

A Word of Authority for Life

Sermon for Easter Sunday

Sermon Text: John 5:19-21



So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of His own accord, but only what He sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. ²⁰For the Father loves the Son and shows Him all that He Himself is doing. And greater works than these will He show Him, so that you may marvel. ²¹For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will.

How does one actually start to talk about eternal life? As far as I know, there is no store anywhere in the world where you can buy eternal life in a package. Nor is there anyone who could prove to us with solid evidence that there is such a thing as eternal life. There is also no special training where one could learn to attain eternal life. Instead of eternal life, however, we have death. In contrast to eternal life, there is a lot of evidence for death. Everyone knows someone who has died. And sometimes we can feel the evidence of death in our own bodies as we grow older and weaker from year to year. The evidence of death is therefore overwhelming. We do not have to prove death, because it is already proven and is a certain outcome at the end of our lives. And yet death remains contradictory, illogical, and inappropriate for us humans. "Dust to dust... ashes to ashes" is what we hear at the grave, and we ask ourselves how it can be that someone with whom we have experienced so much is suddenly no longer there. Death contradicts everything we humans stand for because we are alive and death is the opposite of life and the opposite of ourselves. If we speak more broadly of the consequences of death and its many other manifestations, we have to say that death is not only at the end of life, but also in the middle of it, bothering us every day. I am talking about feelings and experiences that can also be like death. They lead us to hopelessness, rob us of our faith, and cause arguments and quarrels among us. Sometimes I am shocked at the extent to which death is also spreading among Christians. I see empty pews where someone once sat. The person is still alive... at least that's what I think. But he or she is no longer there. And I ask myself: "Does he or she still believe in Jesus? Does he or she still believe that death doesn't have the last word?" And I also see another manifestation of death. I see Christians arguing, and I wonder whether the argument is not an indication that we still haven't understood the most important thing. Sometimes I want to take action against death and all its manifestations. At the very least, I want to register my protest and say that I am against it and all its consequences. I see that I am not alone in this. You could even say that everyone is against death. Because death goes so against the grain for us, we fight against it. Nobody wants to die. People fight against death, both those who are at the end of their lives and those who are in the prime of life. Regardless of their world view or religion and regardless of their age, they oppose death and do not want to accept it. Sometimes we humans manage to successfully confront death or at least protest against it. Occasionally we delay its arrival through medical means, while at other times we simply suppress it and pretend that death is none of our business. But in the end, we can only keep death away temporarily. Through all these efforts, we only show that we can do nothing to oppose death. So what can we say? Should we give up? It seems that many people have done just that. They no longer believe in life, but in death instead. Going along with the motto: "Better to deal with the devil I know." They make friends with death and are against life. They prefer to follow the known devil instead of entering the unknown eternal life. Perhaps this is precisely what frightens us about death: that when we enter death, all masks fall and we are confronted with the ultimate truth that we will stand before God. We somehow suspect that we will then be completely revealed, without the possibility of hiding anything.

Things will come to light that will incriminate our lives. So the final and decisive question of death is whether we can stand before God in this last instance. Humans did not create life but feel that it is God who gives it and takes it away. It is also God who ultimately calls us to responsibility. We are powerless and helpless before this eternal question. We have neither the power nor the authority to decide. And it would all be over if Jesus had not come to us. But Jesus has come and is coming to us today. And when Jesus comes to us, He speaks a powerful word against death. In John 5, He starts His speech against death with a special word of power. He says "Truly, truly, I say to you" – this word is repeated again and again in John 5 and indicates that there is something of great significance here. This time, Jesus' "Truly, truly" refers to eternal life. Jesus dares to proclaim that our life is connected to eternity. He leads us from this world to the next. Jesus openly states what many only suspect: Eternal life has to do with God and is connected to Him. Only God decides about life. But it is precisely this eternal God who speaks His last word through Jesus Himself. Jesus is so closely connected to God that we can no longer separate God's Word and Jesus. We can therefore say: Jesus' Word is God's Word. And whoever is connected to Jesus is also connected to God. And Jesus speaks the words of life: "For just as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom He will." With these words, Jesus sets a strong opposition to death. Jesus' Word overcomes the power of death and transforms the stinking grave into a place of new life. Whoever hears Jesus' Word receives life. And those who die in Jesus' Word have eternal life. Through Jesus, we remain connected to life even when we die. Every time we place ourselves under Jesus' Word, we are under the word of the almighty God, who has not only created life since the first day of creation but has also willed it. What Jesus gives us through His word is a firm anchor point and a guide on how we can attain eternal life. Eternal life does not spring from a human characteristic, but from the will of God, who has always wanted it. In Jesus, God shows us that He also wanted us personally. God loved us so much that He gave His only Son so that all who believe in Him may have eternal life. For Jesus, who is in communion with the Father, death is out of the question. He knew that God's love would never end. Jesus trusted that He was united with God and went to the cross in this faith. In this firm trust, He placed His spirit in God's hands, and on the third day He rose from the dead in this trust. Jesus was, is, and always will be life. Just as death is an inseparable part of our life, it does not belong to Jesus. Eternal life in Jesus is not simply an extension of our present life. If this life were merely prolonged under the conditions of sin, it would be hell. No, eternal life in Jesus is actually a new life and a new creation in Him and in God.

In our mortal world, there are no places of resurrection – except in Jesus. We find life in Jesus, and that already begins now, in this world marked by death. When we are in Jesus, we already have one foot in heaven. In a way, we can already glimpse what it will be like - eternal life! Jesus describes this life and tells us that we can already rejoice and marvel at it now in this world. He prophesies this to His disciples when He says: "You will be amazed." And that is exactly how it was. When the first people saw the empty tomb of Jesus and experienced Him as the risen Lord, they stood firmly on this earth, but they understood what it meant to already have one foot in heaven. They realized that death does not have the last word and understood that life is now in Jesus. That is why they regularly sought Jesus and regularly celebrated Holy Communion, because they knew that they were thereby connected to Jesus in heaven.

Although death may still frighten us, we need not be afraid – Not of physical death nor of the many manifestations of death. For just like the early Christians, we too can already place ourselves under Jesus' Word, which gives us life. As a result, death loses its power over us even today. Life begins now, here in this life! Already at our baptism we are directly connected with God and eternal life. And when we celebrate Holy Communion, we are also connected to God in heaven. God's decision about Jesus' grave is also a decision about our grave. And no one and nothing can override this Word of God. Even when we die, we are in Jesus' hands and will not remain in death. Amen.