

“Christ Has Been Raised!”

The Twenty-Ninth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians: 15:12-34; Isaiah 22:5-14

Imagine the shock and sheer panic you would feel upon hearing news that the body of Jesus had been found in a tomb somewhere near the city of Jerusalem, and that the remains were positively identified as those of the central figure of the New Testament. What would your reaction be? Fear? Anger? Would it even matter? Would you still call yourself a Christian? While no one is going to find the body of Jesus in a tomb near Jerusalem because Jesus was raised from the dead the first Easter, nevertheless, the question is an important one because it pushes us to face a more fundamental question. How do we know that Christianity is true? Why are you a Christian? And why does any of this really matter?

Having spent considerable time working our way through Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, we come to 1 Corinthians 15, one of the most important chapters in all the Bible. I speak of 1 Corinthians 15 as an especially important chapter because it is here that Paul defines the gospel (vv. 1-11), that Paul addresses the fact of the resurrection (vv. 12-19), that Paul speaks of the relationship between the second coming of Jesus Christ and the bodily resurrection of believers (vv. 20-28), that Paul speaks of the relationship between our Lord’s bodily resurrection to the Christian life (vv. 29-34), before he takes up the subject of the nature of the resurrection body in verses 35-56. What makes this particular chapter so important is that all of these topics are foundational to Christianity, and all of these topics are the object of attack from those outside the church, or else subject to much confusion within the church. This is what makes understanding this chapter so important.

Last time we dealt with the opening verses of chapter 15 (vv. 1-11) in which Paul defines the gospel in terms of those historical facts associated with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, according to the Scriptures. This is the gospel which Paul preached and which the Corinthians believed. It was this gospel which established the church in Corinth as well as churches elsewhere. To preach the Christian gospel is to proclaim these facts to both Christians and non-Christians alike in such a way that everyone understands we are making a truth claim (i.e., that Christianity is true and all other religions are false), and that we are speaking about our salvation being accomplished for us by Jesus Christ in ordinary human history through the shedding of blood (which is rhytypable), on a Roman cross (which would have given you splinters if you rubbed your hand across it). The gospel itself is a truth claim.

We also know that Jesus was raised from the dead the first Easter because the tomb in which he had been buried was empty despite a huge stone which sealed the tomb’s entrance, and despite the fact that the Romans placed a guard on the tomb. We also know that Jesus was raised from the dead because the risen Jesus appeared visibly to all the apostles, to over five hundred people at one time, and then finally to Paul, who considered himself completely unworthy of such an honor. Paul not only appeals to the fact that he himself saw the resurrected Jesus while traveling on the road to Damascus, Paul also appeals to the fact that most of the five hundred people who saw Jesus were still alive—the implication being that the Corinthians knew who many of these people were, and that the events associated with the gospel were not only true, they were common knowledge.

The Christian faith therefore is a public faith. It is based upon certain historical facts which if true, establish Christianity as the only true and viable religion, and which if false (i.e., these things did not happen) then Christianity cannot be true no matter how many people claim to be followers of Jesus.

Having established that the Christian faith is necessarily grounded these well-established historical events we call the gospel, we'll now address two themes in the next section of 1 Corinthians 15, namely the fact of the resurrection (vv. 12-19), and then we'll then take up the related matter as to how the resurrection of Jesus Christ impacts the Christian life (vv. 29-34). In our next sermon, we will backtrack a bit and then take up the relationship of the bodily resurrection of believers to the second coming of Jesus Christ (vv. 20-28).

So, we begin by turning to Paul's discussion of the fact of the resurrection in verses 12-19. Since Christianity's basic truth claim is centered in historical events—the life, death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ—this means that there is the theoretical possibility of the falsification of Christianity. If Jesus did not rise again from the dead then Christianity cannot be true. This is why this is such a watershed issue and why I asked the questions that I did earlier. If you deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ, then you deny Christianity. If the body of Jesus is recovered in Jerusalem, then Christianity cannot be true, because the gospel upon which apostolic churches were founded was grounded in Christ's bodily resurrection. Jesus is not only a crucified Savior, but he is also the risen Lord. All the Jewish religious authorities or the Romans needed to do, was produce Jesus' dead body and Christianity is finished before it ever started. Both groups had the means, motive, and opportunity to prove Christianity to be false, but did nothing. In fact, what little Jewish and Roman opposition to Christianity there was, actually acknowledges that the first Christians based everything on their claim that Jesus had risen from the dead.

Paul spells out the precise nature of the Christian truth claim for his readers in verse 12. *“Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?”* From this remarkable assertion we can see the serious nature of the problem which Paul is addressing with the Corinthians. Those who have been preaching in Corinth (Paul, Peter, Apollos) have all been preaching that Christ was raised bodily from the dead. The fact of the resurrection lies at the very heart of the gospel. How then is it that people in the Corinthian church have come to the conclusion that there is no resurrection of the dead?

The reason why this is the case has to do with Greco-Roman culture and that form of pagan religion in which the Corinthians were steeped. Both Greeks and Romans had a problem with the bodily resurrection because of the pagan notion that matter is intrinsically evil. At death, the Greek pagans believed that the human spirit (or the soul) was liberated from the prison house of the body. The body was understood to be the source of all of our bad habits and desires because it was material, and therefore inclined toward bodily passions. Death was seen as that moment when people were finally liberated from their material existence, which the pagans believed was the source of many of humanity's problems.

Because Jesus conquered death and the grave, Paul has been preaching that people will not live forever as disembodied spirits, but that God will unite body and soul in the general resurrection at the end of history, a concept which was not seen as a blessing to Greek pagans, but as something confusing to them—given their pagan presuppositions. This explains the tendency among the Corinthians to deny the bodily resurrection and to instead favor some sort of spiritual resurrection or disembodied existence after death. Grounded in the bodily resurrection, Paul's teaching was completely foreign to them and completely contrary to what had they come to expect given their pagan background.

As Paul states in verse 13, to deny the possibility of the bodily resurrection, is to deny the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which is the foundation of the Christian faith and the very heart of the gospel. *“But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.”* If the dead cannot be raised

(because of the reasons we've just mentioned), then not even Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead. And if not even Jesus has been raised, there can only be one possible conclusion, spelled out by Paul in verses 14-18. *“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 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. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And 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.”*

For Paul it is an either/or situation. If Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead, then the preaching of the gospel is absolutely useless because the content of the gospel would be a falsehood. In fact, to preach that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead if he was not, is to bear false witness. But not only is preaching the gospel bearing false witness (if Christ be not raised), the response of those who believed it (faith) is also useless. If Jesus is not raised, we have believed a lie. We have placed our hope in some gigantic hoax. Those who have gone on before us are dead with no bodily existence—they don't survive death and they don't live on in the presence of God awaiting the resurrection at the end of the age.

The bottom line is that we have placed our trust in a dead man, who cannot save us because he did not rise again from the dead. We are still in our sins and our faith is useless. There is no hope. This life is all there is. And if this life is all there is—to put it directly—then it doesn't matter what we do, or how we live. We are free to sin with impunity, provided we can get away with it. There is no reason to do good, to love our neighbor, or to deny ourselves any sort of pleasure. As the famous Russian novelist Dostoevsky put it, under such circumstances, “everything becomes permissible.” Moral anarchy reigns. This is why so many of our contemporaries dismiss the Christian truth claim without consideration.

Paul presses home the stark reality of a life lived without the hope of the resurrection from the dead in verse 19. *“If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.”* If Jesus Christ is still buried in a tomb, then we are to be pitied more than anyone else because we have staked our hope on something that is patently false. We have believed a lie, and we sacrificed much for no reason. While gospel singer Andrae Crouch can write a song entitled “If Heaven Were never Promised to Me . . .” in which he contends that being a Christian is such a wonderful thing that he would be one even if this life is all that there is, Paul, on the other hand, says to the Corinthians that if Jesus Christ be not raised from the dead then we are in an absolutely deplorable condition, and a laughing stock. As far as Christianity goes, everything depends upon a resurrected savior and the coming resurrection from the dead at the end of the age. If this is not true, we are still in our sins, Christianity is patently false, and we have no hope. We deserve to be mocked if we've based everything on a myth or a legend.

Yet, as Paul points out in verse 20, *“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”* This is a theme we will take up next time, Lord willing.

We now take up the second (and closely related) issue which we will tackle in this sermon, the relationship between the fact of Christ's resurrection and the Christian life in verses 29-34. In verse 29, Paul changes gears a bit, turning from his discussion of Christ's resurrection and its connection to our own resurrection at the end of the age (one of the main themes of New Testament eschatology), to address the inconsistencies of those among the Corinthians who deny the bodily resurrection. Some of those Corinthians who claim there is no resurrection of the dead are engaging in

certain practices which clearly indicate that there will be a resurrection.¹ This is self-contradictory and Paul points out the obvious inconsistencies with this.

In verse 29, we have one of the most peculiar verses in the New Testament. “*Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?*” Paul’s point is that if there is no bodily resurrection of the dead at the end of the age, why then are people being baptized for the dead? This makes no sense. Paul’s statement raises a major interpretive problem which has plagued the church from the beginning—what is this business of baptizing people on behalf of those who have already died. This verse has been so problematic and its meaning so uncertain that one commentator has identified over 200 interpretations of this rather bizarre passage.²

According to the second clause of the verse, (“baptized for them”—*hupere*) people were being vicariously baptized in the place of those who had already died, presumably without having been baptized before death. In other words, this particular baptism was being done so that the benefits of baptism would apply to people who had already died without themselves being baptized. It also appears to be the case that this practice occurs in the same circles where people were teaching that the dead are not raised bodily, therefore the inconsistency in their thinking is readily apparent. The best answer as to why the Corinthians were doing this is that we simply do not know why people were engaging in proxy baptism, nor do we know with any precision what it meant. Paul’s point is simply that it made no sense for the Corinthians to be baptizing dead people if there was no bodily resurrection.

Some heretical groups like the Marcionites of the second century,³ or the Mormons of today have taken Paul’s comment here as an endorsement of the practice of baptizing the dead through some sort of proxy baptism—someone is baptized on behalf of the dead person so that the dead person received the benefits of baptism they otherwise would have missed. The circumstances in Corinth may be like the confusion we see among the Thessalonians who wondered whether or not those who died before Christ returned might miss out on the resurrection. There is no other mention of this practice in the New Testament, or any other Christian literature of the first century. The act of baptizing the living on behalf of the dead was never a Christian practice and there is nothing here—other than Paul’s mention of it—which even remotely implies that it is. Whatever else we may say about this, Paul does not endorse the practice merely by mentioning it in connection with an erroneous denial of the resurrection.

In verse 30, Paul now makes a much more general point about the gospel and its connection to Christ’s resurrection. “*Why are we in danger every hour?*” Why would Christians risk great danger by professing faith in Jesus Christ, if there were there no bodily resurrection at the end of the age? What is it that gives Christians hope and courage in the face of great danger? It is the knowledge of the resurrection yet to come. We may die of sickness, accident or old age. We may be killed at the hands of another. But God will raise us bodily from the dead on the last day. This is our hope. We base everything on the resurrection. We know this to be true because God has already raised Jesus from the dead—the first fruits of the harvest at the end of the age. This is why Paul will risk danger and persecution to preach the gospel—not because Christianity works (it changes lives, it provides people with

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 214.

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 215.

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 214.

a nice way to live, it makes them more moral, etc). Paul risks danger because Christianity's central claims are true! Jesus Christ has been raised bodily from the dead! Paul has seen the risen Christ with his own eyes, and his own encounter with Jesus was verified by the fact that over five hundred others saw the risen Christ at the same time.

As the Apostle states in verse 31, "*I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!*" As we know from Luke's account of Paul missionary endeavors throughout the Book of Acts, Paul's life was in constant danger. Paul faces danger and death every time he enters a new city, from angry Jews (who threaten to kill Paul, or who riot because of his preaching), or from Roman or local authorities (who want to keep the peace and who see Paul as a trouble-maker). Nevertheless, Paul boasts about and glories in what Jesus Christ has done among the Corinthians. There is a reason why the apostles were willing to lay down their lives if that would cause the gospel to spread. That reason is the hope of the resurrection because they know Jesus' tomb was empty and that he had shown himself to be alive. The crucified one is also the risen one.

In verse 32, Paul presses this point home to its logical conclusion. "*What do I gain if, humanly speaking, I fought with beasts at Ephesus? If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* When Paul speaks of fighting wild beasts in Ephesus, he is probably speaking rhetorically—"what if I did fight with wild beasts?"—since Paul was a Roman citizen and would have been exempt from being thrown to the wild animals as a part of gladiatorial combat. Furthermore, people thrown to the beasts didn't survive the encounter.⁴ So, more than likely, Paul is referring to the events described in Acts 19 and to the riots caused by the presence of Christian preachers arriving in Ephesus. Paul himself had faced the angry mob (who behaved like wild animals) when he first arrived in Ephesus, the city from which he wrote this letter to the Corinthians.

But the main point of the verse is Paul's lament, "if the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." This was a well-known slogan in Paul's day, and is even found in Isaiah 22:13 (part of our Old Testament lesson). It is the ancient equivalent of the slogan repeated by my friends who survived the sixties and seventies, "sex, drugs and rock and roll." If Christ isn't raised from the dead, then what else is there but the pursuit of pleasure and self-gratification? To the ancients, that meant drinking too much and feasting to the point of vomiting. To the moderns it is pure self-indulgence, altered consciousness, and the desire to be distracted from life's problems by entertainment and trivialities. If there is no resurrection, Christianity is a lie. What else is there but the pursuit of pleasure?

In the next verse, Paul cites yet another well-known proverb to make the point that association with people who deny the resurrection (and therefore are prone to self-gratifying behavior) may lead Christian people into sinful behavior, and ultimately to a denial of the Christian faith. "*Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."* If people have no moral anchor in life, they are completely adrift with no basis from which to determine what is right or wrong. When good people hang around with bad people, more often than not the bad corrupt the good, rather than the good elevating the bad,

Paul is very clear about this either/or choice. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then this life is all that there is, and we might as well seek as much pleasure as we can because "time is a wastin'." Yet Paul is able to remind those among the Corinthians who mistakenly cast all caution to the wind, that there is a

⁴ Such comments can be found in a number of contemporary writings. See Morris, 1 Corinthians, 216.

huge price to be paid for such behavior. The pursuit of pleasure places you in the circle of others seeking pleasure, and often times they seek their pleasure at your expense. The Corinthians do not want to put themselves in such a dangerous place—especially because Jesus did rise from the dead, and therefore life does have meaning and purpose, despite pagan opinion to the contrary!

In verse 34, Paul concludes by making a very pointed exhortation to those in the church who were acting like there was no resurrection from the dead. *“Wake up from your drunken stupor, as is right, and do not go on sinning. For some have no knowledge of God. I say this to your shame.”* The verse literally reads “sober up, stop sinning.” The Corinthians must stop following this false teaching, which almost inevitably leads to sin. If there is no resurrection, then everything is permissible because nothing is absolute. Because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, we have hope that we live on after death, and we know that everything we do in this life truly does matter! At root then, the problem is that people are ignorant about God—a point which Paul makes to shame those of his readers who follow those who deny the resurrection of the body. God has raised Jesus from the dead, and this changes everything.

What should we take with from this passage in terms of application?

One of the great dangers we face in our day and age is the temptation to consider our standing with God based upon how we happen to feel at any given moment. When things are going well, we tend to feel more positive about God and our faith seems strong. But when things get tough, we may feel that God is distant from us, or that he is somehow punishing us. How many people have left the faith after suffering some trauma in life from which they conclude that Christianity is not true, or that Christianity does not work for them? We all know of people who have done this.

But this is what happens when we base our faith on the intensity of our experience, or how we feel, or based upon our current circumstances, not upon what God has done in history. But if your faith is based upon the truth of Christianity—that what Paul and the apostles claim happened to Jesus of Nazareth actually happened—you are far less likely to be overwhelmed by the storms of life, or because of doubt. Our relationship with God was forever secured by a bloody cross and an empty tomb. Our standing with God does not depend upon our current circumstances, our experience, or our feelings, good or bad.

The fact of the resurrection gives meaning and purpose to everything we do. We are not left with an ethic of “sex, drugs and rock and roll,” because this life is all that there is. On the contrary, because God has raised Jesus Christ from the dead, death is not the end of our existence. The empty tomb means that this life is the beginning of eternal existence in resurrected bodies living in the presence of God and of Christ, on a new heaven and earth. Because Jesus Christ has been raised, all of God’s promises are secured. We now live every moment of our lives in light of Jesus Christ’s resurrection from the dead.

Because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, this means that Christianity is true whether someone believes it or not. All non-Christians must live their lives attempting to deny or ignore what God has done in history. To escape the truth, they invent false religion, they turn Christianity into some sort of subjective religious experience, or they attempt to ignore the claims of God and Christ upon their lives. You don’t need to prove to such people that Christianity is true, because it is true. We just need to preach the gospel to them and let them feel the weight and guilt that comes with denying the truth.

How can we know that all of this is true? Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead! For a Christian, it is not “sex, drugs, and rock and roll.” It is “he is risen!”