

1 Corinthians 15:1-20
(Matthew 28:1-10)
“Of First Importance”

Introduction

By any measure, the resurrection of Jesus is the most radical Christian doctrine. Of no other historical figure has the claim been made persistently that God raised him from the dead. Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow has wondered aloud at the irrational hostility of so many in our culture toward those who believe in biblical Christianity. But it should be no surprise. Moses is dead. Buddha is dead. Mohammed is dead. But every Easter, for over two thousand years, hundreds of millions of Christians have greeted one another with the joyful shout, “Christ is risen!” as though it were the latest breaking news.

The offense of the Christian faith is that we believe that this Jesus – who was crucified, buried and then seen repeatedly over a period of forty days by those who had given him up for dead – we believe to be “the way, the truth and the life,” the only One able to reconcile us to the living God. And so we are inviting people into an intimate, loving relationship with a person who was publicly executed 2000 years ago, but whom we claim to know and to speak with every day. Is it any wonder that those who do not yet know him consider us deluded?

But the question is of far more than mere academic interest. If the world is right, then we are wasting our time here today. We have put our hope and even built our lives on a myth. But of course, there is nothing new about these arguments. Paul refers to them in our text. The arguments being put forward today by unbelievers are actually not new at all. The early church faced and answered these same criticisms from the very beginning. These are not “the assured result of modern scholarship,” but the repetition of old accusations first mouthed by Jewish religious leaders who frantically sought to stop the dramatic growth of the early church by denying the resurrection, and then as the church spread into the Gentile world, the accusations were taken up by thinkers steeped in Greek philosophical traditions that despised the notion of the resurrection because, for them, salvation meant freeing their souls from their bodies. And we see in our text that there were even some within the church who denied the resurrection. It is to these that Paul insists that the death and resurrection of the Christ is the foundation of Christianity, without which there is no church.

John Updike, who was not known as a Christian writer, made this very point eloquently in what is my favorite Easter poem, one that I have shared with you from time-to-time across the years: [Read Updike’s “Seven Stanzas at Easter”].

Paul’s argument is impeccably logical and straightforward: We will simply note three of his points this morning.

Body

1. The resurrection of Jesus is a well-attested historical fact.

Paul simply challenges his original audience to check out the facts: “Talk to his family and friends. Talk with some of the more than 500 people who saw him after his resurrection.” These people were not charlatans. They were honest enough to admit that they had all run away when Jesus was arrested. But something had transformed them into people who would endure threats, torture and death from the most powerful empire of their day without denying their risen Lord. People don’t give their lives for what they know to be a hoax. And all the authorities had to do to stop the movement cold was to torture someone into a confession or produce the body. They could do neither. Instead, they created a contemptible story, claiming that their soldiers could testify to what had happened while they slept.

So, too, there is a very real sense in which we who know him are continuing witnesses to the truth of the gospel and the willingness of the risen Christ to make himself known to those who seek him. Although we have not seen him in the same way as did those first witnesses, when the church is truly the church, the body of Christ animated by his Spirit and living out of its union with Christ, those who experience our life together are experiencing the risen Christ, those who hear us speak should hear his voice through ours, those to whom we show his love should taste and see that Christ is risen.

2. The resurrection of Jesus is crucial to Christianity.

If Christ is not risen, then he is dead. We worship and serve a dead man. If Christ is not risen, then we have no hope for those we love who have died. Those we love who have died are lost to us forever. And if Christ is not risen, then we have no hope for the living. We are still dead in sin and without hope of eternal life. We are still under God’s law, and are therefore still at enmity with God: “we are to be pitied more than all men.” How much more clearly have non-Christians sometimes seen this than have those claiming to be within the church of Christ.

The great Viennese linguistic philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, who taught at Cambridge University and caused consternation to friends and colleagues by exposing the self-contradiction on which the reigning philosophy of his day, logical positivism, was built, although he was Jewish and a friend of such enemies of Christianity as Bertrand Russell, nevertheless was captivated by Jesus and by the gospel, and reflected on why he was inclined to believe in the resurrection. [Read Wittgenstein’s reflections on the resurrection from Monk’s biography, p. 383.]

3. The resurrection of Jesus is the ground of our confidence and hope.

It is the vindication of all that Jesus taught. It is the vindication of all Jesus did. It is the vindication of all that we believe. Christianity is an Easter faith and we are an

Easter people. Everything we believe and preach and pray and hope rests on this.

Conclusion

Because Christ is risen, we need fear nothing – neither life nor death. Nothing can ultimately hurt or destroy us. Death itself has been defeated. For us, truly, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Jesus Christ lived, died and was raised from death in order that we might know God. He said, “I am the way, the truth and the life.” Don’t walk away today as if this were not true, as if it is were just a lovely story that binds us together culturally. Don’t miss the offer of salvation – sin forgiven and peace with God – which the risen Christ offers you today. This is, as Paul insists, “of first importance,” for every one of us, whether or not we believe it. Don’t miss God’s gracious offer of life on this day of resurrection!

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