

## **1 Corinthians 15:19-26**

19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. 20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

## ONE FUNDAMENTAL

This week I've been doing a little study on the fundamentalist-modernist controversy of the early twentieth century. Believe it or not this was in the beginning primarily a Presbyterian argument. The basic question was this: Are there some fundamentals of faith that must be believed? And if so, what are they?

How would you answer that question? What do you

think is fundamental to the Christian faith? What must a person believe in order to be a disciple of Jesus? Those theologians in the early twentieth century came up with five fundamentals of faith in response to the creeping influence of unbelief in the church.

These fundamentals were the inerrancy of Scripture, the virgin birth of Christ, the belief that Christ's death was an atonement for sin, the historical reality of Christ's miracles, and the bodily resurrection of Christ. These fundamentals were approved by a General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the early 1900s.

Being Presbyterians we have spent most of the last 100 years arguing about the details of those fundamentals or if indeed the fundamentals are really fundamental. But, it is still a question worth asking. What are the fundamentals of our faith? What is the core of what we believe?

I would suggest this morning that this last fundamental mentioned by that last General Assembly, the bodily resurrection of Christ is more important than all the rest. If this is true, if Christ is raised, the whole world is changed forever. If this is

not true, then (as Paul puts it in our lesson for today) “we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Belief in the resurrection is the cornerstone of our faith. It is the foundation on which the whole church stands or falls. All the other doctrines of the church are of no significance if Christ is not raised.

## RESURRECTION DOUBTS

But, despite the importance of this belief, from time to time doubts arise. This was true in the Corinthian church. Some began to ask, “What if the resurrection was a hoax?”

Now it’s possible that the Corinthians weren’t denying the afterlife completely. They were just trying to reinterpret the resurrection in a way that was more in line with Greek philosophy.

The Greeks believed that the soul was trapped in the prison of the body. So, in their way of thinking, death brought a kind of welcome release. Death was a friend who enabled them to enter a higher way of life.

But, the idea of a bodily resurrection just didn’t fit

into the mind/body dualism of Greek philosophy. This view, according to some at Corinth was not only unacceptable; it was unspiritual!

There are some today who promote a similar view. Some liberal scholars have really attacked the doctrine of the resurrection in the past few years. They have said that at Easter the only thing that happened was that the disciples of Jesus had an “experience of Christ’s presence” which they later described as the risen Christ.

## WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

Well the earliest biblical witness to the resurrection comes to us through the letter of Paul to the Corinthians. (In fact Paul’s letter to the Corinthians was probably written well before the earliest gospel, maybe 10 or 15 years after the crucifixion.) So, in this letter we have one of the earliest examples of what the first followers of Christ thought about the resurrection.

And this letter certainly doesn’t seem to be promoting the idea that the resurrection was just an “experience of the risen Christ.”

On the contrary Paul talks about the resurrection in the most concrete of terms. To be sure there were those in the Corinthian community who wanted to “spiritualize” the resurrection, to import the Greek idea of the “immortality of the soul” into the church.

But, Paul would have none of it. Paul countered their arguments with some amazing facts. There were many eyewitnesses to the resurrection. He wrote in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of First Corinthians that Jesus appeared to Peter, James and all the disciples of several occasions.

And on one occasion the risen Christ appeared to a crowd of more than 500 people. Paul said, “Most of them are still alive. Check it out if you don’t believe me.” 1 Corinthians 15:3-7

The accounts of the resurrection in the gospels all make several points crystal clear. The stone was rolled away. The grave clothes were neatly folded. The body was gone.

And when the followers of Jesus finally saw him, they saw his scars. They touched him. He ate their food.

Jesus was no apparition. He had been bodily raised from the dead.

In none of the resurrection stories do we hear anyone talking about carrying on the “spirit” of Jesus’ ministry. Nowhere do we hear the disciples talking about Jesus living on in their memories.

In fact, the stories tell us just the opposite. All the gospels make the same point. It is the claim we make in the Apostle’s Creed. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried.

And the followers of Jesus had totally given up hope.

What did the followers of Jesus think when they saw that the tomb was empty? Did they think that Jesus was immortal? No.

They thought, “Somebody stole the body.” And they wept bitterly.

When the disciples first saw the risen Christ they didn’t recognize him. Why? Because the resurrection was something that they couldn’t even imagine.

But, when they finally were able to see him and touch him, they were changed forever.

It was the resurrection that transformed timid disciples into preachers of the gospel. It was the risen Christ that filled those disciples with the Spirit and enabled the church to be born.

### WHY WOULD THEY LIE?

Some of you may think that the resurrection isn't true. And I can understand your reluctance to believe. After all, nothing like this has happened before or since.

Flowers bloom in the spring and bunny rabbits are cute, but we don't have to put any security guards in the cemetery. No one has been able to escape that place.

You might say that all these witnesses to the resurrection were lying.

But, why would they lie? And why would they (in many cases) give their lives for something that they knew was a lie?

The idea that the resurrection was some sort of mass hallucination or wish fulfillment on the part of the disciples just doesn't fit the facts. The disciples are not portrayed in the gospels as people who are ready to believe in a resurrection. After Jesus appears to them they still doubt.

If the resurrection of Jesus was some sort of gigantic hoax, how long could such a conspiracy have held together given that many disciples were so reluctant to believe in the first place?

One author put it this way, "In short the Gospels do not present the resurrection of Jesus ... with arguments arranged to prove each main point, but as a shocking intrusion that no one was expecting ... least of all Jesus' fearful disciples."

Paul brings home his argument with full force. If the Christians at Corinth could not believe in the possibility of a bodily resurrection, then they could not believe in the resurrection of Christ. And if they did not believe in the resurrection of Christ, why would they ever want to be a Christian?

Paul said that if there is no resurrection, our faith is futile. If there is no resurrection, our preaching is

pointless. If there is no resurrection, our sins are not forgiven.

The hinge of the Christian faith is the resurrection. This truly is the one fundamental of the Christian faith.

It is not possible to dress up Christianity as one of many possible philosophies. Either Christ was who he said he was or Christ was a charlatan. Either Christ was bodily raised from the grave or the faith falls flat. There is no middle ground.

## CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED

But, says Paul, as a matter of fact, Christ has indeed been raised.

The resurrection is God's answer to a death-dealing world. The resurrection is God changing the world forever.

This word translated "has been raised" indicates continuing action. As one commentator put it, "It sets forth with the utmost possible emphasis the abiding results of the event." In other words, we cannot talk about the resurrection as if it were an

interesting story that happened long ago. The resurrection was and is the miraculous intervention of God that changes things even today.

The effects wrought by this mighty event continue even today. Paul made this clear when he said that Christ was the “first fruits of those who have died”.

Those of you who are gardeners know all about the first fruits. The first fruits are signs of good things to come. When that first tomato ripens you know that many more are coming. When that first flower blooms you know that a dazzling array of beauty will soon follow.

Paul says that the same is true with the resurrection of Jesus. As it was with Christ so it will be with those who sleep in Christ. His resurrection is a harbinger of the Kingdom that comes.

Robert Hughes, a Lutheran minister used to talk about his father’s job in the coal mines of Pennsylvania. It was his father’s job to check the mines for methane gas before the miners went down into the mines.

Every morning he would descend alone into the

mines, taking with him the safety light. And he would check out each of the tunnels and shafts in the mines to make sure that there was no deadly methane gas present.

Of course if the light of the safety lamp would flicker, he would have to run for his life because it would detect the presence of methane gas.

But, most of the time, after checking the mine he would rise up to the surface, and there would be all the miners gathered around expectantly waiting for him to announce,

“It’s okay. It’s safe. You can go down into the mine.”

Dr. Hughes concluded his illustration by saying,

“That’s what Christ has done for us. Coming up out of the depths of death, he has announced to all who are gathered here,

‘It’s okay. It’s safe because I have been there and checked it out.

It has not been victorious over me. I have overcome

it, and I will be with you in death even as I have been with you in life.’”

Jesus is the first fruits of those who will be raised from the dead.

## A NEW WORLD COMING

In verse 21 of our lesson for today Paul introduces a new argument for the resurrection that he also uses in Romans 5. Paul says that Christ is like Adam. Jesus starts something new, as did Adam.

Sin and death came into the world through Adam. Now that downward spiral has been reversed.

New life, both physical and spiritual, has come into the world through Jesus. The life, death and especially the bodily resurrection of Jesus have changed everything. It's a whole new ball game ... or as the Bible puts it, there is “a new creation in Christ Jesus.”

At this point Paul anticipates another objection. If in the resurrection of Christ there is a new creation, why are we living in the same old world? Paul admits that sin and death still seem to reign supreme.

But, the followers of Christ know a secret. The reign of sin and death is only temporary. The decisive battle has already been won.

The stone is rolled away. The tomb is empty. And the risen Christ is loose in the world creating a new heaven and a new earth. One day all the enemies of God's grace will be defeated.

And the final enemy to be defeated will be death.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of hope. He was not left for dead, and so we will not be left for dead. The world will not be left for dead.

Today the future of our world seems uncertain. There is uncertainty about our political leadership. There is uncertainty about the environment. There is uncertainty about our economic future. And on a personal level there is uncertainty about our own future.

I cannot guarantee that everything will work out well for us in the years to come. But, the resurrection of Jesus assures us that when that final trumpet sounds God will be there for us.

That's all we know, and maybe that's all we need to know.

God never leaves us. God is with us today in the Gethsemanes and Good Fridays of our life today. And God will be with us in the end when the final enemy, death is defeated and we rejoice with him in glory forever.

## NOT TO BE OPENED?

There's a story about a grave in Germany, which was sealed with a granite slab and bound with strong chains. On it an atheist had inscribed, "Not to be opened throughout eternity."

Yet somehow a little acorn had fallen into some crack and its outer shell "died." Years later, everyone saw a huge oak tree which had completely broken up the slab ... the slab that still had those hopeless words inscribed on it.

The new life of that acorn had openly displayed the power of life.

In a more profound way the resurrection of Jesus

openly displays the power of God's new creation. The mighty oak splitting open the grave gives us a graphic picture of how eventually the final enemy will be destroyed. Christ, the first fruits of those who have died has unleashed a power that even the greatest enemy in the world cannot stop.

## WITNESS FROM A SCIENTIST

All of us have doubts from time to time. Like the Corinthians we might even wonder if resurrection is possible. But, consider this. He who created us can recreate us, and his new creation will be even more beautiful than the first.

Michael Faraday a great scientist once heard a student sneer at the mention of the resurrection of the body. And so Faraday answered the objection of the student with a little experiment. He threw a silver goblet into a jar of acid, which completely dissolved it.

Then he threw in a substance that precipitated the silver on the bottom of the jar. He later took the silver to a silversmith who made it into a goblet more beautiful than before.

The teacher said, “If I, an ordinary scientist can dissolve and remake a silver goblet, is it so incredible that God can raise a body from the dead?”

Into our world of doubt and fear there comes the clarion call of a new creation.

“Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.”

Amen.