

The Grace of the Empty Tomb - 1 Corinthians 15:12-22

Scripture Reading: Luke 23:50-24:12

Introduction

At our evening service on Friday, we looked at the mercy that is available as a result of Jesus' death on the cross.

We defined mercy in the judicial sense as not giving someone what they deserve and we saw how, as ungodly sinners and enemies of God, we deserve punishment and are helpless to do anything about it.

And we saw how God the Father responded by sending his Son to pay the penalty for our sins on the cross and relieve us from the debt we owe to God thereby putting those who accept his payment into a right relationship with God.

The cross has made it possible for us to have our penalty removed and that's the ultimate expression of mercy.

This morning, we are commemorating what is arguably the most significant event in history.

You can't name one to surpass it; I dare you to try.

You might argue for Christmas or Good Friday but, if someone doesn't accept the virgin birth or the unjust death, they would say babies are born and people die - sometimes in unjust and cruel ways - every day.

But on a Sunday morning some 2,000 years ago, Jesus, who had died on that Roman cross on Friday rose alive from his borrowed tomb never to die again.

It's an historically verified fact, testified to by many witnesses, that has never happened before or since.

And this morning, I want to show you the flip side of the mercy God bestows because of the cross - God's grace - specifically the grace that is our because of the empty tomb.

I say grace is the flip side of mercy because the two are closely related with mercy being the removal of a penalty owed and grace being the bestowing of a gift that isn't deserved.

And there are six specific gifts that Paul says are ours to receive as a result of the resurrection of Jesus from the grave on that long ago Easter morning.

Leading up to our focus passage for this morning, Paul made the case for the historical fact of Jesus' resurrection.

In **1 Corinthians 15:3-8** he states the following:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

Notice that Paul supports the bodily resurrection of Jesus by appealing to the direct, eye-witness testimony of more than 500 individual most of whom could still be questioned regarding what Paul has written here.

Remember, Paul had made a drastic change as he left Judaism to embrace Christianity.

He wasn't exactly the most popular individual in his day and he had people who opposed him and would have liked nothing more than to prove him wrong.

If Paul were perpetrating a falsehood, he would have been exposed as a fraud.

But he wasn't because the resurrection of Christ is an historical fact that was verifiable in Paul's day.

With that established, we can turn to our passage for this morning which is **1 Corinthians 15:12-22**, and I encourage you to open your Bible and join me there so you can follow along as I read those verses in their entirety.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 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. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.

Notice that Paul plays the role of devil's advocate here as he lists all the things that would be true *if* the resurrection of Jesus hadn't happened.

I once read a novel where the central idea was that there was a box that contained Jesus' bones.

The organized church had long kept the box a secret but it had gone missing and was about to be made public or some such thing, I don't exactly remember all the details.

But should it be proven that Christ didn't rise from the grave, all the dominoes of Christianity would fall to devastating effect.

And that's what Paul is pointing out with his list of negatives that would exist if Christ was not raised.

However, Jesus did rise on the third day so we can just as easily turn those negatives on their heads and view them as the gifts they are because of the truth of the resurrection - and that's what we're going to do.

Paul lists six gifts that are received by anyone who accepts Christ.

I'm going to look at each of them but do so a bit out of order, so bear with me as we jump around a bit.

I. The apostolic message is true

First, we can trust the New Testament because what the apostles preached is true.

Paul says this negatively in verse 15 saying that if the resurrection didn't happen the apostles are misrepresenting Christ. In other words, they are false teachers because they preached that Christ was raised.

When we studied the book of Judges, we saw the oft repeated phrase, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" and we remarked how little things have changed.

Today, it's popular to deny that there is any such thing as absolute truth - things that are true for all people at all times. People prefer to talk about "my truth" or "what's true for me" and allow that someone else may have a different truth. But as we see repeatedly, that kind of system can't possibly work because, when the differing truth claims conflict, there is no way to sort them out.

To know what is true is a fundamental human need - even for those who want to deny the existence of absolute truth. Otherwise, society devolves into anarchy where might makes right and, ultimately, the people in power determine the truth and force everyone to do what is right in their eyes.

Jesus came into the world and taught, "I am the way, and the *truth*, and the life" [John 14:6] and on at least three occasions he predicted that he would rise again three days after his death.

And God the Father raised him from the dead, thereby validating his claim and proving Jesus was absolutely true.

Therefore, we know the words of the apostles' are also true and trustworthy because they wrote in his name.

And, by the words of Scripture, we can know absolute truth.

II. The apostles' message is effective

Second, we see that the message of the apostles is effective.

Again, Paul states this in negative terms as he says without the resurrection their preaching is in vain.

And by "preaching" Paul is speaking specifically about the gospel message.

The resurrection is a core component of the gospel and the two cannot be separated.

If you deny the resurrection, you deny the gospel, which means you deny salvation - it's that basic.

That was the message of the apostles.

And we know their message is not in vain because, as Christ-followers, we have experienced the power of the gospel.

And it's by the preaching of the apostles that we know the gospel.

It's as Paul writes in Romans 10 about the power of the gospel to save saying [**Romans 10:13-15**]:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!"

The apostles were the original "sent ones" - that's what the word "apostle" means - and many others have obeyed the Great Commission and carried forth the truth of the gospel around the world.

We also follow in the apostles' footsteps as we use their words, preserved in the New Testament, to share the good news with others.

The message of the apostles is far from vain.

III. Our faith is secure

The third gift is closely tied to the first two, our faith rests on a solid foundation.

Faith is only as good as the object of that faith and even the strongest faith in an unworthy object is useless.

We call that misplaced faith and it doesn't matter how much one believes and how thoroughly they trust - if the object of faith is unworthy; the faith is in vain.

But when you trust in Christ, the object of your faith is completely trustworthy.

Immediately before his ascension, Jesus gave his disciples what we know as the Great Commission and he said at the end, "*Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age*" [**Matthew 28:20**].

We all need someone we can count on and we can put our complete trust in Jesus because he is alive today.

With his death, Jesus removed the power of sin and, with his resurrection he defeated death, thereby showing that he has power over all of life.

You couldn't ask for a more secure and effective object for your faith than the one who has proven himself to be absolutely true, powerful, and trustworthy.

Everyone who has put their faith in Christ can know their faith is secure on the basis that Christ is alive today.

IV. Our sins are forgiven

Fourth, we are not still in our sins because our sins have been forgiven.

Believe it or not, people debate over which is more important when it comes to our sin, the death or resurrection of Jesus.

One might as well ask which is the most important wing on an airplane.

Both are absolutely necessary or the whole thing comes crashing down.

Paul writes in **Romans 4:25** about how Jesus was “*delivered up for our transgressions and raised for our justification.*”

The cross and the empty tomb are inseparable.

Jesus carried our sins to the cross and paid the penalty for them thereby taking our punishment and with his death, sin lost its power over us.

It was at the cross that he won the victory for us that we were powerless to win for ourselves.

And without his sacrificial death, we would still be in our sins, unforgiven, unredeemed, and unsaved.

We looked at all of that on Friday.

At the end of his ordeal on the cross, we see Jesus exclaim [**John 19:30**], “*tetelestai*” which means “It is finished!” indicating that our bill was paid in full.

There was nothing more to be done as our debt was satisfied.

However, the resurrection is the receipt that God provided letting us know that our bill has indeed been paid.

Think about how differently we would view our sins if Jesus had remained in the tomb.

We would have no way of knowing that his death was actually substitutionary and sufficient.

We couldn’t possibly know that he didn’t die just like all men do.

The resurrection is all the evidence we need that we have been pardoned and are at peace with God.

V. We have life after death

Fifth, Christ-followers whose earthly lives have ended are still alive today.

For many, the thought of no longer existing can be haunting and the fear of judgment and damnation is even worse.

But we see in verse 20 [**1 Corinthians 15:20**], that Christ is the “*firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep [or died].*”

A short history lesson will help us understand what Paul means.

Leviticus 23:9-14 spells out the requirements of the firstfruits offering.

The people of Israel were to bring a sheaf of grain to the priest who would wave it before the Lord and no grain was to be harvested until the firstfruits offering had been completed.

The firstfruit offering was a demonstration of obedience and reverence to God as well as their trust in God as their provider.

The Hebrew word for firstfruit literally translates as “promise to come” showing that the offering was viewed as an investment in the future as God would bless the harvest that came afterward.

It was representative of and in anticipation of the rest of the harvest.

Therefore, Paul’s meaning is that the resurrection of Christ represents and guarantees the resurrection of his followers.

We see Paul state this explicitly in **Romans 6:5** where he writes:

If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.

Christ’s resurrection, then, is just the beginning as his resurrection signals the abundance of resurrections still to come as all those who have placed their complete trust in him are raised to eternal life.

Obviously, the firstfruits offering would necessarily occur at the time of the harvest.

But the Feast of Firstfruits was observed on the day after the Sabbath following Passover as we read in Leviticus 23.

Significantly, that means Jesus rose from the tomb on precisely the day of the Feast of Firstfruits.

And just as the firstfruits offering was bloodless because Passover had just occurred, Jesus ended the need for sacrifice since he provided a perfect and complete atonement once for all [**Hebrews 10:10**].

Every other founder of a religion has ended up mouldering in a grave - but not Jesus.

The grave couldn't hold him because he is the God-man who defeated death and promises that his followers will do likewise.

We all still have a date with death [**Hebrews 9:27**] just as Jesus did but the grave isn't the end for us any more than it was for him.

After the Christ-follower's death, their spirit is taken to heaven where it resides "absent from the body but present with the Lord" [**2 Corinthians 5:6-8**].

Then, at the resurrection of the saints, their physical bodies are raised, glorified, and reunited with their spirits for all eternity.

That's why we don't have any reason to fear death or to grieve as those who have no hope [**1 Thessalonians 4:13**].

The harvest has only begun, there is much more to come, and the resurrection of Christ is the promise that we will continue to live forever and raised to glory after our lives here end [**1 Thessalonians 4:14**].

VI. We are privileged

Sixth, for all the reasons above, we should not be the objects of pity; we should be envied.

Humanity's search for significance is almost as old as humanity itself.

We all have the innate desire for our lives to have meaning, to know that we count for something, to come to the end of our lives secure in the knowledge that our days weren't spent in vain.

But, just as it is with the quality of faith being dependent on the object of that faith, where we search for significance matters.

And if we have poured our lives into Christ - living for him, following his commands, doing his will, and seeking to please him - if we are doing all those things for all the right reasons but doing them for a corpse in a tomb, we *are* pitiable.

If Christ isn't raised and seated beside the Father today, we're no better than those who look to the arrangements of the stars, a plethora of gods, or other religious figures.

Everything we believe and rely on rests on the resurrection of Jesus.

In **Romans 1:4**, we see that **Jesus' divinity** rests on his resurrection.

So does **his sovereignty** as we see in **Romans 14:9**.

Our justification depends on it - **Romans 4:25** makes that clear.

So does **our regeneration** as Peter proclaims in **1 Peter 1:3**.

And **our ultimate resurrection** is also founded on his as we see in **Romans 8:11** and in verse 20 of our passage.

Christ's resurrection is the thread that holds all of Christianity together and, if it's pulled, the whole fabric unravels.

However, we don't need to worry about that because Jesus *has* been raised and he *is* reigning right now as King forever.

And because he is, all our devotion, obedience, love, sacrifice, and suffering serve a purpose as it "is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory" that no one can conceive of [**2 Corinthians 4:17**].

Because of that, we aren't to be pitied but envied.

Conclusion

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have the greatest news the world has ever heard.

And we have a job to do.

Jesus charged his disciples and his church that came after them to go to all people and spread the gospel, to make disciples and teach them to observe all his commandments.

And he promised to be present with us in our efforts until the end of the age when he comes to reign again.

That's a promise that can only be made by someone who is living.

In raising his Son from the dead, God the Father:

- Validated his Son's sacrifice and payment for our sins so that we know we are forgiven
- Gave us a living Savior we can count on to the end
- Gave us the message of truth and righteousness to take to all people
- Gave us a job to do that cannot be thwarted and will prove fruitful
- And, ultimately, gave us life everlasting - a life of both quality and quantity - a life that will not end in death as verified by the resurrection of Jesus the firstfruits of the harvest to come

And Paul ends this chapter and subject by saying [**1 Corinthians 15:58**]:

Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain.

He is risen! (He is risen indeed)

And because he is risen we are rich indeed.

Let's pray.