

6th Sunday after Epiphany
February 13, 2022

“Your sure hope of the resurrection - Christ, the firstfruits!”
(1 Corinthians 15:20)
By Rev. Ed Weber

“Grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today’s text for this 6th Sunday after Epiphany is from the Epistle reading for today, 1 Corinthians 15:20

“But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Here ends our text.

Introduction:

What if someone decided to start a rumor on Facebook that there would be no Vince Lombardi trophy awarded today? You know, that’s the prize given to the winning team of the Super Bowl today. That’s what the NFL organizations have been building towards year after year, and they’ve been giving their all to obtain this year.

What would it mean if this rumor was true? Well, there would be no football game played this afternoon, for what would be the point? And, there would be no halftime show. And therefore, there would be no 6.5 million dollar 30 second Superbowl commercials. And there would be no Superbowl parties at people’s homes. And the Cincinnati Bengals would remain one of 12 teams to have never won a Vince Lombardi trophy.

But, there’s no such rumor and it looks very likely that there will be played a Super Bowl game this afternoon, with a Super Bowl halftime show, commercials, parties and the possibility that the Bengals will bring home a Lombardi.

Wow, as much as I like football, and I doubt if I'll catch much of the game, because we'll be in the middle of a service in Port Isabel, it's just a game...with no eternal consequences. For some, unfortunately, events like this are the only highlights of life.

For every believer in Christ, however, there awaits the greatest prize – eternal life in heaven. Although there is a team called the Holy Christian Church, each believer does two things individually as Martin Luther once said. “Every man must do two things alone; he must do his own believing and his own dying.”

These two things precede the reception of the greatest prize of eternal life. Of course, one may be accompanied by loved ones gathered around one's bed at one's last moment of life, but that moment of earthly life is a solitary experience. Or is it?

It is true that the people whose hands are held at one's death bed do not continue with the soul of the deceased at the moment of death. But, the Christian is never alone. For one's own believing in Jesus Christ brings this assurance from Romans 8:38-39.

“For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

The Bible tells us that God is with us always and that there is no separation from Him even at death!

Now, the Corinthians were needing to be assured of this because there had been false rumors started that there was no resurrection of the dead. Now of course, this wasn't the teaching that Paul had given to them which Paul himself had received by personal revelation from God. In the opening verses of chapter 15 Paul goes to great lengths to summarize the main fundamental truths of the Christian faith.

“Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,”

This is the Good News – the Gospel which saves all from sin who believe it. And most importantly, there is a resurrection in this teaching! Christ’s resurrection!

Now, if this is the Super Bowl of Super Bowls. Christ defeated the enemy of us all Satan, on the gridiron of the cross! And for all who believe in Jesus, are on Jesus’ team through faith, your sins are forgiven! Christ died for your sins! He was buried. His death gained your freedom from sin, death and the devil.

How do we know this is true? Because of this most important fundamental truth, **“that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,”**

Christ was victorious! He received the trophy of the resurrection!! He is the first fruits of the harvest of the resurrection. He rose first so that all who believe in Him on team Jesus, will also be resurrected!

But, what if this is just a rumor? What if the disciples stole the body as the guards were told to report, who were bribed with large sums of money as is recorded in Matthew 28?

Well, Paul tells the tale of the sad consequences if Christ’s resurrection were just a rumor.

“And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. 15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. 16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! 18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.”

If Christ did not rise, then Paul is a false witness, a charlatan, and anyone who believed him is still in your sins. And the worst news? Those who have died in Christ have not just fallen asleep, they’ve perished. There’s nothing after death, no Lombardi, no eternal life – just pity.

But, there's no pity party here today or any day in the life of the Christian. Everyday is a celebration of life for:

“Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Paul tells the Corinthian doubters in the opening verses of chapter 15, and any of us who would doubt Christ's resurrection that...

“He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. 7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.”

Yes, first fruits mean that there are second and third and fourth fruits and so on for all people who believe in Jesus. Every follower of Jesus will rise again to new life!

So, John received these words that he recorded in Revelation 14:13,

“13 Then I heard a voice from heaven saying to me, “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ”

“Yes,” says the Spirit, “that they may rest from their labors, and their works follow them.”

Blessed means that the believer has received the gift of salvation and the prize of eternal life. That's what Jesus is telling the people in our Gospel reading from Luke 6 today.

“Blessed are you poor, For yours is the kingdom of God.

21 Blessed are you who hunger now, For you shall be filled.

Blessed are you who weep now, For you shall laugh.

**22 Blessed are you when men hate you, And when they exclude you,
And revile you, and cast out your name as evil, For the Son of Man's sake.**

23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy!

For indeed your reward is great in heaven,

For in like manner their fathers did to the prophets.

Poor, hungry, weeping souls that mourn their sins, that are repentant and poor in their own righteousness, are filled with the righteousness of Christ, with His riches!

Indeed, though you would be reviled and belittled for your belief in Jesus, that cannot and will not ever negate the truth that there awaits for you a great reward in heaven! Rejoice! Leap for joy! You have the Lombardi of Lombardis in your possession right now through faith. By your baptism, you have been united with Christ's death and resurrection (Romans 6)!

So, Paul says in Romans 14:

“7 For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. 8 For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. 9 For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

Again, we hear in James chapter 1 verse 12.

“12 Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.”

There are so many passages of comfort in the Bible which assure us over and over again that we, who could not raise ourselves from the dead, will be raised by Christ the first fruits. He did it and so all who believe will follow Him and join Him in the Super Bowl celebration of celebrations!

Jesus assures you with His very words recorded by John in the first chapter of Revelation.

“Do not be afraid; I am the First and the Last. I am He who lives, and was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore. Amen.” (Revelation 1:17-18)

I can't guarantee a Bengal's victory today, but I can guarantee a resurrection from the dead, because Christ, the first fruits guarantees it to all who believe in Him. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your heart and minds through Christ Jesus.” Amen. (Philippians 4:7)