

THE CRUCIAL HOURS ¹

Life Marches Victorious Over Death

In the name of Jesus, our Living Victory, dearly redeemed in the life of Christ:

History is full of stories about unlikely heroes. Not long after the Revolutionary War the son of a pastor from a small town in England saved his country from the French Emperor Napoleon. Think of the movie *Master and Commander: Far Wide of the World*. The sails of England's navy clashed with Napoleon's at Cape Trafalgar off the coast of Spain. Defeat for England would have opened the way for Napoleon to invade the island nation. Strongly outnumbered the preacher's son who had grown up to be British Admiral Lord Nelson was able to destroy 22 of Napoleon's 33 ships of the line – while the British lost none. Trafalgar was one of the greatest victories in naval history. But on his flagship *Victory*, Lord Nelson lay dying, shot through the lung and spine by a French sniper high on the mast of an enemy ship. In that great moment of victory the British didn't know whether to cheer or to mourn. At 4:30 in the afternoon, October 21, 1805, Admiral Lord Nelson died. To get his body home would take several weeks. But there is no way to transport a body in those days. So they put his body in a cask filled with brandy. Yes, they basically pickled Nelson's body to keep the ravages of death from setting in and to take their hero home. Victorious he *was*, but after death you could not say, "He *is* victorious."

The women going out to Jesus' tomb Easter morning were planning to do one last act of kindness for Jesus. They brought spices to wrap with the body in a loving but futile attempt to keep the realities of death away. What they found was an empty tomb and two angels announcing, "***He is not here, but has been raised! Remember how he told you while he was still in Galilee that the Son of Man must be delivered over to the hands of sinful men, and be crucified, and the third day rise again?***" (Luke 24:6f)

The Roman soldiers made sure Jesus was dead. He had predicted that. But His followers missed what Jesus kept telling them. Too painful, too strange His promise to rise again from the dead. Still today many misunderstand the importance of Easter, stuck on the Easter Bunny and expensive eggs.

If you ask Sunday school students, "How did Jesus save you?" you'll get an answer similar to my class at Sem. "He died to pay for my sins." That's half right as the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write: "***He was handed over to death because of our trespasses.***" We understand what those crucial hours of Good Friday and His death mean for us. But can we hear Easter across the centuries?

What did Jesus do before He died? He lived a perfect life in our place. Under God's wrath He died as our Substitute. Then **Life Marches Victorious Over Death**. Christ's body did not decay. He is risen!

To revel in Christ's victory understand *trespasses* in God's courtroom. It's not so far off a story a now sainted member told me of riding his motorcycle through a small southern town. Enjoying the day, he missed the sudden drop in speed limit, but the waiting cop did not. As soon as our friend opened his mouth to speak, he said his Minnesota accent set a gleam in the eye of the small town officer. No mercy. Ignorance is no excuse. You pay the fine or land in jail. It's a *mistake* violation, an "Oops sin" (Dr. John Lawrenz ἁμαρτία). Each *trespass* in God's courtroom is a capital crime, like it or not. God, the eternal Judge says, "***The wages of sin is death***" (Romans 6:23a) – a *wage* paid only by each sinful human in hell.

One of those classic ask-the-pastor-moments: "Which is true? *Jesus raised himself from the dead?* or *God raised Jesus from the dead?*" In the classic pastor's answer: *Right*. Yes, they're both true because

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God's Good Book tells us both. *Jesus raised Himself from the dead* (John 2:19), and in this passage in Romans and many other places (Acts 2:24; 1 Corinthians 15:15) it says, *Jesus was raised from the dead* – passive verb, accomplished by God the Father raising Jesus. And here's the awesome truth that won't leave you "in a pickle," or your hero in a pickle barrel – dead and gone. Here in Romans 4:25, the Holy Spirit also says through Paul, ***"He . . . was raised to life because of our justification."***

Justify (or *justification*) is really a courtroom term, a judge rendering a verdict. So to *justify* is to declare: *Not guilty!* It's a familiar word—*justify*, usually about people *justifying* their actions, basically saying, "I understand at first glance, it looks like I did something wrong. But these were not normal circumstances." "Officer, I didn't see the speed sign, so I can say with a clear conscience. I'm not guilty because I justify my actions." Does it matter to the law if you can line up ten friends to agree? Or your lawyer to argue your case? Or other inmates on death row to hear another convict was acquitted? Isn't the only thing that matters what the judge says about you? Could you be satisfied if the whole world were basking in God's grace and forgiveness, but you weren't sure about the Judge's verdict for you?

We need just One to justify us—to declare us *Not guilty!* It has to be the Almighty Judge. Nothing else will do when we stand before God alone on Judgment Day. Because you and I have committed crimes against God, and because in God's courtroom every misstep is a capital crime, every trespass makes us worthy of the eternal death penalty. God says, ***"The wages of sin is death."*** The world can howl, scholars can challenge, comics can skittle and snark – but all that matters in the end is what God says. And the fact that God's own Son had to die makes them all angry at divine justice. And yet...

Easter shouts, "Wait! Hear this!" ***"The wages of sin is death, but the undeserved gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*** (Romans 6:23 EHV) **Life Marches Victorious Over Death!**

Serving jury duty we wondered why there were so many delays getting the trial underway. After the verdict was in, the judge told us why they had to keep us waiting in a side room time after time. The defendant was so violent that his defense lawyers did not want us to see him that way. It would have prejudiced the jury against him. As it was, the judge agreed there was not enough evidence to convict him of murder beyond a shadow of a doubt. Unfortunately, he had committed so many other crimes that as soon as he was acquitted, he was arrested again. It looked as if he would never be acquitted for freedom.

How could it be any different between us and God? If He declared us *Not guilty!* once, but we keep on tripping up, sinning by omission, who of us could ever survive Judgment Day? For us to be truly free there has to be more, much more. And Easter shouts, "Listen up! There's more! So much more!"

What others say doesn't matter. No matter how hard you try to justify yourself and your actions, you can't do or say enough to compel God to keep saying to you, "Not guilty." But then, there's Jesus. We've seen His innocent life all during this Lenten season as Pontius Pilate and the thief on the cross declare that Jesus had done nothing wrong. He justifies himself, knowing that all is fulfilled in God's plan that Jesus would live a perfect life, suffer our hell on the cross forsaken by God, and then declare, ***"It is finished."*** But when Jesus says, ***"It is finished,"*** is it *finished* for us in heaven?

Listen again to what God says: ***"He was handed over to death because of our trespasses and was raised to life because of our justification."*** If God the Father had left Jesus in the grave, the verdict would have been against us. Jesus would only have been justifying Himself. But ***"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them. And he has entrusted to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ [with] God making an appeal through us. We urge you, on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."*** (2 Corinthians 5:19f EHV) The verdict stands for now and forever. God confirms His Son's decree in heaven: ***"It is finished!"***

Christ is **Victorious**. God's gift declares you *Not guilty!* by the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. In Christ alone your hope is found. Because He lives, you can see Easter's message in the round window above our altar. Steve's window praises God for using cancer to bring him to repentance through God's Word in the open Bible. New Life in Christ rises like the butterfly. Happy Easter! Amen.

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