

**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).

Whenever I log on to my Apple Notebook at home, a big picture of Steve Jobs automatically appears. Jobs, the founder of Apple, died a couple of weeks ago. He was just 56 years old. He had a lot to do with the fact that you and I have personal computers at home and perhaps an i-pod or an i-pad or the brand new i-iphone 4, or knock-offs of these innovations. Time will tell, but some say history will revere Jobs as much as Alexander Graham Bell.

Jobs was a convert to Zen Buddhism. He did not believe in a higher power of any sort. He was convinced as anyone could be that this life is all there is. There’s nothing after this life. Listen to what Jobs said at a Stanford University commencement speech. “No one wants to die” he said. “Even people who want to go to heaven don’t want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one [no one!] has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because death is very likely the single best invention of life. It’s life’s change agent; it clears out the old to make way for the new. Right now, the new is you” he said to the graduating seniors. “But someday, not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it’s quite true. Your time is limited, so don’t waste it living someone else’s life. Don’t be trapped by dogma [creeds, faith systems], which is living with the results of other people’s thinking. Don’t let the noise of others’ opinions drown out your own inner voice, heart and intuition.”

This is a pretty good example of the Gospel of our secular age and part of what makes it attractive is that you don’t need any special revelation from God to know it. It’s based only on what we can see, on empirical evidence. It requires no faith really . . . unless believing God doesn’t exist is its own faith system. The only law of this secular Gospel is that you be true to yourself which sounds a lot easier and like a lot more fun than keeping the ten commandments. However, this Gospel stumbles at any number of points. For example, it has no consolation to give the one who is despairing. No consolation for the one suffocating in guilt . . . (perhaps for having been true to himself). It doesn’t know how to address real evil in the world. For example it is strangely silent when confronted with the kind of evil bent on eradicating whole tribes and nations from the earth. And it really has no hope or comfort to offer in the face of tragedy – the kind of tragedy that cuts off lives not just at 56 years of age (in the case of Steve Jobs) but also at 5 or 6 years of age. Is death still the single best invention in life? Is that something you would be willing to tell the parents at a young child’s funeral? Or picture the wife and children of Steve Jobs standing around his fresh grave with these words ringing in their ears: “Death is good. It

clears out the old to make way for the new. Someday you too will become old and be cleared away.” Cold comfort, if you ask me. Cold comfort indeed.

The nature of my work often puts me in close proximity with death and dying, and one of the things I’ve noticed is that many people turn to cold comforts when a loved one has died. (By cold comforts, I mean things that don’t really satisfy, or things that artificially satisfy only a little bit, a veneer sort of comfort.) For example, “As long as we remember him, he has not really died but lives on in our hearts.” Really? Can we really live on in the memory banks of family and friends? It seems to me the cemeteries in and around Watertown are full of forgotten people. Sure we remember those who recently died . . . their faces and their stories. Let a hundred years pass, however, and most of that will have been erased for obvious reasons. What can you tell me about your grandfather’s great-grandfather? If he is living on in your memory, his is a very faint heart beat. He could die another death any day. Cold comfort!

Another example: “Oh doesn’t she look good lying there in the casket.” I figure I’ve done a couple hundred funerals by now and not once have I ever thought someone in the casket looked good. It’s not that the funeral directors do a bad job; it’s just that there’s a dead person lying there. I don’t think of death as the single best invention. The Bible refers to death as an enemy. It’s not the worst enemy but it is the last enemy. And the sight of what that last enemy has done to people I care about never looks good. Cold comfort.

Or the guy who died out on the fairway of the third hole of Norwood Hills golf course in St. Louis. He suffered a massive heart attack. The others in his foursome tried their best to do CPR. And when the EMT’s finally arrived, they tried violently shocking him back into life. “Well” a friend of his said later, “at least he died doing what he loved.” Cold comfort! The fact is he’ll never do it again . . . or go fishing with his grandson or kiss his wife in the morning.

Some environmentalists squeeze with all their might to get a few drops of comfort out of that fact that, when they are buried, their bodies will return to the earth and as they break down they will provide minerals and such for the grass above or the roots of a distant tree. It’s a sort of environmental reincarnation. But as far as I’m concerned the tree can look for its minerals elsewhere. And to be a recalcitrant dandelion sprouting up next to a tombstone, the target of a gaseous 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 over your nephew as he sits all day in his cubicle and stares at his computer? Or as he drinks himself into divorce and unemployment and a car wreck? Even if the saints in heaven could see us, does the Bible say anywhere they have the power and permission to intervene and help us? Cold comfort.

There are lots of cold comforts out there (and in here). “At least she never knew what hit her; she was dead before she hit the floor.” There’s a much older and wiser prayer that asks the Lord to spare us from sudden and evil death. “At least he didn’t suffer much” when there’s the fearful possibility he’s suffering now more than ever before because he rejected Christ and his gifts. Or “At least she didn’t have to spend much time in a nursing home” which might be a gentle way of saying there may yet be an inheritance. Cold comforts, all of them.

One more: “He visited me.” He was in the bird that sat for a long, long time on my windowsill just looking at me. Or, she was in the butterfly that was fanning its wings on the

mums in the flower pot. Or, he was in the chip monk that came real close to my feet. As a pastor, I never say anything; it would cause more harm than good. But there's really no comfort in these things. There is no hug, no conversation, no kiss or love making or walking hand in hand. The chip monk scurries away with panicked chirping. The butterfly is nowhere to be seen in February. The gazing bird doesn't know how to hold a decent conversation. Cold comforts!

And the thing about cold comforts is that they probably expose that for us the resurrection of Jesus and the promise of our own resurrection just isn't quite enough. We need something more than just that and so we fabricate them. We go off and, unwittingly, carve some idols. We need something that our eyes can see *now*, something visible to cling to rather than an ancient promise for a future salvation.

In our text Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. It's a Greek city, and as Greeks, they didn't much care for physical things . . . for trees, dirt and flesh. All that is base, bad even. Flesh imprisons the higher things like spirit and soul. Death finally releases these things from their fleshly prisons. So you can imagine how the Greeks would have a hard time with the resurrection of Jesus in the flesh. Why would he ever want to do that? So it appears some of the Corinthian Christians were shying away from the resurrection of Jesus. Maybe his ideas live on, his teachings. That works. But certainly not his flesh; the best place for flesh is the grave.

Paul deals with this head-on. First, he reminds them "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, and 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. That is, see them about it! Ask them yourselves. "Then he appeared to James" Paul continues, then to all the apostles. Last of all . . . he appeared also to me." "Now" Paul asks, "how can some of you say there is no resurrection?" Check again the evidence, Paul says.

But there's more. There are consequences to unbelief. "If Christ has not been raised . . . your faith is in vain." It's empty. It's futile. That is, if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Jesus is still dead; he's nothing more than the decomposing corpse of an itinerant Jewish carpenter- turned – rabbi. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, he was just another guru-figure and in fact an imposter who taught blasphemy in the name of God. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, you're still in your sins. The sin-problem remains unsolved. All talk of Jesus dying for our sins in accordance with the scriptures is meaningless. Scripture teaches "the wages of sin is death", the end-result of which is total separation from your loved ones, total separation from God, cut off from him and facing his judgment. When we deny or diminish the resurrection, there are awful consequences. Then the wages of sin (death) remains not just 'the last enemy' (v. 26), but the one invincible terror. Then death is not falling asleep in Christ and waking up to his welcome in the Father's house. Rather, it's simply perishing without hope and without God. The resurrection of Christ is the lynch pin. If Christ was not raised from the dead, we of all men are most to be pitied. We've been swindled, duped and we have no hope for life beyond death. If he was not raised from the dead, he is not Lord of anything. He is simply a fraudulent wannabe. If Christ has not been raised, cold, hollow and artificial comforts are all we have.

"But, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead" Paul writes. (This but [spelled but] is the best one in the Bible.) But, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. And

he is the first fruits of the resurrection, the first of an immense harvest to come. This harvest consists of all who are in (v. 22) and belong to Christ (v. 23) Paul says. In fact, Paul sees this baptismal union between you and Christ so complete that you *already* have been raised in him. In Romans 6, he writes, “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). John 3:36 simply says, “Whoever believes in the Son *has* eternal life.” The resurrection of Jesus is not just a past event, and your resurrection is not just a future event. It’s a present reality.

In other words, this is not just another cold comfort. This is the real deal. As Christians, this is where we draw our comfort. We don’t need any cold comforts to prop us up. Paul tells the Corinthians (and us), “Death is swallowed up in victory. 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 who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus died your death and gives you his resurrection. That’s our comfort and he invites us to it: “Do not let your hearts be troubled” he says in John 14. “Trust in me. There are *many* rooms in my Father’s house. I am going there to prepare a place for you and I will come again and take you to be with me, that where I am you may be also.”

Cold comforts have a way of cheapening Christ’s death and resurrection. People of God, you don’t need cold comforts. You have Christ. He is your comfort. He is your peace. He is your Resurrection and your Life. Amen.