

Why the Resurrection Matters I Corinthians 15:1-26

Why does the Resurrection of Christ matter so much? Why is the empty tomb at center stage for the Christian faith? After all, in verse 3, Paul first points to the cross, to the sacrifice Jesus made for all of us – isn't that the most important thing?

And Paul goes on to say that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, according to the writings of the Old Testament prophets. And that's right. For example, some 700 years before Jesus was even born, Isaiah said in chapter 53 of his prophecy that Jesus would be wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. And the last of the prophets, John the Baptist, said exactly the same thing – that Jesus was the Lamb of God who would be sacrificed to take away the sin of the world.

So, if all that's true, then why isn't Jesus' death on the cross the main reason for our celebration? Why the focus on the empty tomb instead? And why does Paul spend the better part of this chapter focusing on the resurrection as lying at the core, the center of the gospel he preached?

Well, in the first place, the resurrection is the ultimate test of the truth, the reality of everything else the Scripture says about Who Jesus is and what Jesus did and why Jesus died. Now, I know, the culture around us is rapidly losing its interest in facts, in the very idea that there can be any absolute truth. Living as we do in echo chambers of alternate views of reality, more and more people choose to believe that truth is whatever you make of it, that what is true for you doesn't have to be true for me. Everything is relative, people say – everything is contextual. There is no truth – there are only lots of different interpretations of reality, none of which can properly claim superiority.

And many modern people extend that kind of relativist understanding to matters of religion. In the eyes of many, religion is only a matter of personal preference, of personal opinion. What you believe is your business, and what I believe is my business, and there's no point in trying to argue about it because we can never be sure who's right, right?

Well, perhaps it is true that some religions are simply matters of opinion. But Christianity is not one of those religions. No, according to Paul in today's passage, the entire Christian faith stands or falls on the reality of a historical event, the event that we celebrate today – the historical fact that the man Jesus of Nazareth walked out of his tomb alive on the third day after he was killed.

For, after all, the resurrection can't be a matter of opinion. It is by definition a matter of fact. It either happened or it didn't. If Jesus didn't walk out of that tomb alive, then there are

certain, logical, even inevitable consequences that flow out of that fact. And those things aren't matters of opinion, either.

Look, for example, at verses four through eight, where Paul lists all sorts of people, including all the leaders of the Church at that time, who insisted they had seen Jesus alive after His death. What if they were just lying? And look at verse 15. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then Paul admits that he should also be considered a false witness. That means that if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, there wouldn't be any use in believing anything else Paul had to say, for all his words would either be the prevarications of a liar or the ravings of a madman.

And that would be true of all the other witnesses of Jesus' resurrection as well – Matthew and John and Peter. Come to think of it, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead on the third day, the entire New Testament is nothing but a pack of lies.

But the logic doesn't stop there. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then the hope and the faith of every Christian who has ever lived is pointless and empty. If Jesus is still dead, none of us have any hope of forgiveness of our sins, for we have no reason to believe that Jesus was anything but a lunatic at best and a blasphemer at worst. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, we all must answer to God for the sins that each of us has committed, for how can the cross of Christ save the world if He was really just a crazy man who only thought he was God?

But maybe we don't have to worry about that. Because if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then there's really no reason to believe that God exists at all. If the resurrection isn't real, then we have no reason to believe in Hell, or in Heaven for that matter. If Jesus is still dead, we have no reason to believe that there is anything at all after this life is over. Death is just the end – for all of us.

You know, that's what a lot of people believe today, especially those who embrace a relative notion of truth. And so it's no wonder that our culture that increasingly embraces relative truth is increasingly marked by cynicism and despair. Indeed, why should we go on living, if there's nothing to live for? Paul himself admits in verse 19 that if we only have hope in Christ in this life, if there is no life to come, then we are the most miserable of men.

But the good news is that the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth is a matter of fact, a matter of truth, absolute truth. The good news is that Jesus did rise from the dead on the third day. The good news is that the Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.

But how do we know that? Paul sums up the strongest evidence in today's passage: Jesus showed Himself to Cephas, also called Peter, and to the rest of the twelve disciples. And He showed himself to over 500 other people who were still alive at the time that Paul wrote this letter.

Now, that's pretty impressive evidence. After all, you only need 2 or 3 witnesses to establish facts in a court of law, and Jesus had over 500 witnesses. That's too many people to conspire to perpetuate a hoax and keep that conspiracy a secret. That's too many people to have fallen prey to some illusion or hallucination or psychological trick. No, based on the testimony of these witnesses, beyond any reasonable doubt we can say that Jesus rose from the dead.

For there's no other way to explain the change in the lives of those witnesses. After all, Jesus' twelve disciples cowered in fear at the time Jesus was crucified. Peter was afraid to admit even to a slave girl that he knew who Jesus was.

But these once-cowardly disciples somehow became the confident witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus to whom Paul points. The apostle Peter, for example, was willing to be crucified himself rather than to deny the truth of the resurrection.

And how else can we explain the change in Paul's life? In verse 9 Paul admitted that he once persecuted the church of God, but then went on to become an apostle of Jesus Christ. Would Paul have reversed course in such a dramatic fashion if he had not seen the risen Lord? No, we cannot deny this fact – Jesus Christ of Nazareth rose from the dead and showed Himself to His apostles. The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.

And if that's true, then all those other precious things in today's passage are true, aren't they? If Jesus rose from the dead, then we can know that the sins of all who trust in Him are, in fact, forgiven. If Jesus rose from the dead, we can be sure that God the Father has accepted the sacrifice of God the Son offered on behalf of all His people. And if Jesus rose from the dead, all who trust in Him can be confident that we, too, will one day rise from the dead.

That's what Paul makes so clear, doesn't he? In verse 21, we read that sin came into the world through Adam, and that all Adam's children are doomed to die because of the sin nature Adam bequeathed to us. But because Christ rose from the dead, all who are in Christ, all who are joined to Christ by faith, shall one day be made just as alive, just as immune from the power of sin and death as Jesus Himself is. Because Jesus walked out of that tomb on the third day, we can be sure that we, that all who trust in Christ as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord will one day do the same thing.

No, it's no wonder that so many Christians come to worship on this day of all the days of the year. For on this day, we rejoice that the resurrection of Jesus isn't a matter of opinion – it's a matter of fact. On this day we rejoice, as Paul says later in this chapter, that in the resurrection of Christ, death is swallowed up in victory. The Lord is risen. The Lord is risen indeed.

But there's one more conclusion that must logically flow out of the reality of the resurrection. We've already seen that if Jesus rose from the dead, then everything the Scripture

says about Him, everything that Jesus says about Himself is true, right? That means that Jesus is also the Son of David, the Messiah that God promised would come to rule and reign, not just over the kingdom of Israel, but over the whole world.

Yes, it is the resurrection of Christ that gives us hope that we too will rise from the dead, but that will only take place on the day that He comes again, just as Paul says in verse 23. But on that day, Jesus will not just come to take His people out of the Earth, and leave everyone else to their own devices, to their own wickedness. No, on that day, on that great Resurrection Morning, Christ will fully and finally put down all possible rivals to His rule and authority and power. On that day, Christ will set everything right, as all His enemies will be put under His feet – even the greatest enemy of all, death itself. And we can be sure all that will happen because of the historical fact, the absolute truth of the resurrection.

So, what are your enemies today? Are you wrestling with addiction or guilt or besetting sins or habits you just can't shake? Are you burdened with worry and anxiety at the dangerous mess this world has become? Are you grieving the loss of loved ones who have passed from this life? Maybe you are struggling with chronic pain or trying to take care of those whose health is failing. Maybe you are having a hard time making ends meet.

If so, don't give into the cynicism and despair this world is trying to push off on you. Don't believe the lie that there is no truth, that there are no solutions. For the historical fact we celebrate today is your greatest reason for hope. It is because Christ is risen that we know are forgiven, set free from the power of sin and death in this life. It is because Christ is risen that we know He will come again. And when Christ comes again, all the things that hurt us and scare us and worry us will be destroyed, along with the sin that is responsible for bringing all the pain, all the problems into this world. When Christ comes again, not only will He destroy death forever, but all His people will be restored to newness of life, raised from the dead just as He is.

Yes, thank God that Christ has died for our sins. But thank God even more that Christ is risen, that He rules and reigns over Heaven and Earth. And thank God that He is coming again to set all things right, to make all things new.