**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church**

**Watertown, WI**

**“Cold Comforts”**

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“*If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep”* (1 Corinthians 15: 17-19).

We live today in what is called a post-Christian culture, which means Christianity no longer holds the dominant position in shaping the values, social norms, or institutions of our culture. Traditional Christian values are being replaced by secular alternatives.

One area in which this post-Christian culture shows up is how people think and talk about death. The less people hold onto God’s promises of resurrection and life in Jesus Christ, the more they turn to what I call “cold comforts.” They resort to cliches and platitudes.

For example, have you ever heard someone say, “As long as we remember him, he has not really died but lives on in our hearts.” What rubbish! What can you tell me about your grandfather’s great-grandfather? Is he living on in your memory banks? If so, his is a very faint heartbeat, and on the verge of dying again. Cold comfort!

Another example, as someone looks at the deceased in the open casket: “Doesn’t she look good?” Again, cold comfort. She’s dead, and that’s not the way she’s supposed to be. Death is an unnatural and unwelcome invasion into God’s good creation. It’s the wages of sin. So there’s no sense pretending it is good or looks good.

Or the guy who died out on the fairway of the golf course: “Well, at least he died doing what he loved.” There’s no comfort there, because the fact is he’ll never do it again . . . or go fishing with his grandson or kiss his wife in the morning.

Some try to find comfort in the idea that when their corpse is buried, it’ll eventually become food for trees and bushes and plants. It’s a sort of environmental reincarnation. But as far as I’m concerned, the tree can look elsewhere for its food. And to be a stubborn dandelion sprouting up next to a tombstone, the target of a weed whacker: that doesn’t sound like much fun at all. Cold comfort.

Or how about this one: “I just know grandma’s up there watching over us.” You really think so? When you get to heaven do you think you’ll have nothing better to do than watch your grandson as he sits all day in his cubicle and stares at his computer? Or worse, as he makes poor choices that will wreck his life and cause big problems for his children? That doesn’t sound like heaven at all; it sounds like a peculiar part of hell. Even if the saints in heaven could see us, does the Bible say anywhere they have the power or permission to intervene and help us? Cold comfort. We have Jesus as our Shepherd, and the angels of God are also helping, and that’s quite enough.

Here's another: Before he died, Steve Jobs told a graduating class at Stanford, “Death is very likely the single best invention of life . . . it clears out the old to make way for the new.” That’s horrible. Would you dare say that to the parents of a young child that just died? “Death is the single best invention of life?” Cold comfort.

Of another person who died suddenly of a stroke: “He was dead before he hit the floor. At least he didn’t suffer much.” As if sudden death is something to which we should all aspire? There’s a much older and wiser prayer that asks the Lord to spare us from sudden death, because sudden death can rob us of the important and necessary time we need to prepare for death and to meet our Lord. Moreover, sudden death is always far more difficult for the loved ones left behind.

One more: “He visited me.” “He came to me in the middle of the night and assured me he’s well.” Or, “I just know she was in the butterfly. Or the mourning dove that sat on the windowsill and looked at me for the longest time.” But there’s no lasting comfort in these things. There is no hug, no conversation, no kiss or walking hand in hand. The butterfly is nowhere to be seen in February. The mourning dove doesn’t know how to hold a decent conversation. And you can’t cuddle up with a ghost. Cold comforts!

As our culture drifts further away from the historic Christian faith, grieving people are turning to cold comforts because they have nothing better. They’re grasping at straws because they have not taken hold of the living Christ. They’re repeating platitudes because they have not laid claim to the promises of Christ. They may have heard some about the teachings of Jesus. They may know something of His death. But they have not apprehended for themselves the resurrection of Jesus.

And so it was for the ancient people in Corinth. It’s a Greek city, and the Greeks thought flesh is base, bad even. Flesh imprisons the soul which is good. The Greeks believed death finally releases the soul from its fleshly prison. You can imagine, then, how the Greeks would have a hard time with Jesus bodily rising from the dead. Why would He ever want to do that? It appears some of the Corinthian Christians were saying Jesus didn’t rise from the dead. Maybe His ideas live on, His teachings. But certainly not His flesh.

Notice how Jesus, in the Gospel lesson, with great foresight, combated what He knew would be a problem. “See my hands and my feet. Touch Me, and see. For a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see I have” (Lk. 24:39). Then He asks them for something to eat, and they gave Him a piece of broiled fish, and He ate it before them (v. 41). More evidence of physical resurrection. And then He reminds them that He had told them it would happen this way. “The Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead” (v. 46). Therefore, there should be no reluctance to confess the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

Paul also deals with this head-on. First, he gives them and us full-blast Gospel. “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, He was buried, and was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). That means He won the victory over sin and death. That’s why He came. That’s what He accomplished. Your sin and death have been conquered by Jesus.

Then Paul gives the evidence. He “was raised on the third day. . . Then He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive,” Paul writes (vv. 5-6). “Don’t believe me? See them about it! Ask them yourselves.”

He warns them of the consequences to unbelief. “If Christ has not been raised . . . your faith is in vain” (v. 14). It’s empty. It’s futile. It accomplishes nothing.

“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are, of all people, most to be pitied” (v.19). We’ve been swindled, duped. We will still suffer persecution but will have no hope for the life to come. If Christ has not been raised, platitudes and cliches are all we have. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then He’s not your Lord or Savior. He’s just another dead teacher or philosopher. And if He’s dead, we are still stuck in our sins. If Jesus is dead, then God still has a case against us. He is not at peace with us. He is, in fact, angry at us. If Jesus is dead, then we *should* be afraid of dying, because we’re just sinners falling into the hands of an angry God.

Everything hangs on the resurrection of Jesus. If Christ was not raised from the dead, we of all men are most to be pitied. **“But, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead”** Paul writes. He is the firstfruits of the resurrection, the first of an immense harvest to come.

I love homegrown cherry tomatoes. And when the first few turn from green to a deep red and are warmed through by the sun, I’m tempted to just pop them into my mouth out there. But no, I bring them into the house and share them with Jacklyn. We celebrate the first fruits because we’ve been waiting for them, expecting them, longing for them.

Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection, the first of countless more to come. His resurrection is what we’ve been hoping for, praying for, waiting for. Jesus was born among us, identifies Himself with us. His death pays for our sins, and His righteousness is credited to us. In fact, Paul says that in Holy Baptism, you are so thoroughly joined to Christ that His death and resurrection become your own. Romans 6, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His” (vv. 3-5).

Luther wrote, “Imagine there was a doctor somewhere who understood the art of saving people from death or, even though they died, could restore them quickly to life so that they would afterward live forever. Oh, how the world would pour in money like snow and rain. No one could find access to him because of the throng of the rich! But here in Baptism there is freely brought to everyone’s door such a treasure and medicine that it utterly destroys death and preserves all people alive” (LC IV 43).

This is no cold comfort. This is the real deal. And it’s for you. As Christians living in a post-Christian society, we don’t need any cold comforts to prop us up. And in a post-Christian society, people out there don’t need to hear any cold comforts coming from our lips. They need the Gospel from you and me. Jesus loves you. He died for you. He is risen for you. He is your living Savior in this life and in the next.

# You have Jesus. He is your comfort. He is your peace. He is your Resurrection and your Life. Amen.