

**+ 1 Corinthians 15:51-57 + Victory Is Ours In the Empty Tomb +
+ The Resurrection of Our Lord: Easter Day + 5 April 2015 +**

CIR HIRI!¹ Dear Friends in Christ Gathered at the Empty Tomb,

When the first shots were fired on Ft. Sumter in the Charleston harbor, the crowds cheered. When war was declared between two parts of the same nation, people threw parties and rejoiced as they sent their brave boys off to war. “The mighty United States Army will crush the southern rebellion in weeks!” “The Confederate Army will ensure the rights of the southern states in a matter of months!” Everyone figured the war would be over in a year. Heroes would be made. Songs of bravery would be written. When a battle ensued outside of Washington DC near a muddy creek called Bull Run, people came out in their finest for an afternoon picnic to watch their brave soldiers squelch this silly rebellion, but they were all horribly wrong.

Those picnicking citizens found themselves fleeing for their lives when the Union army made a chaotic retreat. Soon cheering on both sides turned to mourning. The gallantry and glory they had envisioned quickly turned to darkness and blood and death on fields of battle like Antietam Creek in Maryland where over 22,000 men were killed in the single bloodiest day in American history or Gettysburg, PA where over 50,000 men were killed in three days or Cold Harbor, VA where over 7,000 Union soldiers were killed in less than an hour. Things got so bad that by the end of the war, they were digging trenches to protect themselves like the armies of World War I.

One year soon turned into two, three, and four years. For four years, the Confederate and Union armies traded blows back and forth. Gen. Robert E. Lee brilliantly outmaneuvered many with his Army of Northern Virginia, yet neither his army nor the Confederacy could withstand the relentless pounding of the Union Army under General Ulysses S. Grant. Finally, on Palm Sunday, 9 April 1865 (150 years ago this week), Lee found his army cut off from escape on all sides. The only realistic option was to surrender. So the two generals met at Appomattox Court House in Virginia, where Lee and his men formally surrendered signaling the end of that awful civil war.

That war had taken so many lives, between 640,000 and 700,000 by some accounts—2.5% of the entire American population—and it was finally over. The shooting and the bloodshed and the battles could finally stop as Confederate armies and cities and government officials surrendered.

In Union states and cities and towns, you can imagine the great joy that people felt when they got the news. The war is over! Victory is won! Church bells pealed all across the country. Parades were planned. The Grand Army of the Republic would have a triumphal march in Washington D.C., but above all, the nation and her families would finally be reunited. Pres. Lincoln had promised a merciful and peaceful reunion of both the north and the south back into one nation. Victory was certain, but had come at great cost.

Our first parents were horribly wrong too when they ignited a civil war with the holy God in the Garden of Eden. They had foolishly disobeyed God’s single command when they ate from the one tree in the whole garden that God had said, “Leave that one for me.” They didn’t realize what was coming because of what they did. They thought they would have glory for themselves. After all, they would **“be like God.”** (Genesis 3:5)

Instead, thinking only of themselves, they welcomed into our world such “glorious” things as guilt and shame and conflict. The glory they envisioned quickly turned into mourning as God handed down the consequences for their sin. Their glory turned into pain and toil, suffering and death. The great divide of sin tore apart the perfect unity between God and people. They hoped it would be over soon, but the war was just beginning. The casualties since then are beyond count—all the hurt, all the guilt, all the conflict and shame, all the blame and pain and suffering and, of course, death.

Death came to Adam and Eve and every son and daughter descended from Adam and Eve. The pages of history are littered with the effects and results of death from the mightiest ruler to the poorest beggar. Death has broken into every home and touched every life. It doesn’t care about your social status, your race, your gender, or your religion. It robs every victim of every earthly possession. Whenever death passes by, it leaves behind sorrow and tears. It steals away for all eternity the opportunity for the unbeliever to come to faith and causes pain for even the strongest Christian.

¹ At Cross of Christ, we use the Easter greeting, “Christ is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” on Easter Sunday and throughout the Easter season. CIR HIRI is an abbreviation for that greeting in the sermon.

Death's unrelenting attack against humanity has lasted centuries, because its source—sin—infects us all. ***“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.”*** Like a poisonous snake hunting down its prey and causing severe pain and death with its bite, death causes tremendous suffering and destruction for all of us—and there's nothing we can do about it. Even with all of our brilliant medical maneuvers over disease, we still can't stop death, because death is God's relentless punishment for sin.

So if death is so awful, so dangerous, so terrifying, why is it that we hear the Apostle Paul taunting death? ***“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”*** Knowing what death has done to loved ones and friends and those before us, knowing what death will do to us and our descendants because we've all sinned, you'd think Paul was out of his mind.

...But he wasn't. He knew the sting of death all too well. So why does Paul taunt death? Paul knew that no matter how awful the battles had been or will be, the war has already been won—not by people like us or even great heroes of faith, but by a sinless Savior promised long ago. That Savior would reunite God and us once and for all by winning the victory over death, yet at the great cost of his own life.

As the bad news of the world's first civil war came rolling in, the Lord in his gracious mercy paused to make a promise of peace to come—an act of unconditional love that would one day be fulfilled. Speaking to Satan, his enemy, who had tempted Adam and Eve into that first sin, the Lord promised, ***“...I will put enmity (hostility) between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.”*** (Genesis 3:15) “Guess what, Satan. You got them to ignite this civil war. I'm going to end it so decisively that you and all the forces of hell will be forced to unconditionally surrender.”

So Satan did his best to keep that civil war between God and humanity alive, that is, until Jesus came along. Satan tried to stop Jesus with temptation. So Jesus lived a perfect life. Satan tried to oppose Jesus with arguments. So Jesus taught the Word of truth. Then Satan got his champion—death—to oppose Jesus. On Good Friday, after the Son of God had suffered tremendously for the sins of the world and agonized on the cross for hours, he breathed his last.

Jesus had suffered death just like every other human being. It seemed like death had won just like every other time. You almost wonder if there was great rejoicing in hell that day. “We won!” “Death reigns!”, but they were horribly wrong. Yes, Jesus lost the battle, but won the war. Death couldn't hold him. You see, Jesus had actually removed death's sting for you. After three days, his tomb stood empty. Jesus was alive as his disciples were so happy to learn on Easter Sunday. Death was swallowed up in the emptiness of Jesus' tomb! **CIR HIRI!**

By swallowing up death, by removing its sting, Jesus forced Satan to surrender unconditionally. In doing so, Jesus fulfilled that ancient promise and reunited the holy God with his beloved humanity. He reunited God with you and me. By his death and resurrection, Jesus brings you and me back to God because **CIR HIRI!**

The unbridled joy of the Union victory after four grueling years of civil war lasted all of two weeks. An assassin's bullet ended the life of the president who had promised ***“with malice toward none...let us strive...to bind up the nation's wounds”*** and ***“achieve...a just and lasting peace...”*** (2nd Inaugural Address) Reconstruction of the nation would come, but the healing that was promised with such hope and joy never materialized in the years that followed.

That's what happens with human victories. They promise so much for the future, but rarely, if ever, are those promises fulfilled. What about Jesus' victory on that first Easter Sunday 2,000 years ago? After all, you and I still feel the sting of death. We still have to stand at the deathbeds or open graves of loved ones. We still have to deal with the pain of this life and face the reality of death in our own future. Did Jesus' victory over death come up short too?

Listen again to Paul. ***“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.”*** Paul doesn't deny that we will feel death's sting, but that doesn't mean that death gets the final victory. Yes, death may turn us back to dust, but victory is ours ***“through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*** **CIR HIRI!**

Through Jesus, you now have a new life. You are a new creation in him. If you're troubled by the guilt of your sins past or present, you have mercy and forgiveness guaranteed by his victory over death. If you're troubled by your health or your job or trouble in your family, you have Jesus' protection and promise guaranteed by his victory over death. If you worry about being abandoned or rejected or lonely, you can be sure Jesus guarantees he'll be with you because he conquered death for you. If you're troubled by temptation, find strength in the Savior who conquered sin so you can faithfully love and serve your Lord and others out of

thanks for Christ's victory for you. If you're troubled by grief or if the fear of death grips you, find comfort in Jesus, who guarantees by his empty tomb that eternal life is yours. **CIR HIRI!**

In the end, Jesus guarantees that his victory will be your victory. One day all the grief and sorrow, the tears and fears that death has caused will end. One day you will receive a life that never ends—a life enjoyed in the presence of your living Savior Jesus. One day you will reunite with loved ones who died in Christ and you will see him with them. You can be sure that you will see him with your own eyes, because as Paul explains, ***“We will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.”*** On that Last Day, death will only be able to surrender as Jesus empties your tomb too. **CIR HIRI!**

One hundred and fifty years ago this week, a horrible civil war that tore apart our nation came to a joyful end and caused great celebration. Looking back now, you can see a lot of good and a lot of bad that came out of that victory, but that's the way of human victories since the dawn of time.

You can celebrate the end of a civil war today too. In fact, you can celebrate it every day! Lasting victory is now yours through your Savior Jesus Christ. So celebrate! Celebrate because the tomb stands empty and so will yours! Celebrate because Jesus lives and so will you! Celebrate because death has been defeated for you once and for all! Celebrate because Jesus has reunited you with your God! Celebrate because eternal victory is yours through your Lord Jesus Christ! Celebrate because **CIR HIRI!** Alleluia! Amen.