

The Importance of the Resurrection – 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Scripture Reading: Luke 23:50-24:12

Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023

Introduction

No doubt you've heard the expression that the only two sure things in life are death and taxes

While none of us are genuinely fond of taxes, our culture today seems to be almost fixated on death

We find images of death on clothing and graphic depictions of death in video games, and many movies and television programs these days contain realistic scenes of death and dying - even those with family-friendly ratings

And then there's the internet - be careful what you look at there because, once seen, the images cannot be erased

Our world has no problem with death, so the fact that Christians gathered together this past Friday to commemorate the death of Jesus doesn't cause anyone to raise an eyebrow

Certainly, no one outside the church marvels at the fact that an itinerant rabbi named Jesus died some 2,000 years ago in Judea

Nor would anyone be particularly disturbed to hear that he died at the hands of the Roman government in an unjust execution by crucifixion – people die every day, often unjustly

And unless a person checks the right boxes of intersectionality, unjust deaths don't even merit a yawn

But Easter, which we celebrate today, is another matter

Because on Easter Sunday, we commemorate the fact that Jesus, who was crucified and buried on Friday, rose from the dead three days later

The world understands and accepts death because death happens all the time - the current death rate globally is north of 67 million people - that's more than two people every second of every day

Our newspapers have new obituaries, and death notices every single day

Because the world understands and accepts death, Good Friday poses no problems for them

But they don't understand Easter because people find it hard to accept that anyone who has died comes back to life

Despite the popularity of shows like "The Walking Dead," people don't have a grip for people actually rising from the grave because they have never seen it happen

Some people had seen Jesus raise people from the dead, like Lazarus and Jairus' daughter, but it was a limited number, and others likely discounted the accounts or came up with alternate theories for those resuscitations

In fact, Scripture records there was a conspiracy to lie and cover up the resurrection of Jesus when his body went missing

We read about it in **Matthew 28:11-15** where we see that the chief priests and elders bribed the Roman guards to say that Jesus' disciples had come by night and stolen his body while the guards were asleep

They knew for a fact that Jesus was dead because no one ever survived a Roman crucifixion – the Romans were very good at executing people, and they didn't make mistakes

And the religious leaders *knew* that the dead don't come back to life, so they couldn't accept the fact that Jesus had risen from the grave, and they couldn't allow the idea that he had done so to spread

Perhaps you find the whole concept of Jesus' bodily resurrection a little hard to swallow

I mean, I'm pretty sure you would all say you believe in it, even if you have to admit that you don't completely understand it

Roughly 85% of adults said that very thing when asked about the resurrection in a Gallup poll

Perhaps you go along with Easter because we're supposed to, and besides, it's a good excuse for a new outfit, and there is usually chocolate in there somewhere

But, let me ask you, what difference would it make to you personally if we discovered that Jesus didn't rise from the dead after all?

Some years ago, I read a novel by Clive Cussler called Crescent Dawn

In part, the book concerned the existence of an ancient box that was said to contain the bones of Jesus and the intrigue that surrounded the church trying to keep the contents of the box from being made public

It made for a good story but have you ever considered what it would mean if such a box existed and it was somehow proven to contain the bones of Jesus

It would undoubtedly mean the end of Easter, but would anything else change?

**Would there be any significant harm if we yielded to the skeptics on the subject of the resurrection?
Is the resurrection worth fighting for?**

In the passage before us this morning,

Paul addresses the significance of Jesus' bodily resurrection from the grave on that first Easter morning

Please join me in 1 Corinthians 15 in your Bible and follow along as I read verses 12-19 [**1Corinthians 15:12-19**]

(For those of you using the Visitors' Bibles in the pew racks, you will find the passage on **page 961**)

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.

In verses 12-13, Paul sets up his argument

There were those in Paul's day, and some of them were Christians, who believed that the only thing that mattered was the spirit and that everything physical was tainted

So they denied the possibility, and even the *desirability*, of a bodily resurrection

All the same, they allowed for the bodily resurrection of Jesus – while denying its possible for anyone else

Looking back at verses 1-11, we see Paul lay out the eyewitness testimony that supports the resurrection of Jesus

Then in verse 12 [**1Cor 15:12**], he asks his rhetorical question that basically says, if we can prove Jesus rose, so you can't say there is no resurrection

And then, in verse 13 [**1Cor 15:13**], he states that if resurrection *is* impossible, then Jesus wasn't raised

In other words, Paul is disallowing a double standard and forcing his readers to be consistent in their logic

Then in verses 14-19, he shows the consequences that would result if Jesus, in fact, didn't rise from the dead

In these verses, Paul lists **six detrimental effects** that would result

And from these six effects, we realize that the resurrection is the **keystone** that supports the entire gospel

The keystone of an arch is the wedge-shaped stone that sits at the apex of the arch

Typically, when building an arch, a form is used to support the side stones until the keystone is slipped into place

Then, once the keystone is slid into place, the form can be removed and the arch will support itself and bear the weight that is placed on it from above

And just as an arch cannot stand or bear weight without a keystone, neither can the gospel stand without the resurrection

The resurrection of Jesus is vital to all of Christianity, as Paul will convincingly reason, so let's dig into the passage and look at the consequences of eliminating Easter

Let's look at verses 14-15, where we see the first three of the consequences:

I. If Christ was not raised, our message is meaningless

Look with me at verses 14-15 [1Cor 15:14-15]

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.

Paul says if Christ was not raised, our **message is meaningless**, it's empty, and it has no value at all

In fact, it's worse than that – he says that he and the other apostles are proven to be liars who willfully told false things about God because they said that God raised Christ from the dead and that they had been eyewitnesses to it

C.S. Lewis popularized the idea that Jesus was either a liar, a lunatic, or he was Lord

Either he was a willful liar who claimed to be the Son of God when he knew he wasn't

Or he was a deluded lunatic who didn't know any better

Or he was actually who he claimed to be

Whatever you think of this trilemma and its validity, Paul makes much the same claim here, only he takes away the idea of delusion and says plainly that if the resurrection did not occur, he and the others were guilty of willful deception in saying that it had happened

Remember, Paul and the other apostles didn't just pass along a story that they had heard; they repeatedly claimed that they were eyewitnesses to the resurrection and that they had met the risen Christ face-to-face

And Paul says if what we have preached to you is based on a falsehood, the fact that you believed us and acted on your belief is also useless

Think of all the hours you've spent sitting through sermons and Bible studies

All the time you've spent reading God's Word and reading Christian books

All of the effort you've put in as you sought to understand and apply the principles and practices of the Christian life

Paul is saying here that none of that matters – it all comes to nothing if the resurrection isn't true because it's all based on a lie

Think of the millions of people filling churches all over the world today

From the mega-churches with huge auditoriums that seat thousands to average-sized churches of 80-100 people, all the way down to home churches of just a few folks...

And think of how many people have done likewise during the past 20 centuries

The number is staggering

And, if Christ didn't rise from the tomb, all of those multitudes of people have wasted their time and efforts

Without the reality of the resurrection, all of Christianity is an empty shell based on a lie

and all of us are engaging in a pointless activity based on a terrible lie

and we might as well stop right now and go downstairs and enjoy the leftovers from breakfast

II. If Christ was not raised, our sins still stain

Then, in verse 17 [**1Cor 15:17**], we come to a statement that, at first glance, is hard to understand and accept

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

That if Christ was not raised, **our sins still stain**

Our theology and our thinking tend to be more focused on Good Friday than on Easter

We have been taught, and rightly so, that our sins were nailed to the cross of Christ and that, through his death, our sins were paid for, and by his death, we can, therefore, be redeemed – and that is most definitely true

It's a basic tenet of Christianity that the blood that Jesus shed on Calvary has washed us as white as snow

So what could Paul possibly mean when he says, "...if Christ has not been raised...you are still in your sins"?

We are left to question what part the resurrection plays in the removal of sins if Jesus was correct in saying from the cross, "It is finished," just before he gave up his spirit, as we read in **John 19:30**

This is a vital question that must be answered for us to fully grasp the significance of the resurrection, so let's take a few moments to work through the logic of what Paul is saying

- The first one is kind of easy to see – If the resurrection of the dead is impossible, then Jesus did not rise

That makes sense. If the dead cannot be resurrected, then Christ could not have been resurrected

But let's continue down the logic trail for a bit

- If Jesus didn't rise, then death was victorious and demonstrated it was more powerful than Jesus

Jesus had repeatedly said that death couldn't conquer him and stated his intention to rise after three days in the grave, so if he didn't rise, then he was wrong, and death was indeed more powerful than Jesus

- And if death has power over Jesus, then Jesus cannot be God

After all, by definition, God must be the most powerful being in existence

- And if Jesus isn't God, then he couldn't offer a complete sacrifice for sin because only God could do that
- And if there was no complete sacrifice, then our sins are not satisfactorily redeemed before God
- And if they haven't been fully paid for, then we are still in our sins

If Jesus was not resurrected, our sins still stain us, and we still owe a debt before God for them

Therefore, we come to the logical conclusion that if Jesus did not rise on that first Easter morning, he is not alive today, and he was unable to save us

And that's Paul's point here

When we say we are a born-again Christian, we are saying that we have placed our faith in the saving work of Jesus on the cross - remember, faith is trust put into action

So, because we trust in Christ, we have given up on earning heaven for ourselves and are relying solely on his sacrifice on our behalf to put us in the right relationship with God -

Saving faith is trust put into the action of surrender and reliance

So, if he didn't rise, our faith is "futile," which means it produces no beneficial result on our behalf

If Jesus is still in the tomb, we are still in our sins

And without Easter, Good Friday is less than meaningless because everything we trust in is proven to be worthless

The darkness seems so much blacker when the light of hope is removed

III. If Christ was not raised, the dead are done

And in verse 18 [**1Cor 15:18**], Paul extends his argument to those believers who have gone before and says that if Christ was not raised, **the dead are done**

He writes: *Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.*

The metaphor of falling asleep is often used in Scripture for those who have died

Jesus used it when speaking of Jairus' daughter, who he brought back to life in **Matthew 9:24**

And Paul uses it here to say that those believers who have died have "fallen asleep in Christ"

When we lay down to sleep, we do so with the complete expectation of waking up again

And Christians *can* refer to death as having fallen asleep because we have confidence that believers who die will wake up on that future, glorious resurrection morning and that the dead in Christ shall rise first as we read in

1 Thessalonians 4:16

That's why we don't grieve as others who have no hope when believers die – we know they are only sleeping and that one day they will awaken, and we will be reunited

But only if the resurrection is true

Without the resurrection of Christ, there is no hope for any of us, and when this life is over, we are finished

If Jesus didn't rise from the grave, then the atheists are correct, and death is the end of our existence

If Jesus didn't rise, there is no hope for any of us, and when we die, we're done – just as Jesus would be

IV. If Christ was not raised, our lives are lunacy (19)

We see this truth in verse 19 [1Cor 15:19]

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

Here, Paul gives the summary result of these first five consequences when he says,

If Christ was not raised, **our lives are lunacy**

Actually, he says we are most worthy of pity –

The same kind of pity any of us should feel toward someone who has been deluded

If Jesus is still in the tomb, we deserve to have everyone feel sorry for us

They should feel pity toward us because we have nothing left

No message to share

We aren't saved from our sins

We have no hope of eternal life

We have no reason to go on practicing a demonstrably false faith

One might argue that it's still better to live according to the way that Jesus taught

But is it?

If there is no hope of eternal life and our lives are over when we draw that last breath, why wouldn't we be better off living as the world lives?

We should live like we're in an old Schlitz Beer ad and go for the gusto, grabbing all we can with both hands!

If this life is all there is, we are fools to deny ourselves every possible pleasure this life can afford

"You only live once" should be our motto, and we should only be looking out for number one

Because we believe that our reason for existing as a church is to continue the mission that Jesus began; if he is still in the tomb, we should close up shop and sell the property because we have no reason to exist

How can we be anything but monsters if we go around preaching something that isn't true and thereby lead others to share our delusion with us?

V. But... (20)

Hold on, though, because, in verse 20, Paul stops supposing and declares what is true [1Cor 15:20]

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Everything changes with those three little words, "But in fact..."

Remember, when we encounter the word "but," we are encountering a complete reversal of what came before

Paul moves from the theoretical to the actual and declares that Christ has been raised from the dead

And with that declaration, our fortunes are reversed from the dire situation he has just been describing

Because not only has Jesus been raised from the dead, but his resurrection is the guarantee of our future resurrection

That's what the word "firstfruits" means

We first find the term "firstfruits" in Leviticus 23:9-14 where we see that the firstfruits was the first sheaf of harvested grain that was presented as a wave offering to the Lord

The offering of firstfruits was meant to represent and anticipate the remainder of the harvest yet to come

And the resurrection of Christ is the firstfruits that anticipates the bodily resurrection of his children, as Paul states in **Romans 6:5** where he writes:

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

The third verse of the hymn Because He Lives describes our guaranteed future beautifully

And then, one day, I'll cross the river

I'll fight life's final war with pain

And then, as death gives way to victory

I'll see the lights of glory, and I'll know He reigns

As believers, we need not fear death because for us to die is simply to fall asleep and wait to be awakened again

Because Jesus was not left in the grave, neither will we be left in the grave!

I don't ask for many "Amens," but that has to be worth an "Amen!"

Conclusion

We began this morning by likening the resurrection of Jesus to the keystone of an arch, and now we see why it is such an essential truth

The world has difficulty with the whole concept of bodily resurrection because it just seems too fantastic

After all, none of us has ever witnessed a person die, be buried, and then return to life and walk around with us

All of our experiences tell us that dead is dead, and the trip to the cemetery is a one-way ride

That was undoubtedly part of the problem with the Jewish religious leaders – who could have found it easy to believe in the resurrection even though Jesus had predicted it?

It simply doesn't occur under natural conditions

But when it comes to God, we need to remember that he isn't limited by the natural

That reminds me of another fact about the keystone in an arch

It's rather interesting that even though the keystone is the most important stone and everything depends on it, it has the least amount of stress and pressure on it of any stone in the arch

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is just like that; it's an essential doctrine on which many other doctrines rest [Slide]:

Romans 1:4 tells us that the divinity of Jesus hinges on the resurrection

Romans 14:9 tells us that Jesus' sovereignty is connected to the resurrection

Romans 4:25 says that our justification hangs on the resurrection

And so does our regeneration, as we see in **1 Peter 1:3**

And our own personal resurrection depends on the resurrection of Jesus, as we see in **Romans 8:11**

But the God who created the universe by simply speaking it into existence didn't break a sweat in raising his Son

And because Jesus conquered the grave and rose again, we know that we, too, will rise on that glorious day when he returns

Death won't win, and the grave won't be the end for us

And in the meantime

Our message has meaning

Our sins no longer stain

Those who have died are not finished

And we aren't nuts for being Christ-followers

Because he lives, we know that we, too, will rise from our graves and that we have purpose here on earth

He is risen! (He is risen indeed!)

Let's pray