

"If Christ Is Not Risen" - A Defense of the Resurrection

It's a joy to gather with you today on Easter and declare that Jesus Christ is risen indeed. For the church of Jesus Christ especially celebrates the resurrection on this Easter morning. And so in the words of verse 1 which we just read from 1 Corinthians 15, I "declare to you the gospel;" this very gospel which has been preached from the apostles, recorded in the Scriptures, and handed down through the centuries. The gospel that was foretold in the Old Testament; the very gospel which declares that Christ died for our sins on the cross, was buried, and then raised from the dead on the third day!

And yet as we look at this passage in 1 Corinthians 15, we are reminded that the fact of the resurrection has not always been well received, even in the church. Paul in this letter is confronting an issue in the Corinthian church. Evidently some in the church had been teaching that there is no resurrection of the dead. Yes, some in the church, some among the Corinthian church, were making this claim - that's what Paul makes clear in verse 12, when he says "how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead"? In other words, people who claimed to be Christians, were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead! And so Paul instantly responds by showing that such a view is not consistent with the Christian faith. He says that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then there is no resurrection of Christ, and if there is no resurrection of Christ, then you have no gospel, no good news of salvation. And so Paul responds by considering the ramifications of this position. Paul hypothetically considers what it would mean for Christians, if Christ had not been raised. His ultimate conclusion comes in verse 19. He concludes by saying that if Christ had not been raised, then we of all people, as Christians, would be most to be pitied.

And as we look at this passage today, I hope you will realize that this is a real issue for today. From the beginning of the church, and even still today, people have questioned the historicity of the resurrection. Back then the challenges might have come in a different form, maybe packaged in Greek philosophy. And yet today, they are still here. Today they might get a fancier title such as the "swoon theory;" the theory that Jesus didn't actually die on the cross, just appeared dead and after being placed in the tomb became revived and so people thought he had risen from the dead. Or some today might want to make the resurrection a spiritual reality instead of a historical reality; denying an actual physical, bodily, resurrection of Christ, and instead proposing only some spiritual raising of Jesus. And like the Corinthian church, these alternative views are not just offered outside the church, but even from within. And yet Paul's words are very relevant today. Paul's words to the Corinthians stand as an enduring legacy. Paul says as clearly as possible - if you get rid of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, then you get rid of the Christian faith. Paul systematically shows in just a few short verses that this doctrine, the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus, is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian. It is at the heart of our faith and hope. Without it, you do not have biblical Christianity.

And so in a few minutes we'll look in detail at Paul's response to those who would deny the resurrection of the dead. But first, notice how Paul begins with the gospel. He begins with a clear, straightforward summary of the gospel followed by a list of the witnesses to the historical reality of the resurrection. Look at verses 3-4 - what a beautiful summary of the gospel - Paul says, "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins

according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." This is a sort of an early Apostles Creed, and quite likely was used as such in the early church. And notice there are 4 parts to this creed. One, Christ died for our sins. Two, Christ was buried - in other words, he remained under the power of death for a time. Three, Christ rose from the dead. Four, this was all "according to the Scripture" - in other words, the Old Testament prophesied that all this would happen! These are the fundamental truths of the gospel! If you lose any of these, you lose the gospel!

And as Paul recounts this summary of the gospel, notice how he ties in both preaching and faith. According to verses 1 and 2, this is the message that Paul "preached", and in verse 3, this is the message that he "delivered" to the Corinthians. The declaration of the gospel is at the heart of Paul's ministry. And this message is one that calls for a response of faith. It is the message which verse 1 says that the Corinthians "received", and on which they "stand". Verse 2 says that it is the message by which they are saved, a message which they are to "hold fast to", not believing in vain. Verse 3 again says that this is a message that the Corinthians received. And so in these few short verses, Paul summarizes the gospel, says that this is the heart of his apostolic ministry, and shows how this message demands a response of faith.

But Paul doesn't leave the gospel at that. He then turns specifically to the aspect of the resurrection of Jesus. He begins to describe the historical testimony to the resurrection. In verses 4-8 he names specific people and groups who are eye witnesses that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He mentions Cephas, the Aramaic name for the Apostle Peter, and then mentions the rest of the disciples who had become apostles. He mentions over 500 people who saw Jesus at the same time. And he mentions James, who likely refers to Jesus' brother, who became a leader among the New Testament church in Jerusalem. And of course, Paul mentions himself, who also saw the risen Jesus on the road to Damascus. These are all eye-witnesses. These are people who could personally testify to the historical resurrection of Jesus. These people are not witnesses to some spiritual resurrection. They are not witnesses to some swoon-theory where some barely alive Jesus stumbled into their presence after narrowly escaping death. These are witnesses to the Jesus who had died and then was raised, who then stood before them resurrected. And what an amazing set of witnesses this is! In a court case, two or three witnesses are enough to establish the validity of something. But this is an overwhelming amount of testimony and evidence from a number of different people at a number of different times! And when you think that Paul, who was once a persecutor of the church, could begin to testify to the risen Jesus, you realize that indeed Paul and others had seen the glorious resurrected Christ! And when you remember that so many of these eye-witnesses willingly died a martyr's death for their testimony, then all the more we should be encouraged at the truth of their testimony!

And so I hope you see how Paul in these opening verses in chapter 15 is setting a foundation for the issue that he will be addressing. He will be responding to this view present among the Corinthian church that the dead are not raised. Paul will show how that view would mean that Christ is not raised. But before Paul addresses that, he gives us a summary of the gospel and a summary of the eye-witnesses to the resurrection. In these opening verses, Paul shows that the resurrection of Christ is an essential element of the Christian faith, and how it is an element attested to by numerous eye-witnesses. And so the opening verses in this chapter serve as evidence and a reminder to the Corinthians of the essential and historical nature of the resurrection. This defends the truth of Christ's resurrection, and also defends the overall truth of the resurrection of the dead, which is our hope as Christians!

And so look with me then at Paul's response to the Corinthians in verses 12-19 to this claim that there is no resurrection of the dead. Paul's response is to work out the logical conclusion of this idea that there is no resurrection of the body. Paul begins by showing right away the ramification of this idea to Christ's resurrection. In verses 12-13 he says that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ himself has not been raised. Just to make sure we are listening, Paul says that same thing again in verse 16. That is the first logical conclusion he makes; he says that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then there is no resurrection of Christ.

The rest of Paul's response then focuses on the resurrection of Christ. Paul considers hypothetically the ramifications of Christ not being raised. He first shows the ramifications to the gospel message and ministry. Paul says in verse 14, "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith." Paul says that all his work of preaching is worthless if Christ is not risen. His words here, at the end of this letter to the Corinthians complement his words from the beginning of this letter. In chapter 1, Paul boasted in the fact that he preaches Christ crucified - we looked at that passage back in January. And he said that to unbelievers that sort of preaching is either foolishness or a stumbling block, but to Christians, the message of the cross is the power and wisdom of God. But Paul here in chapter 15 says that even this preaching of Christ crucified is worthless if that preaching is not joined with the preaching of Christ resurrected. In the same way, he says in verse 14 that to put faith in the message of Christ crucified, without the other half, that Christ has also been raised, is also worthless. He'll go on to explain that further in verse 17, but for now notice what he is saying about his gospel message and ministry - without the resurrection, his message is empty. It is vain. It is worthless.

Paul explains this further in verse 15. 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." Paul says that part of the reason why his preaching ministry would be in vain, if Christ has not been raised, is because that's what he's spent his time talking about in his preaching ministry - that Christ is risen! And so Paul would be a liar. All the people that Paul pointed to in verses 5-8 as having witnessed the historical resurrection of Jesus, they would all be liars. They would all be bearing false witness against God, he says, if they proclaim God raised Jesus from the dead, if in reality God didn't - that would even be blasphemy, to say God did something that he didn't. Think about that. If Paul and the others who claim to be eye-witnesses to the resurrection are all liars, then what good would their teachings be? What value would there be in their preaching ministry? Why entrust your souls and your spiritual well being to a liar and a blasphemer? If you did believe in such a fraudulent message, then your faith would be as good as the message - in vain; futile; worthless.

So that is the first ramification if Christ has not being raised: the gospel ministry and message loses its value and power. The second ramification Paul shows is to the individual believer and their salvation. This, really, is at the heart of the problem. Verse 17 says, "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." We would still be in our sins. Wow! Paul says that if Christ has not been raised, then we are still in our sins, and so our faith is futile. That is how significant the resurrection is. It is instrumental even for our forgiveness. Paul in Romans 4:25 says something similar. He says that Jesus was "raised for our justification".

Of course this chapter assumes something. It assumes that we all are sinners, all under God's eternal damnation. That's what Paul tell in verse 18, that the consequence of our sin is death; without Christ's resurrection, we do not have the forgiveness of sins, and so the result will be our death. That's what verse 18 says; it says, "Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished," if Christ has not been raised. Without the forgiveness of sins, we are all dead in our sins. If we hope in a Christ who only died on the cross, but was not raised, then we should have no hope of a resurrection ourselves.

You see our sins had to be atoned for. That happened on the cross. Jesus paid the penalty for our sins on the cross. He bore the sins of all God's people, enduring God's wrath that was due upon them. And yet Jesus' atoning work didn't stop in his death. It was in one sense completed in his resurrection.

You see death and sin are related. It is our sin that guarantees our death. That is what God told Adam in the garden, that if he sinned by eating the forbidden fruit, then the result would be death. And so if Christ died on the cross for our sins, but stayed dead, then what would that tell us about his atonement? It would tell us that his atonement was incomplete. It would tell us that Jesus had not conquered sin and death on the cross. It would tell us that he did not have victory over our sins on the cross. If Jesus had been consumed by death, and he remained dead, then that would mean that the atonement was incomplete. We would then have no hope of a resurrection ourselves!

Think about an earthly example. If you go to prison, you are not set free until your term is up. Until then, your debt and punishment has not been satisfied. If you are still in jail, it shows that you are still paying your punishment. And of course, when we think about our sin, and our debt to God, we realize that this is a debt that we cannot pay for ourselves. We realize that we are eternally condemned because we have sinned against the almighty maker of heaven and earth! And so if Christ, in paying the penalty for God's people, was not raised, that would tell us the debt for our sin had not been satisfied. That would mean that we have not been saved from our sins. That would mean, as Paul says, that we are still in our sins. That would mean that we still have the condemnation for our sins looming over us!

Do you see now why Paul's response comes to a climax with verse 19? He says, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." If Christ has not been raised, then the gospel message is a lie and our salvation has not occurred. And so, if we have placed our hope in a lie, and make sacrifices in this life, because we are looking toward heaven, then woe to us. If we suffer in this life for the sake of Christ, don't we do this because Christ has told us to store up heavenly treasures, to be ultimately planning for our eternal lives in heaven? If we suffer for his sake, don't we do it with joy and peace because we can't wait to go the place he has prepared for us? So much of our Christian hope is hope for something far greater beyond this world. We hope for the resurrection, just as Christ has been resurrected. But if that hope is a fraud, if our hope is to be limited to this world only, and then we perish and die, then woe to us. If that is true, if there is only this life to live, then we should just eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die (~verse 32). Then there would be no reason to suffer for Christ sake.

I think of the apostle Paul. Paul had a lot of things going for him from a worldly perspective. He was part of the elite of the Pharisees, well trained, a strict follower of the law, a zealous persecutor of the church, and so well respected among his fellow Pharisees. And yet Paul said that he counted all his worldly status and privilege "loss", as rubbish, compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus. And what did this mean for Paul? It meant suffering. It

meant that he was persecuted for his faith. Three times he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. He faced perils from every front, facing shipwrecks, angry Jews and Gentiles; often working endless hours getting little sleep, sometimes starving and thirsty. But he took on these sufferings gladly. He found great privilege in sacrificing the good things of this world because he found his true value and hope in Christ. And Paul, of course, is not the only one who suffered for the sake of Christ. The bible records others as well, many martyrs who even sacrificed their lives for Christ. If these men suffered, and some even died, for Christ' sake, how worthless would this suffering be, if there was no resurrection? Surely, these saints, and all of us who take on suffering in this life for Christ, surely all of us would be most to be pitied if Christ was not raised and if there is no hope of the resurrection.

Do you see what happens when you get rid of the resurrection? Do you see how the resurrection is so central to the gospel and to the Christian faith? The gospel, the good news, is NOT good news, without the resurrection of Christ! And yet, I come today bearing good news. I come today to declare to you the good news that Jesus Christ did rise from the dead on the third day, on that first Easter morning! Because of this, we can declare along with 1 Corinthians 15:55, "O death, where is your victory? O death, where 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." That is what we celebrate on Easter, the resurrection, which proclaims our victory over sin and death!

This is the central message of the gospel. Don't confuse the gospel with other things that might be closely related. Don't confuse the gospel with social programs, or moral teachings, or spirituality. Yes, living out our faith, living out the gospel will include those things, the Bible even tells us that, but the gospel itself is not those things. The gospel is that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again to save his people from their sins. That is how verses 1-4 sum up the gospel. This is the central, non-negotiable, message of Christianity, and it especially includes the reality of the resurrection. Our sin is a historical reality, and so praise the Lord, that Christ's death and resurrection is also a historical reality. That is our hope. That is our faith, and it is not in vain.

Brothers and sisters, may we be on guard against any sort of new, fresh sounding ideas that may seem good, if they redefine key fundamentals of our faith. Our faith shouldn't be about being novel. I am not saying that we shouldn't be constantly asking how we can more effectively communicate the message of the gospel to new generations. But the message itself cannot be compromised. If miraculous resurrections are not popular anymore today, we can't just get rid of that part of the message - as we see here in 1 Corinthians, they haven't been popular since the beginning! We don't have the liberty to change the message to suit the hearers. Instead the gospel demands that hearers change in light of the message! But praise God, that it is the Lord who works that change in our lives and in our hearts!

Instead, may we cling all the more to the historic faith that we have been called to. May we believe and trust in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is hopefully why you are here today! I hope and pray that you are here today to celebrate a resurrection that actually happened, a resurrection founded in history. And isn't that the beauty of the Christian life? It is one that brings together both faith and reason. We are called to believe in the risen Christ, but we are called to believe in a risen Christ who was seen risen by so many different eye-witnesses. We are called to faith, and yet it is even such a reasonable faith! Such a faith that makes it easy to believe when there is so much evidence for the resurrection!

And how important this response of faith is. Paul said in verse 19 that if our hope in Christ is only for this life, then we Christians are most to be pitied. But Christ was raised, so that means that it is not believers who are most to be pitied. It is unbelievers. Because if you are an unbeliever, the Word of God says that you are perishing; that you have no hope beyond this life; that you are still dead in your sins. And so I plead with you this morning. Jesus Christ is risen indeed. Come to him in faith and repentance. Grab hold of the life he offers, the victory over sin and death which he secured on the cross; come to him in faith; believe and live!

And if the risen Christ is your hope, then you have hope indeed. You have a hope beyond this life. You have the certain hope that you too, like Christ, will taste of the resurrection life. But Saints, that means, of course, that in this life, you may suffer for the sake of Christ. And so our lives as Christians are pilgrim lives. In the passage which I read for our call to worship this morning, we heard from Peter that for now, in this life, we might be grieved by various trials. Other passages in Scripture talk about Christians being persecuted for our faith. Jesus says in the Gospel of John, that in this world we will have trouble. Even our decisions that we make in life will ultimately come from our Christian convictions, and that might put us at a disadvantage in this life, when we compete with people who are willing to lie, steal, and cheat, to reach their goals. In other words, don't be misled to think that once you become a Christian, everything in life will be easy. If anything is true, it's the opposite! Yes, living godly, does have some immediate practical benefits. For example, godly living calls you to be good stewards of your body. If you are a good steward of your body, then most likely you will be physically healthier. But when Paul said in verse 19 that if our hope in Christ is only for this life then we are most to be pitied, he said this because the Christian life in many ways involves more suffering in this world than for non-Christians. And so I want you all to reckon with that. I want you to recognize that. Christians have suffered through the ages for the sake of Christ. Martin Luther, confessing the biblical gospel during the protestant reformation said, "Here I stand. I can do no other." That confession resulted in him being condemned as an outlaw and heretic, forcing him to flee to live in exile for 10 months.

We too must stand firm in living out our faith. That's what verse 1 in our passage says. It says that it is in the gospel in which we stand. And so brothers and sisters, "stand" in the truth of the gospel. Stand, even amidst persecution. Stand, even when it is not popular in our society to believe in the resurrection. This becomes easier to do if you set your eyes on our hope. Set your eyes on the risen Lord Jesus and the resurrection life that he guards in heaven for us! Set your eyes on glory. Our life is a pilgrim life of hope. Keep that hope in front of you at all times, and by God's grace, he will carry us home. And what a glorious home that will be, no more death, no more suffering, and no more sorrow. Look forward to our resurrection life. Rejoice in it. Celebrate it! That's what we are doing here this morning! Amen.

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