

“Jesus Wins!”

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 to be pitied more than all men. 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 his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him.

Monday night a new national champion will be crowned in NCAA Men’s Division 1 basketball. I was hoping that my favorite team, the University of Illinois, would not only make the final four, but would also win the championship. You see, everything was setting up perfectly. Every 16 years the University of Illinois has a team that is capable of winning a national title. The 1989 team made it to final four and lost in the semi-finals. The 2005 team made it to the championship game and lost. Do you sense the progression? The 2021 team was picked by many to win the national title. I had high hopes for this Illini team, but unfortunately my faith in them was futile as they lost in the second round of the tournament. As Wisconsin fans I’m sure you probably don’t, but you should really have pity for me.

While most of Jesus followers didn’t understand what he truly came to do, all of his followers still had high hopes and dreams for what he would accomplish. Whatever hopes and dreams they had for Jesus died and were buried with him on Good Friday. We have the benefit of knowing the rest of the story, but try to put yourself in the position of Jesus followers on the Friday and Saturday of Holy Week. It looked like Jesus lost. It seemed like their faith in Jesus was worthless. When you consider what they went through those two days you have to have pity for them.

As Christ followers today we know the reasons Jesus came and why Good Friday and Easter are so awesome. Yet, even though we know it, sometimes we act like Jesus still lost. We worry about our country. We worry about our church and synod. We worry about our health. We worry about our finances. We worry about our relationships. We worry about our family and friends. We worry about the future. We worry about how we can go on if our loved one dies. We worry about so many different earthly matters. **“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men”** (vs. 19). All this worry makes it seem like Jesus is still dead in a grave somewhere near Jerusalem. All this worry makes it seem like Jesus lost, like our faith in him is worthless. All this worry makes me think of Jesus words to his friend, Martha. **“You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed”** (Luke 10:41-42a). Viewing life through the lens of Good Friday and Easter is the one thing we need. And it’s necessary for Christians of all ages to be reminded of the one thing needful. When we do that, we see that Jesus wins! And if Jesus wins, then that means those who follow him in faith win too! Paul specifically tells us two different ways that we win because Jesus rose from the dead.

“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins...But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead” (vs. 17, 20a). Jesus resurrection proves that the plan of salvation

worked! You, sinner, now have a reconciled (peaceful) relationship with a holy God. You, sinner, now have access to stand in the presence of a holy God without fear because Jesus atoned for your sins. You, sinner, no longer have to worry about standing in God's judgment courtroom because Jesus has secured a justified (not guilty) verdict for you. You, sinner, are no longer a slave to sin because Jesus has redeemed you, he has set you free from spending eternity in Hell and set you free to live forever in Heaven and set you free to live as a Christian here on earth. You, sinner, enjoy Jesus righteousness (perfection) covering you at all times so that when God looks at you he sees someone with whom he is perfectly pleased. You enjoy all of these blessings right now and for eternity! Jesus resurrection proves that your faith in Jesus is priceless!

“Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 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 his own turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him” (vs. 18, 20-23). I just read that today, April 4th, is a holiday in China called “National Tomb Sweeping Day.” It's on this day that hundreds of millions of Chinese will visit the graves of their dead loved ones to honor them, to ask blessings from them, and to bring them offerings. Yet there is zero expectation that these loved ones will rise from the dead. Death has conquered them. How sad is that holiday? How different is our Christian celebration of Easter? Jesus rose from the dead! So that means I will get to see my dad again, and my two grandmas, and one of my grandpas, and Andy and Julie (two high school friends who died at the age of 20, four months apart, in car accidents), and the 33 Christians that I have had the privilege to officiate at their funeral. You know doubt have your own list of people you are looking forward to being united with. All our worries are based upon two things – either a fear of death or a fear that our earthly life is not turning out to be our best life. Jesus bursts out of the tomb on Easter and says, “death is just temporary, like sleeping, so don't be afraid because I will raise you back to life. And, your earthly life will have some struggles and problems, but I have a better life waiting for you in Heaven where everything is perfect and your body is immortal.

I don't know who is going to win the national championship, but in the grand scheme of things it doesn't matter. But I do know this, Easter proves that Jesus wins. And since Jesus wins, in the most important ways – dealing with death and eternity – that means because you belong to Jesus in faith, you win too. View everything in your life through the lens of Jesus victory, and watch the Holy Spirit grant you the ability to deal with life with perseverance, peace, and joy. Amen.