

“Why the Resurrection Matters So Much”

1 Cor. 15:1-20

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[We are reading this morning from God’s Word the remarks of the apostle Paul to the Christians in Corinth, chapter 15 of his first letter vv. 1-20. This is not an account of the resurrection such as you have in the four gospels at the end of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. This is rather the most important and sustained reflection on the meaning, the importance, and the significance of the resurrection that we have anywhere in the New Testament.]

Whatever else we are to learn from this section of Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, it is clear that the great apostle was perfectly willing to say that the Christian faith stood or fell with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. He put it to a group of fellow Christians as bluntly as it could be put: if Jesus were not raised from the dead, if he were not alive again on that first Easter Sunday after having died on the cross the previous Friday afternoon, if that greatest of all miracles had not happened, then your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. The whole faith of the Christian church is suspended on the historicity, the facticity of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. You might have imagined that Paul, careful thinker that he was and advocate for Christianity that he obviously was, would have hedged his bets, left himself an out. That is what people are accustomed to do. That is what even some Christians have tried to do through the ages: find a way to keep the Christian faith *without* absolutely having to believe in this one of a kind, absolutely stupendous miracle.

Some have argued through the years that one could still have some version of the Christian faith without the Lord’s bodily resurrection, but the apostle Paul obviously didn’t think so. And it isn’t only here that he makes the Lord’s resurrection an indispensable condition of the truth of the Christian faith and the Christian proclamation of hope to the world.

In his letter to the Romans Paul twice makes the very nature of saving faith, the faith by which a man or woman obtains the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and right and title to the life of heaven, explicitly faith *in the resurrection of the Son of God*.

In Romans 4:25, in answering the question: who will be reconciled to God, who will be judged righteous in the sight of the all-holy and perfectly just God who made us and will one day bring our lives into his judgment, Paul replies:

“the one who believes in him *who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord*.”

And in Romans 10:9 Paul says a similar thing:

“...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord *and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead*, you will be saved.”

For Paul, who had himself seen the risen Lord, it was perfectly obvious that the resurrection of the Lord Jesus stood at the very center of the Christian faith, was essential to it, and, therefore,

was necessary to believe if a man or woman were to be saved, delivered from his or her sins, and granted entrance into eternal life. *It was the fact of all facts.* Everywhere he went this was a fundamental part of his message: Jesus had risen from the dead and so will all who believe in him. *This morning I want to explain why the resurrection looms so large in the gospel or good news; why it is so central and indispensable to the Christian faith.* I can't say everything, but I want to give you some sense of in how many ways the resurrection defines the Christian faith and is the linchpin of our message to the world.

I. First, the resurrection is the climactic moment in the history of salvation.

Christianity is not *first*, it is not even in any fundamental sense *primarily* a message about what men ought to do to be good or to have God's approval. It is rather an account of things that happened in the world, events that took place in the middle of history. It is an account of what God has done and is doing to save men and women from their sins. Paul names a number of these events here in his summary of his message. He assumes his readers know who Jesus is, that he was the Son of God come into the world for the very purpose of living the life we did not live and dying the death we now deserve to die and all in our place, in our stead. And, says Paul, this Jesus died for our sins, he was buried, raised on the third day, all in accordance with what the Scriptures had said would happen long before and then, subsequent to his resurrection, he appeared to a number of people, proving himself alive again and, finally, he appeared to Paul himself. [You can read about his appearance to Paul, a magnificent piece of Christian history in Acts chapter 9.]

Unlike every other religion or philosophy of life, we Christians do not say, "do this and do that and God will approve of you." We say instead, we were dead in our transgressions and sins, our case was hopeless, and God himself, in great love and great power, intervened to do for us what we could not do ourselves. All other religions at bottom consist in a summons for men and women to make sacrifices for God. The Christian good news is that God himself has already, inexplicably, and wonderfully made the ultimate sacrifice for us by sending his Son to die for our sins.

Christ's rising from the dead, the Easter story, is inextricably part of that history of salvation. It is as surely a part of it as the incarnation itself – the Christmas story – and as the cross – the Good Friday story. Indeed, it is a seamless history: you cannot pick and choose. We find the history of the one in the same place we find the history of the other. The eyewitnesses, who gave their personal testimony of having seen the Lord die on the cross, gave as well their testimony of having seen him alive again both on that first Easter Sunday and on various occasions afterward during the 40 days between the Lord's resurrection and his ascension to heaven. No wonder then that when the great Bible commentator John Calvin begins his exposition of the account of the Lord's resurrection in Matthew 28 he writes: "We now come to the closing scene of our redemption." Salvation is history in the Bible, and the Resurrection is part and parcel of that history.

This history is the center of the Bible, the explanation of everything it has to tell us, and so the resurrection, like the other events of that history, was foretold in the ancient Scriptures, observed by a great many human beings of impeccable character, *and* preserved in the record of God's

saving acts that we have been given in Holy Scripture. That is the first reason why the resurrection is so important to the Christian faith and to the good news it represents: it is an integral and essential part of the history of God's redeeming work in the world.

II. Second, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proof, the accreditation of the Bible's entire message.

The Lord performed many miracles during his public ministry. People can stumble over this history and many have, but the Lord's miracles are essential to the gospel history, are recorded with a reserve and a chasteness quite unlike that of legendary accounts, were confirmed by many eyewitnesses, and were acknowledged at the time to have been as stunning, as utterly unexpected and inexplicable, even as frightening as we would find such things to be today.

But the fact is, had Jesus not risen from the dead, even could we continue to believe that he had been a worker of miracles – healing the sick, stilling the storm, changing the water to wine and all the rest – the most his miracles could have proved was that he was a prophet sent from God. *It is the resurrection of the Lord Jesus that utterly sets him apart as the Savior of the World.* It is the resurrection alone that places this man, this teacher, this exemplar of true goodness in human life in a class all by himself as the one name under heaven by which men may be saved.

The miracles were his accreditation as a man sent from God and the teacher of the truth about God and man; the resurrection was his accreditation as the redeemer of sinners and the King of Kings. His resurrection was not only utterly unprecedented – no one had ever risen from the dead to new and eternal human life before nor has anyone since – it was in itself the very salvation Christ promised to bring to those who trust in him: victory over death and eternal life.

In 1983 a Jewish scholar, Pinchas Lapide published a study entitled *The Resurrection of Jesus: A Jewish Perspective*. In that book surprisingly he argued that the historical evidence for the resurrection is conclusive, Jesus must have risen from the dead. But he went on to argue that as a Jew that did not mean he needed to become a Christian. Jesus may be the savior of others, but not of Jews. I think most people will find that conclusion more than mildly unpersuasive and not only because Jesus was himself a Jew. If a man has conquered death – and he is the only one who has ever done it – I want to know what that man said, I want to know how I might share in that victory, and I am inclined to accept the obvious: he is the one who holds the secret to eternal life!

That is the second reason for the importance of the resurrection to the Christian faith and the good news of eternal life as a real option for mortal human beings: it accredits Jesus as the one, the only one with the answer to the most fundamental question of human existence: where are we going?

III. In the third place the resurrection of the Lord Jesus is the ultimate demonstration of the supernatural character of salvation.

If you were to ask the typical American what religion is or teaches or, even, what Christianity is or teaches, you would be highly likely to receive a reply like this: there is a God; he cares about

how we live; he wants us to be kind to others, honest in our dealings, and faithful in our relationships. He wants us to revere and love him too, of course, and, depending upon the particular religion, perform certain acts of worship, but, interestingly, most people would not think to mention that last part, at least not at first. How we treat others, that is the main thing. Religions are all about that. They teach their adherents and encourage them to live a good life.

But, of course, while Holy Scripture has much to teach us about the life of love and our obligations to God and to others, that is hardly the sum and substance of what we believe or our message to the world. Quite the contrary. The Christian gospel is not a message about what you are to do for others but about what God has done for you, about the extraordinary things the living God did to deliver you from our sins. There is nothing extraordinary about “be nice to others.” But there is something surpassingly mysterious, awe inspiring, wonderful even terrible about the Son of God, the creator of heaven and earth, humbling himself to become a man, so much a man that most people never recognized him for who and what he was, indeed, some did not even regard him as a good man. There is something bone-chilling and awe-inspiring about that same God/Man going to a cruel death to pay the penalty for his people’s sins. And there is something almost terrifying about a dead man springing back to wonderful and eternal life. These were shattering things to those who witnessed them, exhilarating things, utterly life changing things.

These are not the pedestrian, pedantic, and predictable nostrums of man-made religions; this is the furthest thing from being good to others in hopes that God will be good to you. This is the mighty God at work in his world, this is his all-conquering love removing every obstacle to the salvation of sinners, this is a work as fully wonderful and powerful and divine as the creation of the world itself.

That is the third reason for the importance of the resurrection: it takes salvation, it takes mankind’s relationship with God out of the silly, superficial, menial, predictable, thoughtless dimension in which self-important human beings are inclined to put it, and places it where it belongs, in the sphere of Almighty God’s own purpose, plan, and work.

IV. In the fourth place the resurrection is important because it is in itself a concentration and demonstration of the salvation that Jesus accomplished for us and promises to give to those who trust in him.

The very word “salvation” presupposes that there is something that human beings need to be saved from. There are perhaps many things we need to be saved from – for example, we certainly need to be saved from ourselves – but the fact is everyone knows our greatest enemy. It is death, both physical and spiritual death. According to Holy Scripture that death is the judgment of sin, our sinfulness and our actual sins, and Christ’s death on the cross for our sins and his resurrection from the dead is the means of our deliverance from that death that faces us all.

Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées* famously observed:

“It is not natural that there exist men who are indifferent to the loss of their being and the perils of everlasting suffering. With everything else they are quite different: they fear the most trifling things, they foresee them; they feel them. And this same man who spends so many days and nights in rage and despair [over some smaller loss] is the very one who knows he is going to lose everything through death, but he feels neither anxiety nor emotion. It is a monstrous thing to see one and the same heart at once so sensitive to minor things and so strangely insensitive to the greatest. It is an incomprehensible enchantment, a supernatural torpor that points to a supernatural power as its cause.”
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Is that not right? Men and women hold their death at arm’s length as long as they can. They worry and complain about everything else but they won’t think about death because it terrifies them so. The fact is human beings crave life. They complain, they worry about so many things because those things in one way or another are a diminishment of their life. They crave existence and they crave that life that is what they know life ought to be: full of goodness, love, joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, and communion with God and man. They seek such life all their lives in this world. The sad story of human existence is that it is so perfectly obviously a search, a desperate search for what men and women cannot find. For no matter what lesser pleasures he may obtain in this life it must all soon come to an end and, frankly, along with the pleasure there is a great deal of pain in this world. We all know that. *We want to live!*

Do you remember Tennyson’s verse?

“Whatever crazy sorrow saith,
No life that breathes with human breath
Hath ever truly longed for death;
‘Tis life, not death, for which we pant,
More life, and fuller, that I want.

But here is the Lord Jesus alive again in a body that is both the same and wonderfully different, fit for everlasting life. A body that consumes food and bears the marks of his past life, a body that is in every respect fully human, a life that we recognize as both our own and as transcending our own life. It is the realization of all human hopes in a single event, a single moment, a single person. Those longings in your heart for real life that never ends come from God your maker – a person who is so chock full of life he has more than enough of it to share with others –; he and he alone who gave you those longings can enable you to fulfill those longings! And he has fulfilled them!

This is what the Bible means when it describes the Lord’s resurrection from the dead as the “first fruits of those who sleep” that is, the first fruits of those Christians who have died. The first fruits, the crops first to appear above the ground, the first to be harvested, are the guarantee that there are more to follow. The seed that was planted was good seed, there was enough rain, the field or the vine will be full in due time. The whole harvest is coming! Well in the same way, there is an organic connection between Christ’s resurrection and ours. What happened to him will happen to his people, to those who trust in him. This is Paul’s point here in 1 Cor. 15 when he says that if Christ did not rise from the dead *we won’t either*. His is the guarantee of ours, the

firstfruits of ours, as he says in v. 20. The Lord's resurrection is not only history, it is meta-history that is, it guarantees and anticipates and defines events that are still to come, the resurrection from the dead of Christ's people. As the Lord once said to his disciples, "Because I live, you will live also."

That is the fourth reason for the essential place the resurrection of the Lord Jesus has in the Christian faith and the Christian good news. It is the conquest of death which is precisely what all of us long for, hope for, and desperately need. The resurrection isn't simply the way of salvation, *it is the salvation*. It is the promise of what will happen as well to those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for their salvation from sin and death.

V. *In the fifth place the resurrection is so fundamentally important to the Christian faith and the good news we have to proclaim to the world because it is the pronouncement of the verdict in the trial of our lives, at least it is if we are in Christ by faith in him.*

There are a great many crime dramas on television these days. They are referred to in the business as "procedurals," because they take the story from the crime through its investigation, the identification of a suspect, and then his trial. We witness the procedures of the police and then the procedures of the lawyers, and then the procedures of the court. And typically in such shows the climax comes when, at the end of the trial, the jury foreman reads out the verdict. "Have you reached a verdict?" the judge asks. "Yes, we have Your Honor," the foreman replies. "What did you find?" We find the defendant guilty" or "...not guilty" as the case may be.

Well the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's verdict pronounced in our case, at least, in our case if we are believers in and followers of Jesus, if his death on the cross has become our salvation. That is what Paul means when he writes in Romans 4:25:

“[Righteousness] will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”

The Lord's resurrection was the divine verdict announced: because Christ bore our sins on the cross, because our guilt has been discharged when our sins were carried away, we have been declared righteous in God's sight: Not guilty! The resurrection is the end of the proceeding, the announcement by the judge himself – no jury here – that Christ's work of redemption was effective, infinitely so, eternally so for those who believe in him.

Had the Lord not risen, what would the cross have meant? We would not, we could not know. But now we do! There is peace with God and new and everlasting life for those who trust in the Son of God. That is the fifth reason the resurrection looms so large in the Christian message of life and salvation to the world.

VI. *Sixth and last, the resurrection is so central to all that Christians believe and proclaim, so vital a part of the good news, because it is the means and the demonstration of Christ's continued presence in the life of mankind; it means Christ is alive to be known today!.*

You remember the beautiful things that Jesus said to his disciples and to the crowds during his ministry.

“Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” [Matt. 11:28-29]

“He who comes to me, I will never drive away.” [John 6:37]

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” [John 8:12]

“I have come that they might have life and have it abundantly.” [John 10:10]

He said many such things and issued many such invitations like those. But who can come to a dead man and how can a dead man give me rest? He is not dead; he is alive! It is the resurrection that guarantees that Jesus Christ may be known by men and women today as surely as he was known by those who were with him during his public ministry. It is the resurrection that enables us to experience the love and power and goodness of Christ as surely as they did who saw him, heard him, and touched him in those long ago days.

To the one who does not know God, who does not love and trust the Son of God, this world and this life is largely defined by the absence of God. However and to whatever extent the person thinks about this or realizes this, practically, so far as he or she is concerned, God is not present in the world in any meaningful way. He cannot be known, he cannot be loved, his love cannot be experienced by human beings, nor can the reality of his presence. He or she lives life as if God did not exist; but it is not so. Since Christ's departure from the world, forty days after his resurrection from the dead, there have been vast multitudes of boys and girls, men and women, who have lived in the reality and experience of Christ's presence. Though they cannot see him with the eye of the body, they have known him to be present just as surely as a blind man knows that he has run into a brick wall or has fallen into a swimming pool. Believe me, the living God can make his presence known to the soul.

Christ is alive! He is as alive as you are alive or as I am. Indeed, he is much more alive than you and I. His life is brim full of eternal life, of perfect life, of life in its completeness and perfection.

What the resurrection tells the world is that Jesus Christ is present to be known, to be loved, to be trusted and he is present to love you, to forgive you, to renew your life, to bring you into relationship with himself. His disciples knew him before and after his death and while we could not know him *before* we may know him after as surely as they did!

Few of us who are Christians in this sanctuary this morning became Christians because we examined the evidence for the truthfulness of the biblical accounts of Christ's life, death, and resurrection and found that evidence persuasive. I know of some who became Christians in just that way. Indeed I know of some who set out to *disprove* the resurrection and became Christians as a result of their examination of the historical evidence. But in our case we became Christians because, by his Spirit, we met the Lord Jesus Christ, encountered him in his love and saving

power. We may have read examinations of the historical evidence later and found those studies entirely persuasive, but it was our own personal encounter with the Lord Christ that convinced us of the truth of all that is said of him and all that he said in the Gospels. You remember his last words in Matthew 28 were, “Lo, I am with you always.”

That is the significance of the resurrection: not only its place in the history of God’s work of salvation, not only its verification of the entire message about Jesus that we are given in Holy Scripture, not only its demonstration of the nature of salvation as a divine act of supernatural grace and power, not only the demonstration it provides of the nature of salvation itself as the gift of eternal human life, not only the verdict it represents on Christ’s sin-bearing in our place, but because it means that the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, lives to make himself known to men and women and today and long ago may be sought and known by them. He is living now as hosts of Christians have discovered for themselves.

This is the great invitation and summons of Easter: you can know the Lord Jesus as surely, as really, as genuinely as did Peter, James, and John. You can trust him and receive new life from him as surely as did Mary Magdalene.

“Come to me,” he said to so many in those long ago days, and he says the very same thing to you today! Come to me, and find all that you have ever truly longed and hoped for.