

The Son of God Goes Forth to War

About 120 years ago the American artist Albert Pinkham Ryder painted a memorable scene titled “The Race Track.” Today the painting hangs in Cleveland’s Museum of Art. Look at a photo of that painting on the screen right now, the colors are not as bright as they once were. Or maybe the artist purposely made the scene look dark and dingy. After all the subtitle of the painting reads: “Death on a Pale Horse.” ~Creepy~ In case the photo of the painting is too dark for you to make out the scene, there is a horseman riding alone on a horse-racing track. That thing in his right hand is a huge scythe, a tool farmers used to use for harvesting crops before mechanical reapers became commonplace. Notice that the rider is going around the track clockwise. Now why would the rider be riding his horse in the “wrong” direction? What was the rider’s name again? “Death on a Pale Horse.” Ah, no wonder the rider looks almost like a skeleton. The rider is the Grim Reaper. So then the race track is a symbol for everyone’s life on earth. Although we can’t see them, they are all racing toward the finish line, and Death is riding toward them in the opposite direction. That will make it easier for Death to pick off all the human riders as they approach. Since the rider’s name is Death, we expect he will get everyone. And if anyone swerves off the track to avoid Death, O look, there’s a big snake on the ground alongside the track. Nope, you’re not going to escape Death. The pale rider, Death, is coming after you. He’s got your friends and family in his sights. And he always wins. So far.

Now consider another painting. You’ll have to use your mind to see this one. The artist is known by his common name: God. Through the apostle John, he wanted us to know that the story of life on earth has another ending besides just death. Listen to this word picture that God has drawn for us in today’s sermon text from Revelation. [Read Rev 19:11-16 here.] Did you notice? This picture also has a rider, a rider on a white horse. He’s got a name too: King of kings and Lord of lords. Does he scare you? I hope so, at least a little. The artist wants us to sense the power of the rider in the blazing fire coming out of his eyes and the sharp sword coming out of his mouth. ¹⁵“*He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.*” “What does that mean? Are people the grapes, and he is stomping them? This doesn’t sound very warm and fuzzy. Are you sure this is an Easter sermon?” Yes! Everyone needs to understand the power of this rider. He can strike down the nations. He rules them with an iron scepter, as in, if you do the opposite of what he wants, he can bonk you on the head with that scepter. That’s a touch worse than a tickle. This rider can stomp you in the winepress. That’s why his robe has been dipped in blood—(check out Isaiah 63:2-3!)—he has indeed stomped his enemies, conquering them all. You do not want to go against this rider. He is ‘King of kings and Lord of lords.’ He is in charge of everyone, even all the kings and all the lesser rulers, and all of us little people too. This sure strikes me as the kind of warrior we’ve been thinking about since the beginning of Lent. *The Son of God Goes*

Forth to War. According to this Artist's work, our warrior knows total VICTORY.

By referring to God as an artist, I don't mean that his work is subject to various interpretations. God revealed the interpretation he wanted us to understand, and we don't get to add to that or subtract from it (Rev 22:18-19). God wants us to know and believe that Jesus is victorious over death and the other powerful enemy who worked so hard to bring death to all people. VICTORY. This Resurrection Sunday is a day to celebrate VICTORY.

When we last left our Savior, our great hero, our warrior, his dead body was being taken down from the cross and being laid in a brand new tomb, a small cave cut out of the rock. Before dying he had just declared, "*It is finished*" (John 19:30), and then he voluntarily gave up his life at the time of his own choosing. Already on Friday we were calling Jesus' death his greatest victory.

"How can Jesus be victorious if he died?" Because of what Jesus' death accomplished. Our sins needed to be punished if God is fair and just. But if we had taken the punishment, we would have ended up in hell, forever being stomped ¹⁵"*in the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty.*" God didn't want that for anyone. So the Son of God took our place, not just on the cross, but under God's wrath. Jesus took the full stomping for us. Because "*the wages of sin is death*" (Romans 6:23), Jesus died in our place. His death accomplished our rescue from sin.

But Jesus didn't stay dead. He came alive

again. That's the point of our sermon text. Listen again to the apostle John. ¹¹*I saw heaven standing open, and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war.* This rider on a horse is not painted on canvass, nor carved in marble, nor cast in bronze. He is alive and powerful, and actively waging war. And not by himself. ¹⁴*The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean.* The armies of heaven. Is that people? If so, look closely. Come on, zoom in tight on the army. Look closely at that face right there. It's your face! You're in the Lord's army. And you're dressed in white linen—that's the color that people in Bible times wore when they were victorious. If these armies of heaven are people, you have VICTORY. You win with this rider. Follow him everywhere. Arrange your life to do what pleases him. This rider wins. Jesus wins. He is no longer tied up and humiliated by soldiers who pounded their crown of thorns onto his head with the fake wooden scepter they made him hold. His body is not in a grave anymore. "*Christ has indeed been raised from the dead*" (1 Corinthians 15:20).

Jesus had certainly died. The professional killers, also known as Roman soldiers, stabbed him in the heart to make sure he was dead. His death is how he gained victory over sin for us. But that still left one more foe to defeat: death itself, a force so unyielding that only two people have ever left earth without dying (Genesis 5:21-24, 2 Kings 2). No wonder the apostle Paul writes: "*The last enemy to be destroyed is*

death” (1 Corinthians 15:26). Through this word-picture God wants us to see that there is something even more powerful than death. Jesus did something no one else has ever done. He raised himself from death. That means he is stronger than the grave!

Think of that the next time you visit a cemetery. Maybe you’ll go there to lay yet another loved one to rest. Aren’t you sick of burying your dead? It’s like admitting that death is stronger than we are. But then it is. I hate that death takes our loved ones away from us. But while you’re at the graveside look up. There’s Jesus standing next to you as you lay your loved one into their final resting place. And he says in your ear through all those Bible passages the pastor reads during the graveside service, “Don’t worry. I conquered death. Remember? I have the victory. I’ll make death surrender your loved one on the Last Day. Just wait a little longer.” All this Jesus wants us to think about when we look at the picture that the Holy Spirit painted for us in our sermon text. Jesus is alive! The mighty rider on the white horse is a victorious rider.

“But how do we know Jesus is alive? Even if we grant that Jesus raised other people from death, they all had to die a second time, as far as we know.” Good question. The Bible lists over a dozen different appearances the risen Jesus made, including one time when there were over 500 people present. Get a stubborn German and a stubborn Swede in the same

room to watch the same event and you’ll end up with at least three strong opinions. Would it have been much different for 500 Jewish people at the time of Christ? Yet those 500 testified that they saw the dead Jesus alive again. If anyone wanted to challenge the resurrection of Jesus, they could have challenged those 500 witnesses or the apostles. And some did (2 Peter 1:16). But that’s one reason why Christianity grew so quickly—there were so many eyewitnesses of the formerly dead Jesus.

If Jesus had stayed dead, Christianity would have become just another fairy tale. There were plenty of Jewish and Roman intellectuals who could have easily written documentable refutations of the four Gospels. But so many knew either from personal experience or from what they heard from firsthand witnesses: Jesus actually rose from the grave.

Think of this as you make your own funeral plans, something I hope you all will do. I admire all of you who already have your burial plot bought and maybe even your headstone in place. Good for you. Your fear of death is under Jesus’ control. And why shouldn’t it be? Jesus said, “*Because I live, you also will live*” (John 14:19). Why is that important to you, O Christian? Because you know death is coming for you. Maybe it will be through COVID-19, but your cause of death is much more likely to be something else. We try to push death away, maybe because we understand that earthly life is

a great gift from God and we get to treat life with respect. Or maybe you are among those who push death away because of fear, as if Jesus' resurrection has not yet helped you conquer your fear of death. So you join the millions who spend more than a trillion dollars each year in just this country in a vain attempt to beat cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and other common threats to life. But the very best we can possibly do is forestall death, delay it, defer it, postpone it. Unless Jesus comes back first, death will take you.

Easter is God's way of proclaiming, "There is a cure!" The rider pictured in our text made this promise before he forced death to let him go: "*I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me will live, even though they die*" (John 11:25). That's us. We will rise from our graves because the one who has the VICTORY over death said so. Your body—go ahead and poke it or pinch it right now—that body will rise glorified. The apostle Paul declares: "*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*" (1 Corinthians 15:52,53).

Our victorious Lord riding the white horse has the power to do as he promised. Not only has he promised to raise all believers, he has also promised to raise all unbelievers. But it won't turn out well for

them. Many of you were in our Sunday morning Bible class until the Governor rightly told us to stay at home. You read the horrible things that Jesus has promised to those who treat him like he is not the Savior of all sinners. So then why would anyone go against Jesus? Why would anyone say, "I don't intend to change, Jesus. I'm going to go back to my life after church today and do exactly as I please. You don't get any more of my Sunday mornings. You don't get fifteen minutes for devotions from each day you grant me. You are not the boss of me." Oh, dear listeners, don't be on the wrong side of this. Humble yourself and come over to be with the rest of us who acknowledge that the Son of God should have pushed us out of his loving presence forever, but he didn't. Those riding with the rider in this picture are safe forever! God has chosen to count us as his dear children. He already answers all our prayers according to his will. He already turns evil into good for us. He cheers us on days of sadness and disappointment. He heals all our diseases. He takes away all the shame we feel for past sins, and he replaces it with his peace. He leads us to say: "All my sins are forgiven by God for Jesus' sake. I will never be put to shame before God" (see Hebrews 8:12 and Romans 10:11). "My proof is Jesus' empty tomb and God's promises. With this rider, I will finish the race, and I will have Jesus' VICTORY!"