

**+ 1 Corinthians 15:55-57 + Jesus Lives Means Our Victory¹ +
+ Feast of the Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Dawn + 31 March 2013 +**

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

He was on the edge of battle, lying on his back atop a seven-story high missile loaded with rocket fuel and waiting for ignition. On the morning of May 5, 1961, our country was in the middle of the Cold War, fighting with the Soviet Union for primacy in space. It was a war the U.S. was losing.

Americans could do nothing, but wring their hands in worry when the Soviets launched the Sputnik satellite soaring over their heads. They had despaired when the Russians sent Yuri Gagarin into space. America was losing the race. Even worse, we seemed to be out of our league, because our rockets had a tendency to blow up...a lot.

Just weeks earlier, America had gotten some rockets off the pad, but going off course, they had to be blown up on purpose. Yet here was Alan Shepard lying on his back on top of 70 feet of explosives, ready to try and be the first American in space. As the countdown ticked off, America held her breath, because in a very real way, her fate was tied up with his.

In a very real way, Shepard was what one write called a “single combat warrior”. In ages past, warring sides would have a champion fight instead of a whole army. Two men would fight with the lives of everyone else hanging in the balance. Do the names David and Goliath sound familiar? They were single combat warriors.

Shepard had been one of seven men chosen to enter battle in this space race because he had the right stuff. Of all the men in America, very few could be test pilots. They had to be the best of the best. Of all the test pilots, 101 were invited to try to become an astronaut. Of those 101, only seven were chosen, and of those seven, Alan Shepard was picked to be the first American in space. He had won the right to lie on top of a rocket which had a pretty good chance of blowing up, rather than take him to the heavens.

Unsurprisingly, just before launch, the engineers detected a problem—fuel pressure was too high. Better scrub the launch because it could be too dangerous, but then over the radio, everyone heard the voice of their single combat warrior from on top of the rocket, “Light this candle!” That was the right stuff, at least for a Cold War single combat warrior.

...But what if the enemy you faced was bigger than Goliath and mightier than the Soviet Union? What if you faced an enemy that would relentlessly hound you? That would take those who are close to you? That would ultimately come for you as unavoidably as the evening darkness falls? What if the enemy you faced was Death? What kind of single combat warrior would you need for that battle? Who has the right stuff to face down Death? No human being I know, because death is the great equalizer. Sooner or later, death comes for every one of us.

We’ve all seen it. Have you known what it’s like to lose someone you care about? One day they’re there, and the next they’ve died and they’re not there anymore. You pick up your phone to call them. Maybe your cell phone still has their picture and number, but the call just rings and rings. Their home is exactly the way they left it when Death came knocking. Their Facebook page is frozen to the day when the enemy came, and then it slowly starts to dawn on you that they are really, truly gone. The enemy took them, and you realize Death will one day come for you too.

Was that on the mind of those women early on Easter morning? They were so tired, so exhausted, so emotionally drained from the past two days. They had watched Jesus suffer and die. They had watched Joseph and Nicodemus place his body in a tomb. Can you feel their emptiness? Arms full of spices, but hearts full of disappointment. All they hoped to do was to go and anoint a dead body—and so the biggest question on their mind was, **“Who’s going to roll the stone away from the mouth of the tomb?”** (Mark 16:3)

When they got to the tomb, something was wrong—there were no guards there anymore...the stone rolled away...the tomb gaping open... When they looked in, they didn’t see a dead body. They saw angels who told them the Easter truth that changes everything: **Jesus lives!** The angel said, **“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen! Remember how he told you...”** (Luke 24:5-6)

“Remember how he told you...” It was all according to plan. That’s why Jesus had to come to earth. That was the reason why he took on flesh and blood. That was the whole point of his ministry, his miracles, his mission. He had come to defeat our great enemy called Death. Those ladies were looking in the wrong place, because he was alive. They heard the words and the Spirit started stirring them to believe the promises. So on that Sunday morning the chant of Easter victory started to build in their hearts: **“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.”**

¹ Many of the thoughts and language of this sermon were received with thanks from Pr. Jonathan Schroeder.

Now have you ever heard people say that death is just part of the circle of life? Have you heard them say that death is just natural? To put it bluntly, that's a bunch of hogwash. Death is the most unnatural thing a human can do, because God never created us to die. He made us to do what all of us want—to live and never die, but sin changed all that—the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, the sin of our hands and mouths and minds this past week, the sin that's been in your heart since it took its first beat.

Sin pays a wage, and that wage is death. It's as simple as that. Sinners die. Sin is what makes death hurt, what makes it the final indignity. Sin gives death its sting, and no matter what you and I try to do, we can't make the sting go away. We can't because we can't do anything about our sin.

Oh, we think we can! We make promises to not do it again. We think if we feel badly enough, that somehow our feelings can make up for our guilt. We think if we do enough good things, maybe God will let the bad things slide, but that's not how God works. There is no karma in God's world, and you can't pull out the stinger of sin by feeling badly about it. No, sin needs to be paid for, and you and I can't do it.

So God sent someone who could. Someone with the right stuff...the one man out of all people of all time, who could be the hero we needed. Someone who is truly God and truly man—holy in every way and human in every way yet without sin. God sent him here to be our single combat warrior in the battle with Death. He would walk between the lines and fight as our champion, and God tied up our lives with his.

God said to you, "You won't have to suffer for sin. He will. It will be his cross and his crown of thorns." So Jesus found himself on a Friday we call Good, lying on his back on a cross of wood with his arms outstretched, waiting for the battle to begin and he didn't hesitate. No, the Lord of heaven said, "Make it happen. Do it to me, so no one will ever do it to them."

There on a lonely hill, the best of men died for the worst—for you, for me. He did it in our place as our single combat warrior. There God gathered up all my failures, all your guilt, all the wrong of our hearts and hands, and placed them on Jesus, punishing Jesus with the hell we deserve. Jesus paid for every bit, and then he said, "***It is finished!***" (John 19:30) Sin is paid. Guilt is gone.

Do you see what that means? That's God saying those memories that burn... those things you wish you could take back... the shame, the remorse, they're gone. Forgiven. Forgotten. Forever. God put them on Jesus, and he says to you, today, "***I have forgiven your wickedness and will remember your sin no more!***" (Jeremiah 31:34) Now God promises you that not even Death can hold you anymore, because it's been swallowed up in victory. How can that be?

When Jesus died, he won. When the price of sin is paid, death has no sting. On Easter morning, the whole world got to see that because **Jesus lives!**

May 5, 1961. The countdown continued, and then they lit that candle. The Redstone rocket blasted Alan Shepard 115 miles straight up into space, and it didn't blow up! The flight stopped a whole country in its tracks, waiting anxiously at radios and television sets. When the message of success came through, "Everything is A-O.K.!", everyone seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief. Shepard's victory was theirs. That flight gave President Kennedy the confidence to commit the nation only twenty days later to landing men on the moon within the decade. When Shepard came home, America threw a ticker tape parade and cheered, because this man was their single combat warrior. When he won, they won. The act of a single man caused victory for an entire people.

My friends, I am glad you're here today, whether you're a member here or just stopping in to see us for the first time. I am glad you're here because today we celebrate the warrior that stepped into battle for you and me. Jesus Christ went to the cross in your place, in your stead, but when he rose from the dead, he defeated death forever for you and me. The act of a single man caused victory for us all. "***Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!***" Jesus lives—there are no more victorious words in human language.

Now the living Jesus promises that your loved ones who died in faith, they aren't gone. They're simply waiting—waiting for you, waiting for you to taste the same sweet victory. They're waiting for you to join them in the triumphant chant, "***Where O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?***" We have a warrior, a champion, a Savior. His cross. His crown. Our victory. **Jesus lives**, and so will we! Amen.

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!