

THE REALITY OF RESURRECTION

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1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Each day, as I make the commute between my home and this church, I am guaranteed to happen upon at least one deceased critter—some poor animal that has failed to successfully traverse Highway 70 and has met its ultimate demise under the wheels of some car or truck. It may be a squirrel or a skunk or an opossum or a raccoon or even a deer—any one of God’s creatures. All that is left of them is a crushed, misshapen corpse. The sight is never pretty, and I usually try to avert my gaze.

The one thing these creatures all have in common is that they are dead—very dead. Decidedly, unquestionably dead. There is no surgery or procedure that will save them. They have been violently evicted from this mortal coil. They have kicked the bucket; they are pushing up daisies.

If anyone were to try to convince me that these bodies would come back to life, I would not believe them. It is simply not possible. Dead things remain dead. However, having said that, today I would like to talk to you about resurrection.

Back, two thousand years ago, in the city of Corinth, the residents of that great city felt the same way. They knew the dead would stay dead. Any variance on that natural order would be scandalous.

In the first century, the 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 to the Jewish population but was quickly 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, and he soon gathered a group of inquirers whom he taught about Jesus of Nazareth. When this group had gelled as a worshipping community, Paul then moved on to another city 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 received word 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 divisions, and more. Paul addresses these issues in his letters to this church.

Today, I am reading from Chapter 15 of the letter we call 1 Corinthians. Chapter 15 is the next-to-last chapter of this epistle. 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 filled with temples and shrines to a multitude of deities. It boasted a diverse population with innumerable expressions of religious faith. When a Christian attempted to explain to their neighbor that Christ had died and had risen, that was a tough sell. Why would anyone 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. This issue of the resurrection was an ongoing subject of concern. It was an obstacle for believers.

Paul begins Chapter 15 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.* And then it is here that Paul offers a powerful summary of belief: *Christ died for our sins, he was buried, he was raised on the third day, and then he appeared to his followers.* We know this story.

The big question that Paul puts to those who doubt the resurrection is this: He says, *If, as followers of Christ, we proclaim Christ as raised from the dead, how then can you claim that resurrection does not exist?* The two ideas are mutually exclusive. *If you say there is no resurrection, then Christ was not raised. And if you say that Christ has not been raised, then all that we believe has been thrown out the window.*

If resurrection does not exist, then God did not raise Christ. If Christ has not been raised, then our faith is futile. And all these sins that believed had been forgiven, well, they are still with us and we are wallowing in them. If we claim to live in Christ but without the resurrection, then we should be pitied, because it was all in vain. That is what Paul tells the Corinthians.

I get it. Resurrection is a tough sell. When I pass those crushed critters on the highway, I never think to myself, “Well, they’ll be up and around pretty soon.” Resurrection is not something that we can explain. It is beyond our comprehension.

And this is one of those moments—maybe the moment—when we simply have to say, “I believe. I believe in the resurrection.”

The resurrection is the basis of our Christian faith. We proclaim it in our creeds—I believe. To an outsider, the resurrection is a scandal. It is the scandal because in it we are asked to believe the impossible feat of resurrection. It is not a myth; it is not a metaphor; it is a fact.

Throughout history, many people have endeavored to “explain” the resurrection of Jesus. They suggest things like, Maybe Jesus didn’t die on the cross but fell into a

coma and they just thought he was dead. Or maybe someone else took his place on the cross. Or maybe there was no crucifixion at all, and it is just a story that was made up.

But no. We cannot accept any of these explanations. As Paul emphatically proclaims, *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead*. It is non-negotiable.

For some, this is the scandal of the Christian faith. For the rest, however, it is the good news. Despite our sins, our God forgives us. Our God saves us. Our God redeems us. Our God makes us new. Because of God, we have this hope of new life. But take away the resurrection and you take away the hope. And if there is no hope, then everything we thought we knew about God is wrong. If there is no resurrection, then all we have is this life. And the gospel is not really good news.

Paul himself knew the power of resurrection. He had once been one dedicated to the persecution of the church. But then he encountered Christ, and his life changed. It became new.

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 the presence of Christ. But when the light of Christ shines on us we are able to diagnose the darkness infecting our lives. Paul understood 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.

Several months ago, a young man worshipped with us on a Sunday. He was very nice, and I had a long conversation with him. He told me his story. He had been adopted but had been given up by his adoptive parents and then placed into the foster system. He admitted that he had been difficult. He got heavily into drugs. But now he was in a drug program and was trying to turn his life around. Why the change? He told me why. He had had a resurrection experience. Not long ago, he overdosed, and he woke up in the morgue. They thought he was dead. He decided to change. I pray for this young man that he might find the true hope of new life.

I also ask that you take time to 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 brought light to you. It may have been life changing, but more than likely, it 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 but sharing the light of Christ with one another. Beyond these walls, we seek to share this light with the

world. We do it in our day-to-day interactions—how we connect with people, how we help them.

You do things that you don't even talk about. Every day—quietly—you help people, you show kindness and compassion, 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, let us focus on taking the light of Christ to our community. Let us show that resurrection is real. Amen.