

“Christ Has Indeed Been Raised!”

It was one week after Easter, and not much had changed. The disciples who had locked themselves in an upper room the week before were there again, or perhaps there still. Most had seen the Savior, but I suppose they were still processing what it meant to them that he was alive. One of them hadn't been there the week before—that was the significant difference a week later. So Jesus came again and gave more convincing proofs that he was indeed alive.

It was twenty-some years after Easter, and very much had changed. The disciples had transformed through the working of the Holy Spirit into bold apostles who carried the message of Christ's resurrection from Jerusalem to the world. Paul had joined their ranks after seeing Jesus on his way to Damascus. Paul's journeys had taken him throughout the Roman Empire, including to a city called Corinth, a busy, bustling urban center. The church that he established there had its fair share of problems, but one is of particular importance to us today: there were people who were questioning the whole idea of the resurrection. There were people making the claim that there was no such thing as the dead rising to life. So Paul wrote to the congregation and included in his letter the great resurrection chapter of the Bible, what we know as 1 Corinthians chapter 15.

And now it is nearly 2000 years after Easter, the first Easter, and one week after our most recent celebration of that event. What's amazing after all this time is that in spite of so many changes that have occurred in technology and society and world history, and in spite of the number of generations that have come and gone, there remain so many similarities to the time one week after Easter which we heard about in the Gospel today and to the time when Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthian Christians, including the words of our sermon text. As important and as valuable as these words were to the Corinthians around 56 AD, they remain important and valuable for us as we face doubts and uncertainties and trials and challenges.

Indeed, many of the words of our sermon text could have been written directly to our congregation and so many like it today. Starting from the very beginning, **“But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?”** The resurrection of Christ from the dead has been a central point of Christian teaching and outreach since the very beginning. And the denial of it has been a reaction ever since. Paul doesn't tell us much about those who made the claim, but he gives us the impression that they had a troubling effect on the Christians in Corinth. Were these people who valued knowledge and learning using that to point out the impossibility of resurrection? Were they confused Christians who were breathing in pagan philosophies and beliefs? Did they fully understand what they were saying?

We know people like this today. It seems that right around Easter time each year they pop up on television or in popular magazines to share the latest research about who Jesus really was. They claim to have a high view of him and his message, but for them the resurrection is nothing more than a myth or a legend. People just don't rise from the dead.

But understand what that claim means. If people don't rise from the dead, then neither did Jesus. And if Jesus died but didn't rise again, then you can throw out everything that Christianity claims and stands for. If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then Paul was a liar, and I am a liar, and you are a liar every time you tell someone about the hope that you have in Jesus.

Because if Jesus didn't rise from the dead you have no hope. As Paul wrote: **“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.”** There is a reason that the resurrection has always been so central to Christian preaching. It is the guarantee of our justification, that Jesus through his sacrifice on the cross has made us right with our holy God. With his work complete, he rose triumphant from the grave. If he didn't, then you aren't justified. Then you stand before God with all your weaknesses laid bare, all your sins exposed, all your wrongs uncovered before him. And God threatens to hold you

accountable for every single sin. Each on its own is enough to sentence you to an eternity away from his presence. As the writer to the Hebrews sums up the thought, **“It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”** (Hebrews 10:31).

If Christ has not been raised, then he was not who he said he was. At best all he could be for us is a fine teacher or a good example. But what good is a teacher really? What good is an example? They may serve us well, but only for this life. And if this life is all that we have in Christ, **“we are to be pitied more than all men.”** A fine teacher or a good example can do nothing about our eternal predicament. A fine teacher or a good example can do nothing about our destiny when this life comes to an end. So will you really follow a fine teacher or a good example in a way that means carrying your own cross? Will you deny yourself and your natural desires for him? Will you give of yourself to serve others? Will you suffer the ridicule of so many who surround you? Will you do all of this if this is all that you have? If so, you are a fool. If Christ has not been raised, then what have we been doing? We should have simply given in to our every desire, been concerned only with ourselves, and sought every last pleasure that we could muster out of this life because this life would be all that we have. This life is all we have if Jesus is dead.

But Jesus is not dead. **But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.** And therefore each and every one of those hypothetical hazards is gone. You are not still in your sins, your sins have been taken away. Those who speak of Jesus as the world’s Savior are not liars, but they are tellers of the ultimate truth. And your hope in Christ does not end with this life, it lasts into eternal life.

Jesus Christ is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. This beautiful picture comes from the practice required of God’s people in the Old Testament. The firstfruits, the very first portion of the harvest as they brought it in each year would be devoted to God, offered at his altar. In giving to God the firstfruits, the people expressed their confidence not only that this harvest had come from God, but also that the rest of the harvest would be blest by him. More was definitely coming.

So also Jesus rising from the dead is a firstfruits of sorts. He is the first to rise from the dead, but he will not be the last. The rest of the harvest will be gathered in. The rest of the harvest will come from those who have *fallen asleep* because that is now what death means for us. It is not an absolute end. It is a time of rest for our bodies until Christ awakens them on the Last Day.

By his resurrection, Christ has undone death forever. He is the counterpoint to Adam, through whom death entered the world and become the reality for every one of his descendants. But now a special descendant of Adam has loosened the grip of the grave and has defeated death for us. **For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.**

And so whether we have been aware of it or not, at the time of the first Easter everything had changed. One week later, the followers of Jesus were still locked inside the upper room because they had not fully understood what it meant that Jesus was alive. Twenty some years later the congregation at Corinth was troubled by false teaching because they hadn’t held firmly to this amazing truth, and so God through Paul preached and proclaimed that message to them in unmistakable terms. And nearly two thousand years later it is so easy for us to lose focus or to lose hope when we don’t daily keep in our minds and in our hearts the reality that Christ has risen from the dead and that it means we have life eternal as our future.

There are today some even within the ranks of so-called Christianity who deny that Jesus has truly risen from the dead. And there are many outside of the Church who mock the entire idea of the resurrection. “People don’t rise from the dead,” they remind us. “Science tells us that is impossible.” This line of reasoning is a favorite tactic of the devil. But we don’t need them to tell us that people don’t rise from the dead. We know it already. The disciples knew it, and so did the Corinthians. But that’s what makes this news so amazing. Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. He has changed the equation. Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. Blessed are all those who believe it.

The Text: 1 Corinthians 15:12–22 (NIV84)

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.

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