

Is Life a Tragedy or a Comedy?

Happy Easter everybody! My name is Kent, and I'm one of the pastors here. If you're at a City Church Gathering for the first time ever this morning, *welcome*. We sincerely hope you enjoyed the donuts and the coffee. Easter calls for celebration in a *lot* of different ways, but we felt like bare minimum, it justified plenty of sugar and caffeine, so that's what that was about.

If you have a bible, or if you have a bible on your phone, go ahead and turn with me to the book of 1 Corinthians, chapter 15. If you are newer to the bible and have trouble finding it, you could totally just Google "1 Corinthians 15" and I'm sure you'll find it. If this is your first time with us, what we generally like to do here on Sundays is open up the Scriptures, walk through a passage together, and then let the Spirit show us what the things we read mean for *our* everyday life. No smoke or mirrors—just the words of God and the spirit of God. So we'll get to 1 Corinthians 15 here in just a bit.

But while you're getting there, I want to frame up our time together this morning with one question for all of us to consider. Are you ready? Here's the question: *is life a tragedy, or a comedy?* (repeat) Those of you who paid attention in school when you studied Shakespeare will know what those terms mean. I was one of those people who did *not* pay attention, so let me explain it briefly for the rest of us. When it comes to literature and storylines in general, there are two types: *tragedies*, and *comedies*. *Tragedies* have a story arc shaped like this:



Usually, in a tragedy, the story starts in an okay place, things get steadily better and better, but then they drop off significantly and end tragically. *Romeo & Juliet*, for instance, is a *tragedy*. The story starts off with the main characters meeting, then falling in love, but then things get worse and worse until eventually they both die and never get to be together (I would say "spoiler alert," but if you haven't read it in the past 400 years, I'm just assuming it's not a priority for you). That's a *tragedy*. Another slightly more *modern* tragedy would be a movie like *Titanic*. The story starts with Rose engaged to Billy Zane, who is a verifiably horrible person (you know that because he has slicked

back hair—bad guys only ever have one hairstyle). But then Rose meets Jack, they fall in love, they go frolicking about the boat...but then, after Rose meets Jack, *ship* meets *iceberg*, and it's all downhill from there. The story ends with Jack dying because Rose for some strange reason doesn't want to share her float (that has plenty of space!) with him. That's also a tragedy. So there may be bright spots in the story, but in the end, things get worse and worse until it all ends in a very tragic way. That's how *tragedies* work.

Now *comedies*, on the other hand, work in just the *opposite way*. Their storylines look more like this:



Comedies also start in an okay place, then there's usually a *dip* or a disappointment in the action, but then things steadily get better and better until there's a celebration or a bow at the end. Things end on a very *positive* note. Think about the movie *Lion King*. The movie starts with the birth of Simba, the whole animal kingdom celebrating in the most epic scene ever, but then Mufasa dies, Simba is exiled, and Scar runs the kingdom into the ground. But then at the end Simba returns, defeats Scar, and claims his rightful place. That's a *comedy*. So in this sense, the word "comedy" doesn't really have anything to do with it being funny or not funny, it just means the story ends on a *positive note*. If it helps you, you can remember which is which by the *shape of the narrative*. **A tragedy ends negatively and looks like a frown. A comedy ends positively and looks like a smile.** The shape of the narrative tells you which one it is.

So again, **my question for you** today is this: **is life itself—is the story that you and I find ourselves in—a tragedy, or a comedy?** Which of these more accurately *represent* the experience of life in our world? Now, by asking that, I don't mean which one does *your life feel like right now*. We would all have various answers to that. What I mean is which one represents the story of life *in general?* The story of *humanity*. Is that story more like a *tragedy*, or a *comedy*?

I think if your **eyes and ears are open** to the message we receive day in and day out, I think you have to conclude that life is a *tragedy*. **If this life is all there is, and there is no grander story that it all belongs inside of, that is a tragedy by definition.**

Because that means no matter what, however incredible the life you lead is on this earth is, you will eventually die, be buried, and be forgotten (Happy Easter?) That's where we're all headed. Zero exceptions. Last I checked the stats, right around 100% of people eventually die. And that means life is a *tragedy*, through and through. **Death means that life itself, if that's all there is, is a *tragedy* waiting to happen.**

Now, that's not to say there aren't more *positive ways to spin* that story, because there are. You can make it sound much more optimistic in how you present it. We can say things like "seize the day" or "live for today!" or more recently, "YOLO"—thank you Drake for that one. Those all *sound* much better than "you're going to die soon." But if we see past the marketing, you'll realize that those all still operate on the premise that life is a *tragedy*. They're all saying life is short, and it won't be long until it's over, so do all you can do to enjoy it while it lasts. It's that if this life is all there is, and eventually nothing we do will last or be remembered, so we might as well have a little fun with it *now*. The message is that you should make that high point of the frown as high as you can, because the decline will be here before you know it. So while it might sound more *positive*, that is a *tragedy* just the same. *It's just a tragedy with an amazing P.R. department.*

And *if any of us* actually believe *life is a comedy*, it's usually a *cheap* version of a comedy. *It's that life might be bad right now, but it's only a matter of time until we get that perfect job, meet that perfect person, live in that perfect city, and then we will live happily ever after.* This is everything Disney movies taught us to believe about life. Our "happily ever after" is *coming*, it's just not here *yet*. But the reality is that even that outlook has quite the dark side. *Because plenty of people never get that perfect job. Plenty of people never meet that perfect person. Plenty of people never get to live in that perfect city.* So when you pretend that life is the *cheap* version of a comedy, it often sets you up for disappointment and let-down at the fact that life did not pan out like you thought that it would. Maybe even *resentment*, right? I mean **this is why many people live their lives with this deep, residing sense that life has dealt them a bad hand**—because they believed that life was a comedy, and their "happily ever after" never came.

Or, best case scenario, what happens is that you *get* the perfect job, you *meet* the perfect person, you *move* to the perfect city—you *get* your "happily ever ever"...but it's nowhere near as perfect as you imagined it being. It's not "happily ever after," it's *meh* ever after. And turns out that *then* you need to find the *next* perfect job, the *next* perfect person, the *next* perfect city, the *next* perfect experience, or whatever it is. My point is just that *cheap* comedies aren't really *comedies* at all—they're *also* tragedies. **It turns out that what you thought was the amazing ending of your life is actually just the top**

of the frown before the tragic ending. These *too* can be filled with disappointment, frustration, and tragedy.

So my point is that *tragedy* is **precisely what life is. *If***—and this is a big *if*—the resurrection of Jesus did not happen. And *that* brings us to **1 Corinthians 15**. Pick it up with me in v. 13:

[13] But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. [14] And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.

Okay, here's **what this passage just said:** *if* Jesus did not come back from the dead, then everything that we do up here each week is absolutely pointless. Everything that so many of *you* do by sharing the good news of Jesus with your coworkers and friends and neighbors is useless. And more than *that*, if Jesus was not raised, our very *faith* is in vain. If the resurrection isn't true, there is *nothing lasting* worth believing in, and life is a tragedy. You're born, you maybe have a few good years here and there, and then you die—that's *it*. And then he goes on, v. 15:

[15] (If Jesus hasn't been raised from the dead, he says...) We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised (that logic-check out). [16] For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. [17] And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. [18] Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. [19] If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

So Paul says that *if* Jesus has not risen from the grave, there are **three specific tragic consequences** of that. **First, we are still in our sins.** If there is no resurrection, there is no possibility that we won't always struggle with the things we struggle with now. **If we are impatient and self-righteous now, we will always be impatient and self-righteous.** If we are racked with shame and self-hatred now, we will always be marked by shame and self-hatred. If we are consumed with greed and materialism now, we will always be consumed with greed and materialism. If Jesus hasn't been raised, there's no chance that things will ever get better. Tragic ending to our story.

Second, if Jesus hasn't been raised, death is the end of the story. Just like we mentioned earlier, if this life is all there is, that means that everybody's story ends at the grave. Every single human story is a tragedy. // And **third, if Jesus hasn't been raised, we are to be pitied.** Put another way, if what we call our faith in Jesus is just something

we cling to periodically to get us through—if it's more about positivity and reassurance than it is a historical event to base our lives *on*—people should absolutely *pity* us. Because **that means our story is a tragedy just like everyone else's—we're just living in *denial* about it.** So there we have it. If Jesus has not been raised—if there is no resurrection—**that's the situation we're left with:** a *tragedy*, any way you look at it.

But my dear friends, **I have good news for us** this morning: Christ *has* been raised from the dead (I'm gonna say that again because I don't think you heard me: Christ *has been raised from the dead*). Paul continues, in v. 20:

*[20] But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the **firstfruits** of those who have fallen asleep. [21] For as by a man came **death**, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. [22] For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ **shall all be made alive.***

So here is the **story of the bible.** Our **first parents, Adam and Eve** turned life into a tragedy for all of us. God made humanity to live forever with him in a world with no sin, no pain, no death and no tragedy. But they made the choice, in essence, that we *all* make constantly: to live life independently from God, and to define good and evil for themselves. And that is what started the downtick in the storyline.

But **as the story declined, God sat into motion** a plan to change all of that. A plan that had been underway before the foundations of the world. And the culmination of that plan was sending a man, who in reality *was God*, to turn the whole thing around. **Philippians 2**, talking about this plan, says that *Jesus...*

*...who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being **born in the likeness of men.** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

So catch this: God's plan to reverse the tragedy of life in his world was to **endure tragedy himself.** Did you see that? God's plan didn't involve him remaining distant and detached from the tragedy of life. **Some religious traditions teach that: that the only way to endure the tragedy of this life is to try and remain above it. Distant and detached. To empty your life of all desire and longings, so that tragedy doesn't affect you the way it affects others.**

But **that's not the perspective** of the bible. For God, this plan involved he *himself* putting on flesh and blood and *entering into* our tragedy. He writes himself into the story not just to *experience* the tragedy, but to be on the *receiving* end of the very worst parts of it. He

became subject to all of it, to the point of death—experiencing the tragedy that all of us were headed towards. And then he experiences not just *any* death, but death on a cross: one of the most devastating, painful deaths imaginable. Jesus entered into our tragedy, and experienced it to the full, and his life too ended in tragedy.

...or so we thought. You see, **if that's where the story ended**, the message would be that life is indeed a tragedy, and that that tragedy comes for everyone—even Jesus. But that's *not* where the story ends. Peter, one of Jesus' closest disciples, says that **God raised him up, loosing the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it.**

“It was not possible for him to be held by it.” There it is: Jesus' story **does not end in tragedy—it ends in resurrection.** Three days after his death, a group of disciples went to visit Jesus' tomb, only to find it *empty*. The pangs of death and tragedy had been loosened, because it was not possible for them to hold Jesus down. As it turned out, what we thought was Jesus' tragedy turned out to be just the lowest point of the smile.

And the point that the Scriptures make repeatedly is that **because death wasn't the end of his story**, it doesn't have to be the end of ours either. Back in 1 Corinthians 15, it said that Jesus' resurrection was the **“firstfruits.”** **In other words, what was so significant about his resurrection isn't that it was the only one to ever happen. It was the first one of many to happen.** The story of the bible is that Jesus' resurrection was a big deal because it made possible *our resurrection*—all of those who belong to Jesus. The story of the bible is not that we will all one day be sucked up into heaven before stuff gets really bad. The story of the bible is that we will reign forever with Jesus in a new heavens and a new earth: a world that is *remade* to be everything he intended it to be. So for us too, *death* just happens to be the low point of the smile.

So the **true story of the world** is a **comedy**. It's a beautiful story with the best possible ending. It's a narrative that closes with the only true good guy winning and bringing anyone who wants to come *along* in his victory. It's him proclaiming with *confidence* that “every sad thing will one day become untrue” and that every heartache will be forgotten. It's a story that ends with him wiping every tear from every eye and proclaiming that sin, death and injustice are forever defeated and have been robbed forever of their power.

So follow me here: for followers of Jesus, life itself is **not a tragedy**—that death and evil win—but it's **also not naive**—the shortsighted belief that a new job or a new relationship or a new city will fix what is broken in our souls. ~~It's not a cheap comedy.~~ For followers of Jesus, **it is the belief that though evil and injustice exist now, that that is a temporary reality—it's not the final outcome.** The true story is that **though darkness**

and brokenness may wreak havoc right now, that they cannot and will not reign forever. Because we are citizens of a *new* world, we are participants in a new reality. A new story. A new ending. And one that changes the entire *trajectory* of the present. That is the *difference* that a resurrection makes.

You see **if you belong to the kingdom** of God, that means *right now* is the *worst* that life will ever get. This is the low point in the story. But you happen to know that the injustice *now* will not be the reality forever. The sin *now* will not be the reality forever. And the brokenness *now* is about to be made whole. And *even* all of the *good* things we experience *now* are *previews* of the world to come. Every incredible friendship, every life-giving conversation, every genuinely loving relationship—they all are simply a *taste* of what the new heavens and new earth will be like.

This is **what we say every single Easter**—and I *will* probably say it every single Easter until I die—the “**hope**” that we are given in the Scriptures is not some sort of vaguely positive feeling about the future. It’s not the same thing as crossing our fingers that life gets better or that this is the worst it will get. *It’s not a glorified version of wishing the weather is sunny tomorrow or that the Vols play better football next year (because Lord knows neither of those are guarantees in Knoxville right now).* **The hope that we are given in the Scriptures is a *certainty* that God *will* one day make all things new, and that he is starting that process *now*.** The resurrection of Jesus was the “firstfruits” of the resurrection of all things. And *that* is where we set our hope.

So here is where we’ll land for our time this morning: **are you a *part* of that story?** I know for some, the story of a god-man who dies and comes back to life might be a hard one to swallow. I get that. And I want you to know there are plenty of books and podcasts out there that lay out the reasonable, rational reasons for believing that that story is true—you may want to check out some of those this week. They might be *immensely* helpful to you.

But *today*, I just want to ask you this: **don’t you *want*** that story to be true? Don’t we *want* it to be true that death and pain and injustice aren’t the end of the story? Don’t we *want* there to be something beyond a few good years before we die? A few good experiences before we’re forgotten? I would argue there is something within each of us that *longs* for the story of the resurrection to be true. That *wants* life to be a comedy, not a tragedy.

And what I’m here today to tell you is that **those desires**, those longings, were put in you by a God that *made you* to live for something more. And that same God put on flesh, entered into your tragedy, carried *your* sin on his shoulders, and then nailed them to a cross and *left* them there. And because he did that, *sin* is not the end of your story.

Death is not the end of your story. The brokenness of the world is not the end of the story. Your story doesn't end in tragedy, precisely because *his* didn't. He rose three days later, and now extends the invitation to *you*: "will you rise with me?" You see, **the death, the shame, and the tragedy in our world are real, but they do not have to be final.** He has set a story in motion that is so much better than anything you or I could imagine. And his invitation to you is simple: join the story, and find hope.

So **if** you're here today and **you want to be a part of that story**, I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand or walk the aisle or pray a prayer. I'll just tell you that there countless people here in this room that would *love* to walk with you as you take your next steps towards Jesus. Talk to the person you came with and tell them you want to know what that looks like. Talk to someone in your life who follows Jesus and tell them you want to know what that looks like. If you don't know who to talk to, come talk to me, or anyone on this stage and tell them you want to know what that looks like. We would love nothing in the world more than walking with you through that. Even if you're not sure yet, but you have questions, we'd love to help answer your questions, or walk with you as we *find* answers to your questions.

But the **invitation is simple**: join the story, and find hope. We're going to take some time before we're done to respond by celebrating the reality of the resurrection. We're going to sing about how good that is and what all its implications are. If we can help out in any way, please let us know. But you're invited to stand and celebrate with us.

Let's pray.