

THIS IS NOT THE END

1st April 2018

Easter Sunday

Folder: This is Not the End

Readings: Luke 24:1-12; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

What's the most important question about Jesus? If you're a skeptic, what's one vital question that makes all the difference? If your faith is troubled, what question do you return too again and again? It's not a question of Christ's birth, his miracles, his teachings - even if he's God's only Son. These questions are significant, but not the most important. No, the most important question about Jesus is whether he's dead or alive. For, if he's dead his life and all he did may still influence us today, but his words and actions have ended. His life is over. Finished. Complete. The dead... lie... still.



But if he's alive, then everything is radically different. He can show up on our doorstep. He can walk through this very door. He can do new things. He can surprise, confront, encourage, instruct. He can connect with us as one living person to another.

In fact, I'd go so far as to say that to be a Christian is to believe and confess that Jesus is alive. It's a "who's in" and "who's not in" sort of question. We can disagree about a number of things and still be Christians - can't we. We can differ over the details of creation - seven 24 hour days or seven long periods - or differ over the details of Jesus' return - when, or even if, the rapture occurs - we can disagree about these and still be Christ-followers. We can disagree about the running the church - about budgets, building projects, allocation of staff and volunteers - but still be Christian. We can attend different denominations -Presbyterian, Baptist, Catholic, Pentecostal and the like - and still be Christ-followers. You can even disagree with your minister - though not too often I hope :) But to believe and confess that Jesus is alive is absolutely, non-negotiable.

You see, for everyone else, no matter how much they respect him, Jesus is still a dead man. But for Christians there's no middle ground. If he's dead, the story's finished. But if Jesus is alive then his story continues.

So, it's no surprise that through the ages and even today Satan works to discredit, undermine, cast doubt on the resurrection - both the resurrection of Jesus and those who believe in him. In living memory we see a number of Satan's campaigns.

In the 60's Lloyd Geering, then Principal at Knox, was tried by the Presbyterian Church for denying the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Geering was tried - but acquitted. In the 80-90's the Jesus Seminar, a coalition of liberal academics, made the front page of Time Magazine. While in the 2000s Dan Brown's Dev Vinci Code, popularised Jesus escaping the cross and marrying Mary Magdalene.

Even the early church did not escape the devil's work of discrediting the resurrection. We see this most clearly in the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthian Church. Paul had founded this church and it was a vibrant, Spirit filled and growing church but also a church chaotic, self destructive and a real mess. And so chapter after chapter Paul addresses bad behaviour after bad behaviour until the last-but-one chapter - chapter 15 - where he addresses bad belief. The belief that there's no resurrection from the dead.

Paul rightly sees the denial of the physical resurrection of Christ as a threat to the very heart of the Christian faith. So he constructs a carefully laid out, logical proof in two parts. The first establishes the bodily resurrection of Jesus - verses 1-11. The second establishes the bodily resurrection of believers - verse 12 and on. We only have time to look at the first 11 verses dealing with the resurrection of Christ.

Let's then turn to 1 Corinthians 15 and dive right in.

I. The Centrality of the Good News

Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

Paul starts off with emphasising the centrality of the Good News. Notice the progression:

- a. "I preached"
- b. "you received"
- c. "are saved"
- d. "hold firmly"
- e. "believed in vain"

Let's trace this for you and I. At some stage we heard the Gospel - it was preached or proclaimed. How did you hear it? Was it sitting in church, or evangelistic meeting. Was it in a youth group or at a Christian camp. Did a friend share one-on-one. Did you read it in a Bible, book or tract? Maybe it was on Christian TV or Radio broadcast. Somehow Jesus was presented and we had to make a decision. We had to make a call. Was it thumbs up or thumbs down. Accept or reject. Embrace or ignore.

For to be a Christian we must make a decision. We must receive Christ. Last Sunday we saw how Jesus stands at the door of our lives and knocks. Those who hear his voice, open the door and invite him in - receive him.

And wonder of wonders when we receive Christ we're saved. We're rescued from the dominion of darkness, from Satan's rule. We're transferred into God's kingdom and with it new life.

But Paul has a warning, a caution, a "watch out". We must hold fast to the Gospel least we lose our salvation and have believed in vain. The original word for "hold fast" has a nautical background for a navigation technique still used today. The technique of choosing a fixed point on the horizon and steering your ship towards it. So, no matter the winds, tides, distractions - whatever - we head in the right direction and not onto rocks or lost or shipwrecked.

Paul is saying "Yes, you're saved but steer the course, hold fast to the Gospel, for if you keep denying the resurrection you're in danger". But what must I hold fast too? What is this Gospel I'm not give up on? Where must I take my stand?

II. The Core of the Good News

Paul does not leave us guessing. For it is about to spell out the Gospel. In the next few verses are the undeniable facts of our faith. The foundation of the Gospel we believe. Verse 3...

For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance... 1 Corinthians 15:3a

"For what I received" - Paul was the only apostle who did not see Christ's earthly ministry. Paul did not see the miracles nor hear Christ's teaching. He did not see Jesus on the cross, nor the empty tomb, nor the early resurrection appearances. So what he received from eyewitnesses and his own encounter with Jesus is passing on of "first importance". Another key phrase. Paul is signaling what is about to say is absolutely key. All else about our faith hangs on what he's about to layout. It's core, non negotiable and vital.

... that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. 1 Corinthians 15:3b-5

Let's break this down

a. **Christ died** for our sins according to the scriptures. Jesus's ministry caught everybody by surprise but it was not an "out of the blue" occurrence. Though everyone was caught out, even the disciples Jesus' death was foretold in the Bible.

God's plan is set out in the Old Testament that the suffering servant would die for our sins. This is the great and wonderful news of the Gospel. Jesus died for our sins, he died to make us new, he died that we might be dearly loved children of God. Next...

b. Christ was buried. He was dead and buried. There was no "swoon", no fainting that he recovered from. No not at all. In all reality - he died, his body grew cold, it was laid in the tomb. Like a smouldering candle, extinguished, put out, no more. Darkness settled on the land. But - joy of joys...

c. Christ was raised on the third day according to the scriptures. And this is the triumph of Easter Sunday. Death could not hold him down. Christ is risen. He is risen indeed. Because he lives we have new life, now in the present, and the promise of a bodily resurrection in the future. We've a taste of this new life now, but we will have it in all its splendour and fullness soon. Indeed "Christ was raised" - Jesus' bodily resurrection - is the key to our salvation - our walk with God.

But this is what some of the Corinthians were turning their back on. But the stakes are high. They're risking all that they'd suffered and strived for because of a lie. They'd taken their eyes off the true landmark and were in danger of shipwrecking their faith.

So after stating the core of the Gospel, Paul goes on to back-up this claim by supplying proof. Proof by multiple witnesses.

III. Proof of the Good News: Proof by multiple witnesses

You see, in a court of law lawyers call forward witnesses to verify the truth. Likewise Paul presents eye-witnesses to the resurrection of Jesus. In a court of law the more witnesses who are constant the greater weight their testimony carries. The resurrection has both - many witnesses and all of them agree - Jesus rose from the dead. He is alive. We have seen him.

Now who are these witnesses? Verse 5...

and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. 1 Corinthians 15:5-8

Firstly - Peter, who had rejected and denounced Jesus on the night of his betrayal. And yet Peter was the first into the empty tomb and met the resurrected Jesus a number of times.

Secondly - the twelve apostles. Think back to the evening of that first Easter Sunday. Suddenly Jesus appeared to the disciples in the upper room. He spoke even ate with them. But who wasn't there? Thomas. So he refused to believe Jesus was resurrected. He was a skeptic and fair enough - until a week later Jesus appeared again and said

Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." John 20:27

What did Thomas do? Fell on his knees and worshipped.

Thirdly – 500 saw Jesus at one time. Now, unlike the first two groups of eye-witnesses we have no other Scriptural account of this mass appearance. Paul points out that although some the 500 have died many are left to verify their seeing the resurrected Jesus. Any Corinthian skeptics could ask them.

Fourthly - James. This is not the disciple and brother of John. No, this is one of Jesus' own brothers - half brother. During Jesus' life James thought his half brother mad for what he was doing. But after seeing the resurrected Jesus, James followed him as Lord - eventually becoming the head of the church at Jerusalem.

Fifthly – all the apostles. Paul probably has a larger group than the twelve mentioned in verse 5 mentioned earlier.

Lastly – he, himself, Paul. Paul who'd once persecuted the church, who had Christians beaten and thrown in jail. This same Paul - who least deserved it - met the resurrected Christ. Many know his story well. How on the road to Damascus, on his way to further persecute believers, Paul encountered the resurrected Jesus. So, like one untimely born Paul is the last on this list to encounter the resurrected Jesus Christ.

So, what can we say? In the light of these many witness, consistent in their testimony, no court of law could deny Christ had risen from the dead. The judicial evidence is just to high.

But Paul doesn't leave his argument there. He moves from the legal to the personal.

For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am...1 Corinthians 15:9–10

Isn't that a wonderful phrase: By the grace of God I am, what I am. Now some can use this as an excuse not to change. You know what I mean. "I am what I am – take me or leave me. I have no intention of changing for the better". No, no no. This

is not what Paul's doing here because in verse 10 he makes it clear that because of this grace he'd worked harder at pleasing God - because grace had given him a second chance. He who least deserved it, met the risen Christ, the Christ of second chance and served him with joy.

So for us, this Easter how do we respond. Well, we celebrate knowing our faith is built on the strongest of foundations. Because of first importance - Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ has risen. Why? That our sins might be forgiven, that we might be given eternal life and that when Christ comes again we will be resurrected with a new wonderful bodies to be with our dear Lord, forever.

So, we join with in the final words of this chapter for when all is said and done - verse 54

Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting? ... Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:54-56

So, here we stand with confidence, joining our voices the last 20 centuries of believers, in the full knowledge that Christ did rise from the dead on that first Easter Sunday, that our sins are forgiven as we hold fast to that Good News we first heard -walking humbly with our God, dependent on the Holy Spirit.

Rejoice greatly O people of God!

Amen