loved them and they loved God. It was literally paradise. No worries. No uncertainties. But this only lasted a short time. I say a short time because before they had any children, the uncertain times began. They chose to rebel against God. They chose to trust the lies of the devil instead of the Lord who had given them a life without uncertainty. Ever since they sinned, this world is filled with all kinds of unpleasant uncertainty related to our health and life, our work and family, the nations of this world and the environment we live in.

But the Lord has not left us without hope. God gives us certain hope through the resurrection of Christ. Easter is a celebration of the certain hope God gives us now and forever through Christ. We consider two verses from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

1 Corinthians 15:19-20

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Now

Jesus made some wonderful promises to us in the four Gospels. In this world of uncertainty we need these promises to comfort and encourage us each day. Jesus said:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28). When the world around us and in our own homes is frantic and exhausting, Jesus promises rest. For he forgives our sins and lifts the burden of the law of God from us. He walks with us through life so we don't have to carry the burden of this uncertain world on our own. What a wonderful promise of rest!

Jesus also promised forgiveness of sins to those who repent. *"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."* (Luke 18:13-14). When our sins trouble us, we have the promise of Jesus that God is merciful to those who call on him for mercy. God justifies the sinner, that is, God declares sinners not guilty

for the sake of Jesus. What a wonderful promise of forgiveness!

Jesus promises that God hears our prayers and answers according to his will. *“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.”* (Luke 11:9–10). When life is uncertain, we go to the Lord in prayer with confidence that he is listening and that he has things under control. God will do what is best for us.

And as we wait, Jesus promises that God will take care of us. *“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. Life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds!”* (Luke 12:22–24). How much better life is when we do not have to worry about our daily needs. Jesus takes care of us.

Of course, Jesus knows that this world is far from perfect. He lived as one of us in a world that hated him. Therefore Jesus promises us that he is in control even when the world is against us. *“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”* (John 16:33).

And just one more wonderful promise from Jesus. This one tells us how long Jesus will be with us to forgive and comfort and provide and protect. *“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”* (Matthew 28:20). He is never going to leave us. When life is uncertain, Jesus does not abandon us. What wonderful promises!

But how certain are these promises? Can you count on Jesus to keep all of his promises for as long as you live on this earth? Listen to one more promise Jesus made. *“The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.”* (Mark 9:31). Jesus promised to rise from the dead. If he did not keep this promise then there is uncertainty surrounding all of his promises. For if Jesus was still in the grave, he was either a liar or he was powerless to overcome death. And if Jesus did not rise from the dead, we have no forgiveness, no provider, no one to listen to our prayers and Jesus would not be with us always.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead.

With this short sentence, Paul wipes away all uncertainties. The resurrection of Christ guarantees every promise of Christ is true. God gave us the Bible to give us certainty. He doesn't want us to go through life wondering if he loves us or if he cares for us or if he will forgive us. Through Christ's death and especially in his resurrection, we can be 100% certain. So let's take a moment to see how we know that Jesus really rose from the dead.

At the beginning of chapter 15 in 1 Corinthians, Paul tells us who Jesus appeared to after the resurrection: *“He 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.”* (1 Corinthians 15:5–8). Peter had denied knowing Jesus three times on Thursday and now he is convinced Jesus is alive on Sunday because he saw Jesus alive. The other disciples except for Thomas see Jesus alive Sunday evening. Thomas won't believe his friends until he sees and touches the marks of the nails and spear a week later. And if you won't believe any of the disciples, go ask one of the 500 who saw Jesus alive. Many of these people are still living when Paul writes. All you have to do is go ask. And then there is Paul

himself.

Jesus appeared to Paul when Paul was on his way to arrest and maybe even execute those who believed that Jesus had risen from the dead. Paul considered Jesus to be a false prophet and troublemaker for the Jews. Paul was trying to exterminate any remaining influence Jesus had after the crucifixion. But Paul encountered a very much alive Jesus on the road to Damascus. The risen Christ changed Paul from a persecutor to a proclaimer of the truth. Jesus has risen from the dead! This is the biblical truth and the historical truth. This is the truth that gives us certainty in all of Christ's promises to us now on earth and into eternity.

And Forever

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Karl Marx said that "religion is the opiate of the masses." He meant that religion is just something to keep people calm and sedated during the troubles of this life. Of course this would not be good for encouraging the revolutionary uprising of the masses against their rulers so Marx had to get rid of religion. But doesn't Paul say something similar here? *If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*

If Jesus is just a pain killer for the trouble of this life, if Jesus is just a way to feel better as we go through earthly life, then we are living a sad life. But Paul destroys that theory (along with Marx). *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

The resurrection of Christ gives us certainty about what comes after this life is over. When we fall asleep, a biblical way of talking about death, what will happen? The same thing that happened to Jesus when he fell asleep. For Jesus is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. When God's people planted a field with grapes or barley or any other crop, they would bring the first portion of their crop to the Lord as an offering. They gave the first harvest of grapes, the first of the barley, the first of the wheat to the Lord. God's people trusted that God would make the rest of their harvest bountiful to provide for their families. The firstfruits offerings to the Lord guaranteed the rest of the harvest.

So also with Jesus as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. Jesus died and was buried and then rose to life, never to die again. All who believe that Jesus died and rose for them are the rest of the harvest. Because Jesus rose to eternal life, so will all who believe in him. This is our certain hope because Jesus Christ is alive again.

Through Christ, our big plan for the future is being in paradise with Jesus forever. No bad weather will cancel this plan. The borders and gates of heaven are open to us through Christ. No sickness or disease will keep us from reaching this destination. This world will continue to be full of uncertainties. But we have certain hope through the resurrection of Christ for our lives now and forever.

Amen.