

"Christ's Victory Makes Us More Than Conquerors"

Rom. 8:28-39

--CEFC, Easter, 2019, 2001

I've always rebelled against those psychological profiles--

like the Meyers-Briggs test, or the MMPI, or the DISC assessment,

or now, the Enneagram, that has become quite popular.

I've never liked the way they all try to label me and put me in a neat little box,

by telling me just what kind of person I am.

I resent the notion that my psyche can be so simply described.

But I suppose that just means I'm a high-S, or whatever it is.

Do people really have certain well-defined temperament types?

I'm not so sure.

But determining your temperament

was popular a few years back in Christian circles.

I can only recall two of them--

One was the *sanguine*,

and then there was the *phlegmatic*—

Now isn't that an awful term!

Who would want to be "phlegmatic"?

It sounds like a horrible disease!

But the sanguine and the phlegmatic correspond roughly to the **optimist**--

who is sure that this is the best of all possible worlds,

and the **pessimist** who fears that that is so.

anyone could think that to be true?

For experience in this world can provide very reasonable grounds

for thinking otherwise--

the evidence can be quite compelling.

Think first of the **scientific reality**--

We live in a violent and unpredictable world.

Natural disasters, like earthquakes and tornadoes, come from nowhere

to devastate whole towns--

who knows what tomorrow might bring?

All of California might fall off into the Pacific Ocean!

Perhaps there is asteroid on a collision path with the earth right now.

We live in a world of limited natural resources--

our natural fuels will eventually burn up,

and all the while the population keeps exploding--

many expect it to double again within the next forty years.

How will we all survive?

And what about global warming and the pollution of nuclear waste?

There are good reasons to lie awake at night

dreading the possibilities.

But beyond these more natural causes for concern

are the lessons from **human history**--

Will the next century be any less murderous than the last,

when tens of millions of men, women and children

lost their lives through the ravages of war?

We are all vulnerable to terrorist attack,

and as nuclear capability becomes more accessible

to every rogue nation or aggrieved militia group,

the terror associated with nuclear annihilation will only increase.

And doesn't pessimism about life seem reasonable

when you consider **human nature** itself?

Our whole political system is based on the assumption of

the corrupting influence of power--

so we have checks and balances on our various branches of government.

Investigative journalists serve the public as watchdogs of our public officials--

and every once in a while they do get their man.

But are public officials any different than the rest of us?

Without constraints we would all naturally rig the system to our advantage--

we as human beings are just that way.

Who would trust any one of us with absolute control?

And finally, there are good grounds for pessimism about life in this world

simply because of the universal **finality of death**.

The condition of every one of us may be diagnosed as terminal--

we have all embarked on a one-way trip to the grave.

The Bible repeatedly reminds us of this--

We are frail creatures--

We are like puffs of smoke--

"What is your life?" James asks.

"You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes." (4:14)

We are like blades of grass--

Ps. 90:5,6--"You sweep men away in the sleep of death;

they are like the new grass of the morning--

though in the morning it springs up new,

by evening it is dry and withered."

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Death is the destiny of us all.

What's there to be optimistic about?

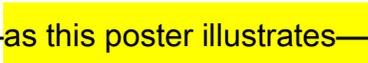
As someone has said,

"There are more dead people than living,

and the numbers are increasing all the time." (Eugene Ionesco)

There are good reasons to be pessimistic about life in this world.

That's why some say—as this poster illustrates—

optimism simply comes from a lack of information!/


But I want you to listen again to Paul's words that were just read from Rom. 8--

v.28--"And we know that in all things

God works for the good of those who love him,
 who have been called according to his purpose."

"in all things"--

"And we know that in all things
 God works for the good of those who love him,
 who have been called according to his purpose."

There is no question about it—

The Apostle Paul was an unashamed optimist--
 just like my mother!

But on this Easter morning I want to ask, Why?

How is it possible for Paul to speak this way?

Is this a Pollyannish wish,

a naive blindness to the harsh, cruel realities of this fallen world? /

I don't see how that could be true--

Paul had more trouble in his life than most of us will ever see.

Five times he was flogged with lashes,

three times he was beaten with rods,

once he was stoned,

three times he was shipwrecked,

he was frequently in prison,

he knew hunger and thirst and dangers of all sorts.

No, Paul was not naive about life,

out of touch with the trials and tribulations

which it can bring.

Yet he could still say that *in all things* God works for the good of those who love him,
 who are called according to his purpose.

Is this just the power of positive thinking?

Or is there some basis, some foundation, for such a rosy view of life?

I believe that there is--

and that foundation is found in the event we celebrate this morning--

the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

"But," you may ask, "what's the connection?"

Why does the resurrection of this one man Jesus make such a difference?

You may be a stubborn pessimist--

I mean, you look both ways before crossing a one-way street.

You are so pessimistic,

you even doubt the sincerity of other pessimists.¹

Why should the resurrection of Jesus

turn a pessimist like you into a convinced optimist?

Let me try to explain--

Consider for a moment what it would mean

if Jesus had not been raised from the grave.

What would be the case if Jesus had lived and taught and then been betrayed

¹Jean Rostand, cited in *The Portable Curmudgeon*, p. 215.

and condemned and tortured and mocked, then nailed to a cross,
and then died--and that was it?

What would that mean?

Well, first, if Jesus is now dead in the tomb,
so is all that he stood for,
and all that he taught.

You see, the teaching of Jesus stands or falls with his resurrection.

Jesus came preaching that the kingdom of God was at hand--
in fact, that that kingdom was present in his life and ministry.

Jesus came as the Messiah, the Son of God,
the Savior of the World, the Lord of Life.

But what could all of that mean if he is still in the grave?

Why should anyone follow him
if in the end his life is snuffed out like all the rest?

What kind of king is this, and what kind of kingdom does he bring,
if he can be so easily put away,
crushed like a troublesome ant under the boot of the powers of this world?

Why should anyone believe what he had to say?

"**Follow me,**" Jesus said,
but you'd have to ask, "Why? What's the use?"

Without the resurrection, Jesus is just another martyr for a noble cause--

a martyr with lofty ideals perhaps, but one who was simply out of touch
with the harsh realities of a cruel world.

Why turn the other cheek?
Why go the extra mile?
Why humble yourself in service to others?
Why do it, if it just gets you nailed to a cross, and that's the end?

Why should we believe that the meek really inherit the earth,
if Jesus just ended up in a tomb?

Throughout his ministry Jesus had laid claim
to a unique relationship with God as his Father.
God his Father loved him and cared for him--
and through him we could know that same love and care, too, he said.

But what could that mean if in the end Jesus was simply left to die on a cross?
What kind of fatherly love is that?

If Christ was not raised,
he had no grounds for claiming to be the Son of God--
he was just another messianic pretender
full of grand illusions, but nothing more.

Why should we believe anything Jesus had to say?
Let's not hear any of this nonsense about Jesus being a great moral teacher.
Don't you see, our faith in such a man is empty—
it is vain, it is foolish—

if he remained in the grave. //

If Christ has not been raised

his teaching is empty,

and more than that, **his mission was a failure.**

For what did he come to do?

He came to seek and to save the lost.

He came to give his life as a ransom

to rescue us from our moral rebellion.

But Paul knew that if Jesus had not been raised from the dead

then we would still be in our sins--

still under the righteous judgment of a holy God

for our refusal to give him our total allegiance and obedience,

for not allowing him to be God in our lives.

Still in our sins--with nothing before us but the awful prospect

of standing before that holy Judge

to hear his words of condemnation

and to face the full fury of his wrath.

That's where we'd be, Paul says, if Christ has not been raised.

For Jesus had been condemned to die as a lawbreaker by the highest court in the land.

And didn't the Scriptures themselves teach that

any person "**hanged on a tree**" was the object of a divine curse (Dt. 21:22f).

How could this condemned criminal also be our divine Savior?

He could be, only if the verdict was overturned--

only if the Jewish court and the Roman governor Pilate

did not have the last word--

and the empty tomb announces that they didn't.

No, God had the last word,

and when he raised Jesus from the grave,

he gave his own verdict on what had taken place.

And this great reversal demonstrated that the curse Jesus bore

was not for his own sin, but for ours.

The resurrection shows that that offering for our sins was acceptable to God his Father.

It satisfied God's wrath against our sin,

It established God's justice, even while demonstrating God's mercy.

On the basis of what Christ did we are no longer in our sins.

"He was delivered over to death because of our sins," Paul writes in Rm. 4,

"and he was raised to life because of our justification."

In Rom. 8:33 Paul speaks of our certain standing before our holy God,

and he asks the question, **"Who will bring any charge**

against those whom God has chosen?"

and in the next verse, **"Who is he that condemns?"--**

It is certainly not Jesus Christ who will condemn us--

he died--more than that, he was raised to life, Paul says,
 and is now seated at the right hand of God, and is also interceding for us.
 Again, it is the resurrection of Jesus that provides the grounds
 for Paul's confidence and hope.
 It is the resurrection that demonstrates that Jesus' mission was a success;
 he did become our Savior.

That's what the resurrection means--
 and if Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile,
 we are still in our sins.

And if we are still in our sins,
 then we are without hope before God.

Is there hope after the grave?
 Is death the end?
 How would we know?
 How could we be sure?

Maybe life is just "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 signifying nothing."²

Maybe it is right to eat, drink and be merry,
 for tomorrow we die.

This is what we're left with if Jesus was not raised from the grave.

²Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Act V. Sc. 5, line 19.

Ah, yes, but what if he was raised?

What if the tomb was empty on that first Easter morning?

What then?

We live in a competitive world--

we love sports, partly because they are competitive--

there are winners and there are losers.

That's why they say, if winning and losing don't matter, then why keep score?

The resurrection means quite simply that Jesus was victorious,

that he is a winner.

All the cruel evil that this world could throw at him,

and not even death itself could conquer him in the end.

He has conquered them all.

What he taught about God and about himself was true.

And his mission was not a failure, but a rousing success--

He did rescue us from the consequences of our sin.

That's why Paul can ask in Rom. 8,

Can anything separate us from the love of Christ?

"Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine

or nakedness or danger or sword?

Not at all!--

"in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons,

neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,
 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,
 will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

How can he say this?

Paul can say all this

because Jesus Christ has been raised from the grave and is now Lord of all.

But, you may ask,

"what does that victory mean to you and me?

He was just one man, and he lived many years ago--

what difference does his victory make to us today?"

And this is why Paul's encounter with the risen Jesus on the Road to Damascus
 is so important.

Do you remember what happened there?

Paul, who was also called Saul, was a great enemy of the first Christians.

He was on his way to Damascus to seek out any disciples of Jesus he could find there
 and to take them back to Jerusalem as prisoners--

to face charges of sedition and insurrection.

As Paul was approaching the city, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him--

he fell on the ground and he heard a voice say to him,

"Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" he asked.

"I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting." (Acts 9:3-6)

his chief-of-staff, his campaign chairman,

his policy advisors, his fund-raisers--all working on his behalf.

They believe in him, they trust him, they are loyal to him.

And you know, if he wins, they win, too--

To the victor goes the spoils,

and they all get jobs in the White House.

But if he loses, well, that's different--

they all go back home, looking for new jobs.

As far as the campaign staff goes,

the fate of the candidate is their fate also--

their destiny is wrapped up in his--

he, in a sense, embodies and represents them.

We could say the same thing about a football team.

After a big victory, the fans all cry out, "We won!"

"*We*"? They didn't do anything.

But they see the team's victory as theirs, too.

And so it is with Jesus.

By faith we are joined to him

such that his victory becomes ours.

"Follow me," he said.

And where might he be going?

Was it just to a Roman cross?

Is that where he was leading us?

Was that the end of the road?

but you can be assured that Sunday's coming!

God is not done yet!

As Paul says in Rom. 8:16,17--

"The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Now if we are children, then we are heirs --

heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ,

if indeed we share in his sufferings

in order that we may also share in his glory."

Here is the source, the grounding, the fundamental reason,

for Paul's insufferable optimism about life.

Look at what happened to Jesus--

What could be worse than what he endured?

He was selfless and loving,

yet he was hated and maligned.

He was a friend of sinners,

yet he was betrayed by a friend.

He was innocent,

yet he was declared guilty.

He was humble and gentle,

yet he was beaten and then crucified.

He lived in perfect union with God his Father,

yet was cut off from him because of our sin.

Jesus belonged in heaven,

yet he experienced hell itself.

But even all that, as bad as it was,

was shown to be but a part of God's perfect plan of redemption.

It was a means to a great and joyous end.

And by looking at what had happened to Jesus,

and by seeing him risen and alive,

Paul understood that nothing, nothing at all,

could overcome God's good and gracious purposes.

Jesus was raised to new life--

he who had been humbled,

was now exalted to the highest place of honor.

In the resurrection of Jesus, we have a great hope set before us.

Of course, we still live in a fallen world,

a world still groaning for what is to come.

But in that uncertain world,

a world of unexpected tragedy and sometimes fierce opposition,

God is at work,

he is always at work, for the good of his people.

And so Paul concludes, with great conviction and with good reason--

"we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him,

who have been called according to his purpose."

This is surely one of the most beloved verses in all of the Bible, and rightly so,

for it offers absolute assurance and certainty to the followers of Jesus.

God is working for the good "in all things," Paul; says--

not in some things, or in most things, but in all things--

nothing is outside of God's gracious power to work for good—nothing!

Notice, he doesn't say that all things are good--

only that God can use all things for good.

The crucifixion of Jesus was certainly not a good thing--

it was despicably evil--

but God used even that evil thing for good--

in fact, for the greatest good.

So what do you think he can do with the tragedies

and even the evil that you experience?

This is what makes me an inveterate and persistent optimist--

When I counsel married couples who are at each other's throats,

when I talk to people who have just received bad news from a doctor,

when I share in the last days of a believer about to leave this world--

I am an optimist.

Not that I say, blindly,

that everything is good, or that we will never have to endure anything

that is hard or painful.

But the resurrection of Jesus teaches me that the story is never over.

The book did not end with Jesus dying on the cross and lifeless in a tomb.

God can use even the things which seem the worst adversity and the most harmful--

even persecution and death itself--to bring about his good in our lives.

He is working "in all things."

But we have to remember what this "good" is

that God is working for in our lives--

Paul doesn't mean that all things serve our comfort, or our convenience,

or that they foster our worldly interests--

that's not the "good" he has in mind.

The "good" has to be defined in God's terms, not ours,

and the "good" God is concerned about is our spiritual growth, our godliness,

our salvation, our eternal relationship with himself.

Our highest "good" is to share in the joy of his divine life

and to experience his unfathomable love.

Is that the "good" that you're concerned about?

If it's not, then this verse doesn't offer you much comfort at all.

For this is not a general statement of the optimist

that everything always works out for good for everyone in the end.

This statement is much more specific than that--

It says that God, in the work of his sovereign providence,

is at work for a certain "good" for a certain group of people.

It is "for those who love God."

That's Paul's way of describing Christians--

that's the basic inner direction of all Christians--

they have a love for God,

their deepest desire is to please him.

Their hearts, which once were opposed to God,

and which worshipped created things rather than the Creator,
 have now been turned back to him in love./

But then Paul adds another phrase,

not to narrow the first one and restrict it in some way,
 but to define that same group of people in a different way--
 they are those **"who have been called according to God's purpose."**

Here Paul looks at our relationship with God from a different perspective--

instead of from the human side, focusing on what we do in "loving God."

Here he focuses on the divine side,

from the side of the One who calls us to himself.

So Paul adds this phrase, those **"who have been called according to his purpose,"**

to signify that behind the reality of our love for God

is the far greater reality of his love for us--

his love in calling us to himself.

The certainty of the hope of which Paul speaks

rests on nothing less than the eternal purpose of God--

a purpose proved sure when he raised Jesus from the grave.

So, what does it mean to be optimistic as a Christian?

I think of two prisoners fixed to the wall of a deep dark dungeon.

Spread-eagle, they are securely lashed by shackles and chains

and are actually hanging, suspended, side by side,

above the damp floor of their prison cell.
 There is only one small window,
 over thirty feet above their heads.
 They are immobile and alone, pinned inexorably to the cold stone.
 And one prisoner turns to the other and whispers,
 "Now, here's my plan!"

Is that the kind of optimism I'm talking about?

That may be optimism, but it's not the kind found in the Bible.
 For our confidence in the future is not based on our plans at all.
 Our optimism comes from a confidence in God's plans, his purposes,
 which he promises to work out in our lives for our good.

And our God does have a plan—

it's the plan that unfolds in the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 and that plan will be forever victorious--
 for even when it looked like there was no way out--
 when Jesus Christ, God's Son, was suspended above the earth,
 with his hands and feet nailed to a cross--
 God had a plan.

And on that first Easter Sunday the world could see that that plan was successful--
 Jesus was victorious--overcoming even death itself.

And by our union with Christ by faith,
 his victory becomes ours.

**“And we know that in all things God works for the good
 of those who love him,**

who have been called according to his purpose.”

Do you want to have this kind of hope,

this kind of optimism in your life?

Then you need to listen to God's call in your life--

for he calls you to himself,

he calls you to join in his plan, his purposes,

he calls you to trust him and to love him.

Come and follow Jesus,

and because he is risen from the grave,

you can be a victor, too--

You can be more than conqueror through him who loved you.

You can be sure of it.

Prayer

Closing Song: #234 *Crown Him with Many Crowns* [all 4 vv.]

Benediction:

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God!

He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you.

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord,

because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Easter, 2019

**Christ's Victory
Makes Us More Than Conquerors**

Rom. 8:28-39

It seems there are ample reasons for being pessimistic about life in this world. But the Apostle Paul makes an extraordinary claim: "we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). How is such optimism possible? The answer is what we celebrate today—the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave!

I. What would it mean

if Jesus had NOT been raised?

A. His teaching is empty

B. His mission was a failure

II. But Jesus has been raised!

Joined to him in faith,

his victory is now ours.

And because of his resurrection from the dead,

*"we know that in all things God works for the good
of those who love him,
who have been called according to his purpose"*

Sermon Response:

**Christ's Victory
Makes Us More Than Conquerors**

Rom. 8:28-39

- Why is Jesus' ministry a failure if he has not been raised from the dead?

- How does Jesus' resurrection affect our lives? Why is it important to us?

- Should Christians be optimists? Why or why not? In what sense does our optimism need to be qualified?

- How is the promise of Rom. 8:28 qualified by Paul? How is it unlimited and how is it limited?

- How does the promise of Rom. 8:28 affect your view of life? How has its truth helped you in the past?

- Spend time reflecting on the difference the resurrection of Jesus makes to our lives—and praise God for it in prayer.

