

RESURRECTION OF THE LIVING

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1 Corinthians 15:1-11

We are all familiar with Stephen King, the author of those many horror novels and short stories. I imagine most of you have read one or twelve of his books. You've also probably learned (the hard way) that if you are alone at home at night, and there is a thunderstorm raging, and the power goes out, and the dog is quietly growling at the door that goes down to the basement, that this is probably not a good time to light a couple of candles and pick a Stephen King book off the shelf to read.

One of King's darker books (if you can believe that) was published in 1983 and is titled *Pet Sematary*. In it, a young family—dad, who is a doctor, mom, two kids, and a cat—settle in a small, rural town in Maine. They buy a pretty house with lots of land. All is perfect. After moving in, their older neighbor takes the doctor on a walk around their property and tells him about the town. He also tells him that behind the property, beyond the swamp, is an old Indian burial ground. And it is cursed. Anything buried there will come back to life. It is not long after that the couple's son is hit by a car and killed. He is buried in the city cemetery. The father is so distraught that he exhumes the boy's body and re-buries it in the cursed Indian burial ground. The boy comes back to life and, not surprisingly, terrible things happen.

That's how it goes in stories like this. Things that die and come back to life are never right—zombies, vampires, and such. We know this today—we've read enough scary books and seen enough movies. The dead are meant to stay dead. It's better that way.

The residents of Corinth, two thousand years ago, felt the same way. They knew the dead should stay dead. Any variance on that natural order was scandalous.

This book, which we know as First Corinthians, was a letter written by the Apostle Paul to the church community in the city of Corinth. As an apostle, Paul traveled across the Mediterranean world establishing Christian worshipping communities. We know that he went to Corinth and remained there for eighteen months. He started out teaching in the local synagogues, but soon was banned from those places. They did not approve of his spreading the message that Jesus was messiah. So, Paul then turned his focus on the non-Jews of Corinth. He soon had gathered a group of inquirers and he taught them about Jesus. When this group seemed to gel as a church, he moved on to the next mission opportunity.

As with all his churches, Paul kept in touch with the folk in Corinth. He did so through letters and word-of-mouth. It wasn't long before he learned that the

Corinth church was experiencing internal conflict over a variety of issues—issues such as baptism and communion, what kind of food was permissible to eat, social class division, and more. Paul addresses these issues in at least two letters.

Our reading today is from Chapter 15, which is the next-to-last chapter in the first letter. It is here that Paul addresses what is possibly the most confounding concern of the people—the fact of Jesus’ resurrection.

Corinth was a large, metropolitan city with a diverse population and innumerable expressions of religious faith. The city was filled with temples and shrines to a multitude of deities. When a Christian attempted to explain to their neighbor that the one they followed had died and had risen, that was a tough sell. Why would you follow a god that died? That made no sense. Gods—at least the good ones—don’t die. That is why they are gods. And they certainly don’t come back. That just goes against the natural order of things. In Paul’s absence, the church was struggling with this matter.

It is this subject of resurrection that Paul addresses in Chapter 15. He begins our reading for today with a powerful statement of faith. He tells the church, *I would remind you of the good news (the gospel) that I proclaimed to you. This is the gospel you received. It is the basis of your belief and the means of your salvation. This message that I proclaimed to you is the one to which you must hold firmly, unless you have come to believe that it is a hoax. It is of primary importance and I delivered it to you just as it had been delivered to me.* And then it is here that Paul offers a succinct statement of belief: *Christ died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised on the third day, and then he appeared to his followers—Cephas (or Simon), the twelve, then more than five hundred all at once, then to James, and then to the apostles. Then, last of all, he appeared to me (Paul).*

Paul tells the Corinthians that he was called last because he was *the least of the apostles*. This is not false modesty on Paul’s part. He believes this. He tells the people that he is *unfit to be called an apostle*. Why is he unfit? Because of his history of persecuting the church. In his earlier life, Paul had been a zealous and tenacious inquisitor of the emerging Christian movement. He viewed it as a Jewish heresy that had to be eradicated. Representing the high priest, Paul had doggedly tracked down Christians Israel and Judea. He didn’t stop until he was famously blinded by a vision of Jesus. Because of his works of persecution, he viewed himself *the least of the apostles*. After all, none of the other apostles had done anything close to what he had perpetrated against the church. But, because of God’s grace, Paul had been changed and now he was dedicating his life to spreading the story and message of Jesus of Nazareth—this same Jesus Christ who had been killed, buried, and raised from death.

Paul understood resurrection personally. He, himself, felt that he had been raised from death. A few sentences earlier, Paul describes himself as *one untimely*

born. Other translations of this passage say, “born at the wrong time,” or “one abnormally born” (NIV), or as the King James Bibles puts it, “born out of due time.” Although the English makes it sound as if Paul believes he was born at the wrong time in history, the phrase is actually an idiom for a pre-mature birth, or a still-birth. Paul is actually saying that when he was born, because he did not know Christ, he was dead, spiritually dead. It took Christ coming to him to give him life. The people in Corinth may be offended by the notion of Christ’s bodily resurrection, but only through him may they find spiritual resurrection and a new, eternal life.

All of us, in one way or another, understand what it means to be dead spiritually. We may not recognize it until we come into contact the presence of Christ. But when the light of Christ has shined on us, we can diagnose the darkness infecting our lives. And once we see the light, we still continue to fight the darkness. As Paul writes later in this chapter, *I die every day* (15:31). Paul understands the struggle of faith, the daily setbacks we experience. However, without the power of Christ, he knows he would lose. It is the resurrection of Jesus that demonstrates God’s power to defeat death and sin and the darkness they bring. The entirety of Chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians is Paul’s detailed argument of the reality of the resurrection. I encourage you to sit down today and read it carefully.

Now, at this point in the sermon, I should offer you a great and inspiring story of someone whose life was turned around by their encounter with Christ. But I am always hesitant to do that. Those can be good stories, but they are not my story, they are not your story. Instead, I ask that you reflect on those occasions when you have witnessed or experienced the light of Christ’s love. It was probably through someone’s act of compassion. You were feeling the darkness and this person touched you. It may have been life changing, but more than likely, it was just changed the moment. It was a small act. But it was enough. These small acts add up.

The church is a community of people living with darkness and sharing the light of Christ with one another. And then, outside these walls, we seek to share this light with others. We do it in our day-to-day interactions—how we connect with people, how we help them.

I once told you a story about the time a man in a Wal-Mart parking lot inadvertently backed into my garden trailer causing minor damage. He was astounded that I would not accept any money from him. To me, it didn’t seem necessary to take his money. I didn’t realize it at the time, but looking back, I can see from his reaction that what I did was offer a brief moment of light.

You do things that you don’t even talk about. Everyday you help people, you show kindness and compassions, you bring light. You do these things in the name of Christ, because his light has shined on you. You know how his light is life. You know the power of resurrection.

As a church, we intentionally reach out to the community through our acts of service. For example, we host the homeless women through Compassionate Hands. Hopefully, on those Saturday nights that they are with us, a little light enters the lives of these troubled people.

The light of Christ is the new life of resurrection; it is the victory of life over death. And this victory comes from Jesus Christ. May we always be thankful for our savior and his resurrection from the dead.

Amen.