

“The Most Pitiful People in the World!”

1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Introduction: If you have your Bibles I would invite you to turn them to 1 Corinthians 15, 1 Corinthians 15.

A paper ran a comic which depicted a man shipwrecked on a deserted island. His lonely desperation was soon averted as he saw a Navy ship approaching the island, presumably for his rescue. As the vessel approached a young sailor jumped off with a stack full of recent newspapers and handed them to the man. “These are compliments of the captain sir. He figured you might want to see the headlines before you decide whether or not you want to be rescued.”

This is so much how life is in this world isn't it? It would seem to be easier and less stressful and less hopeless if we could just live on a deserted island all by ourselves. Sometimes the depressing evils which abound in our world drive us to think that there is no answer and no solution. But then along comes Resurrection Sunday! We are living in a Good Friday world, but we ought to be Resurrection Sunday Christians! That is what we rejoice in and remind ourselves of this morning. We will spend our time looking at a text in which God reminded a local church of the importance of the resurrection. We cannot afford to be ambivalent or non-shalant about the resurrection of our Lord. It stands at the core of our faith, and as we will see in Paul's words to the church at Corinth – we have no faith and no Gospel and no reliable revelation from God if the resurrection of Jesus is not true.

I am not going to be preaching to the skeptic this morning. I presume that since you are here gathered with our church that you have at least some belief in the work of Jesus Christ – both upon His cross and his rising again. My message will mirror the concern of the text. Paul was writing to people who believed in the resurrection of Jesus. But some of them were saying that there was no resurrection from the dead for anyone else. Presumably they were getting this idea by mixing cultural beliefs with the Gospel they had been given. The city of Corinth was a cosmopolitan city which was always abreast of the latest philosophies which were captivating the Roman world. And many of the philosophers taught that physical matter is bad and spiritual matter is good. Physical realities are passing away and will eventually give way to spiritual realities – so they said. And they viewed the physical body as a prison for the soul. Death, then, was like a release from this prison as your spirit was liberated to eternal life. This was illustrated in Acts 17:32 when those in Athens mocked Paul for believing in the resurrection of the dead. Now, you can see how this easily seeps its way into Christian thinking. This world is indeed full of sin, and it is indeed passing away – and so the great hope of the Christian can easily become – wow – I can't wait until I am released from this prison to a greater spiritual and eternal reality – kind of like that deserted island with no more bad headline – all of this with no thought of the resurrection of the body from the grave. This was not just a subtle misunderstanding of doctrine, but in Corinth this was an invasion of false teaching which the Holy Spirit deemed serious

enough to confront head on through the pen of Paul. For us this issue is more subtle. We know better than to deny the resurrection of the dead, but we can easily deny its importance. What we learn so clearly from this text is that you cannot rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead while also denying the importance of the resurrection of everyone else. They are conjoined twins so that if you lose the importance of one you deny the importance of the other. We will see that mainly in verses 12-20 of chapter 15, but those verses are built upon the solid rock of Gospel truth presented in verses 1-11. Look with me at the first 11 verses. *Read vs. 1-11.*

Before Paul addresses any problems with their practical theology he lays down the bedrock of Gospel truth. This is not new truth for this church. This is the same message Paul has already once delivered to them in person as he preached Christ to them. So, now here he reminds them of this Gospel which they have already received and in which they are currently standing. But, they are in danger of denying the whole thing because of their view on the resurrection, so Paul starts by calling them back to the bare basics of the Gospel which he preached to them. This Gospel is all about Christ. This is seen in the 4 propositions of Gospel accomplishment which are given in verses 3-11. These are marked off in the text by the use of the word “that” in the ESV. So, this Gospel is of first importance and here are the four propositional accomplishments of that Gospel – that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures – that he was buried – that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to all the people listed in verses 5-9. Notice that there are two main facts in this Gospel and there are two proofs of those facts. So the two main facts are that Jesus died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, and that Jesus Christ was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. These two facts were accomplished in just the way that the OT Scriptures had prophesied, and then they are proven or validated by two things. So the death of Jesus is proven by his burial. He is placed in Joseph’s tomb because he is indeed dead. The second main fact of the Gospel work of Jesus is that he was raised from the dead on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. This is validated by the proof of the many who are listed as eyewitnesses in verse 5-9. So he appeared to individuals, to small groups, and to one very large group. He also appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus – and then Paul took this same Gospel with these 4 fundamental propositions and preached it in Corinth. So, Paul here reminds them of the Gospel he preached, and of the Gospel they received. Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, rose from the dead, and appeared to many after his resurrection. This simple clarity on the Gospel work of Jesus leads to the concerns addressed in verses 12-19. Look at verse 12 with me. *Read vs. 12-19.*

Verse 12 makes known the core of the issue here. This local church in Corinth believed in and continued to preach and proclaim that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, but some among them were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead. This text shows them that they cannot hold to both of those things. They cannot rejoice in the risen Christ and then turn around and deny, either subtly deny or out-and-out deny, the resurrection of everyone else from the dead. If after death there is no life given back to the physical body through resurrection, then, as this text says, Christ didn’t rise from the dead either. This shows the clear humanity of Jesus Christ. He was so human that if something happens to him, particularly to his physical body, then this will happen to the rest of humanity. Or to say it the other way – if something is to

happen to humanity in general, then Jesus is so absolutely human, that it must also happen to him. So, normal humans are conceived in the womb of their mothers and born through the process God designed. So too was Jesus. Humans grow and develop from infancy to toddler to young child to young adult to full grown and mature adult. So too did Jesus. Humans face the weakness of the fall, the limitations of their human body, the hunger, pain, and need for sleep. So too did Jesus. And humans die because of the curse and condemnation of sin. So too did Jesus, not because of his own sin, but as a substitute for ours. And humans are to be raised from the dead – and we know this preeminently because Jesus was raised from the dead. According to his human nature he was brought forth from the grave and his body was resurrected and glorified and became different, but was still physical – still could be seen and touched. What Paul is saying here is that if that happened to Jesus, then we as humans are guaranteed it will happen to us. But the point he makes in this text is in the negative. If you abandon the resurrection of the dead in general, then you give up the resurrection of Jesus in specific. If you give up the resurrection of Jesus then you put a knife to the throat of the Gospel and you begin to slit it. Specifically there are four tragic results which come when we abandon the resurrection of mankind in general and of Jesus in particular.

1. The Gospel is Empty – vs. 14

- a. The first tragic result is that the Gospel is empty. So, the argument goes like this. If you deny the resurrection in general, then not even Christ Jesus is raised from the dead. And if Jesus is still in the tomb then the Gospel is empty. As Tom Pennington has said, either the tomb is empty or the Gospel is empty – it is one or the other.
- b. Verse 14 says that if Christ is not raised from the dead then the apostle's preaching is in vain, and their faith in that preaching is in vain as well. The word for vain carries the idea of a shell without a kernel or seed in it. It gives the appearance of having something worthwhile, but when broken open it shows that it is vain and hopeless. That is the Gospel without the resurrection of Christ. If the tomb still contains the body of Jesus, then the whole message of Christianity can be discarded. This is the only religious system in the world of which this is true. Other religions carry on based upon the teachings and the good life of their founders. But Christianity only exists if its founder actually rose again after giving his life in substitutionary death. So, it is absurd for us as Christians to then endanger the truth which sits at such a fundamental spot to our faith. If we deny the resurrection, we deny the resurrection of Christ, and we thereby empty the Gospel.

2. God is a Liar – vs. 15

- a. The second tragic result of giving up the resurrection is found in verse 15. Paul says, we are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised.
- b. Paul is arguing backwards here from a future resurrection to a past resurrection. If there is no future resurrection of the dead, then there has been no past resurrection of the dead, namely of Jesus Christ. This means that all of those who

have been tasked with testifying of the resurrected Jesus have been misrepresenting God all along. This misrepresentation of God has legal overtones. This is the word for witnesses in a legal proceeding. God has called upon them to be his legal, verified and validated witnesses of this Gospel which has at its core the resurrection of Jesus. So, if there is no resurrection, then Jesus is not raised, and they are misrepresenting God. This does not mean that they are lying by telling something that God did not tell them to say. This means that they are lying by telling others something God did tell them to say, when in fact God didn't do what they were proclaiming. This is serious business. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then what Paul is saying here is that God is a liar!

- c. This is an astounding assertion considering that the whole context here is about the faithful proclamation of a message which has been given by God. Paul received it and Paul faithfully proclaimed it. Not only him, but also the other apostles to whom this message had been given. According to verse 11 their Gospel had been the same. They were preaching the same message all along. So, if there is no resurrection then they all have been lying for God – adding condemnation to God as a liar – if that is true. Consider also that the resurrected Lord appeared to Paul specifically after our Lord's own ascension into Heaven. This Jesus who appeared to Paul was not some spiritual disembodied being, but rather he was the resurrected and glorified Lord. And because he was Paul was broken of his unbelief and humbly fell to the ground before His Lord and His God – the Lord Jesus Christ. But that is all a lie if there is no resurrection of the dead. There cannot be a resurrected Jesus and then no other resurrections in the days to come. And if there is no resurrection then God is a liar!
- 3. Sinners are Still Lost – vs. 16-18**
- a. The third tragic result of denying the resurrection is that sinners are still lost. This is spelled out in verses 16-18. The key phrase is found in verse 17 where it says that your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. In the original language here there is no “and” between the two phrases. It reads literally like this – “your faith is futile, still you are in your sins.” If there is no resurrection then sinners are still lost. This counters the very words of Christ upon His own cross when he said – It is finished. He came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. He came to seek and to save those who were lost. He came to earth to save sinners. If He is still in the grave then all of those are empty promises from the mouth of a crazed lunatic who thought himself to be something he never was. And if this is true, then sinners are still in their sins. If sinners are still in their sins then their faith is futile. This is a different word here than the one translated as “vain” in verse 14. It speaks of something which is not what it appears to be – something which is completely unprofitable and useless – something which has no purpose. That is what your faith in Christ is, if he did not rise from the dead.
 - b. Back in verse 3 we read that the first propositional fact of the Gospel is that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. If Jesus is still in the tomb then he did not die for our sins, but rather he died to our sins – meaning

they took his life and have not given it back. This is what Romans 4:25 says so clearly. “Who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” (Rom. 4:25 ESV) He took our guilt in death and he secures our righteous standing before God with his resurrection. If you have one but not the other then sinners are still in their sins.

- c. Listen, there is no hope in the face of our greatest enemy – death itself – if the one we are putting our hope in is still dead in the grave. How can we defeat something through one who remains defeated by it? We can't! You can only be saved from your sins by the bloody death of Jesus and the glorious resurrection of Jesus.
- d. Maybe you are here this morning and you have heard about this Jesus and you know the facts of what Christians claim about Him. But you are not sure what you think about this salvation thing. Maybe you've never seen the connection between the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus and your need for forgiveness and reconciliation with God. Listen friend – may today be the day when you turn to Jesus Christ and see Him crucified, buried, and risen again as the only hope of saving you from your sin. Will you consider this Jesus today? Will you see in him the only way, the only truth, and the only life?
- e. If it is true that Jesus is not raised from the dead because there is no resurrection from the dead then all of those who have fallen asleep in Christ are doomed to an eternity without a Savior. They died with all of their hope in Jesus, but if Jesus is not raised, then they are hopelessly lost forever. Like Jesus they are forever lost to death.
- f. Notice that even in stating the negative side of this argument Paul uses terms which insinuate the resurrection of the dead? So, he does not say in verse 18 that those who have died have perished forever, but he says, those who have fallen asleep in Christ. This is common New Testament description of death for the believer. They have fallen asleep. This is only true if there is a resurrection of the dead. So, let's just take my Grandpa as an example. He died in 2007 with all of his hopes set upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. He had no other answer for his sin or for his justification before God, but Jesus Christ and His finished work alone. If there is no resurrection of the dead then his body sits in a grave in St. Paul, MN where he will be forever banished. He is lost forever. But, if there is a resurrection of the dead, then his body is asleep in the sense that though it is lifeless at the moment, it will come back to life at the trumpet sound of the coming of Jesus Christ. The dead in Christ will rise first – they will be resurrected, restored, and glorified. Their original human bodies will rise from the grave – and they will be changed and glorified. 2 Corinthians 5 describes our original body as a tent, but our coming glorified body as a well-built house. We groan as we walk through this life in this tent. It leaks and sags and the poles are getting weaker everyday – but one day, that trumpet sound will blow and we will shed the tent for the glorious house of an eternal resurrected and glorified body built for us by God. All of that is wrapped up in this phrase – asleep in Christ. If there is no resurrection of the dead then they are lost forever.

4. We are the Most Pitiful People in the World – vs. 19

- a. The last tragic result of denying the resurrection is that we are the most pitiful people in the world. Paul says in verse 19 that if we have hope in Christ only in this life then we are to be the most pitied people around. Pity is deserved only when a situation is utterly miserable. And there is no more miserable condition than to have hope in Christ in this life only! This is the culminating thought of the rest. If the Gospel is empty and God is a liar and sinners are still lost, then we are the most pitiful people in the world.
- b. This is also a statement which he is making in relationship to his own life, and the lives of those entrusted with this Gospel message – particularly the apostles. They have given their lives for this Gospel, and many of them will die a martyr's death for this Gospel. He expands on this in verses 30-32. *Read Vs. 30-32.*
- c. If there is no resurrection of the dead then the men and women of every generation who have chosen to follow Christ have given their lives for vanity. They have suffered and died and this was all a foolish waste if Jesus was not raised, and we ourselves are not to be raised. It makes no sense to take up your cross and follow Jesus and die daily and be crucified with Christ, if you are also then not to be raised with Christ. As Paul says – if our hope in Christ is only for this life, then we are the most pitiful people around!

But, the death of Christ was not in vain and the Gospel is not empty and God is not a liar and sinners are not still lost in their sins if they are in Christ and we are not the most pitiful people in the world – because Jesus is not still in the grave! Verse 20 is like the gentle but firm voice of the parent awakening the child from a nightmare – wake up honey, wake up . . . no, none of that is true! “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.” This matters because your future resurrection matters. You cannot rejoice in the past resurrection of Jesus and then in the next breath minimize the importance of your own future resurrection. As I stated at the beginning, I don't think any of us are literally denying this core doctrine of the faith – that God will indeed one day raise from the dead all men. Hebrews 9:27 lets us know that it is appointed for each man to die once, and after this to face the judgment. And Revelation 20 rounds out that picture by making known to us that this judgment before the thrice holy Judge of Heaven will happen after all people both small and great are raised from the dead and then appear before the Judgment Bar of God.

While we may not outright deny this truth, we do have a tendency to practically deny this truth. We easily walk through this life with little or no thought of the resurrection that awaits us all, and this puts at risk the very resurrection of Jesus Himself. Let me prime the pump a little and give you some practical ways in which we deny the resurrection of the dead, and ultimately the resurrection of Jesus – for if the dead are not raised, then Jesus Christ has not been raised!

We deny the resurrection when:

- *We Pursue Paradise in this Life*
 - When we make life about this here and now life, we are denying the resurrection. When we are seeking our paradise in the here and now. We make our man cave

or our princess castle out of our home and we fortify our life with our safe spaces because we are seeking paradise here and now. This means we are practically denying the resurrection. We are consumed with life here to the extent in which we are minimizing the true life to come. This looks like trying to make everything perfect here, trying to find every cure and trying to mend every pain and heartache.

- Beloved, Romans 8 is so clear to us here. The whole creation groans together awaiting the fullness of the adoption of sons. This means that the things which are broken by sin will only be fully fixed by the return of Christ, the restoration of all things to a glorified state and the resurrection of the dead. It is right of us to enjoy the good gifts of God which He has given in this world, but it is wrong and eternally dangerous of us to make them our paradise – our ultimate longing and hope. This is what the world is doing around you – creating their paradise in the here and now. If the resurrection is true, if Jesus is raised as the firstfruits of our coming resurrection – then the pain and the problems and even the good things of this life will point our hearts forward to the day when all will be right because we will be raised with Christ and the world will be remade and we will dwell with God and He with us.
- *We are not Longing for the Life to Come*
 - We also deny the resurrection practically when we are not longing for the life to come. This is the flip side of the same coin as trying to create paradise in this life. This is coupled with the fact that we are not longing for the life to come. So when we have such an ethereal, other-worldly view of Heaven that we don't even long to go there – when we view it as this ongoing unending strumming of harps in spiritual bodies floating on clouds in some strange and unknown existence – this does not create within us a desire to go there. But when we view our eternal state in the New Heavens and the New Earth in the Eternal Kingdom of God as a glorious remake of what we know – then we desire to go there. When we see in this life a mere shadow of a coming glorified reality which will be the result of the resurrection – then we long for that. So, just take your body for instance. There are many amazing and wonderful things about the human body, but you also know the pain and the agony which comes upon this body in a sin-cursed world. Now think of this body as a mere tent which has served well for this pilgrimage through this life, but on the journey it has suffered some problems and so now when it rains the tent leaks, and the poles are starting to sag and the zipper is broken and it is cold and night and hot in the day – but at the resurrection the tent will be replaced with a well-built house which will not fade away or falter for all of eternity!
 - This will turn our afflictions and cares and conflicts in this life into longings for the next life. Instead of thinking that the greatest solution to those things can be found here and now, we as believers in Jesus' resurrection realize that the ultimate solution is still coming – our own glorious resurrection. So we can say with Paul in Romans 8:18 - For I consider that the sufferings of this present time

are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:18 ESV)

- *We are not Testifying of the Solution to the Problem*
 - We also practically deny the resurrection when we see others languishing under the Problem and we are not telling them of the Solution. It is right and good to help people with here and now problems and to bless them physically by meeting those needs. But ultimately those solutions to those problems are not the answer. Your neighbor or your co-worker or your family member has a greater problem which will last for all of eternity if they die without Christ. If they finish this life without the hope of salvation in Jesus Christ, then the problems they know here and now will only be multiplied and eternally experienced in a place the Bible calls the Lake of Fire. If you really believe in the resurrection of the dead – both of the just and the unjust – then you will be seeking and praying and boldly entering into conversations with unbelievers about the only real solution to their only real problem – the problem of sin. If we are not testifying to the lost about Jesus, then we are practically denying the resurrection.
- *We Pray Mostly for Here and Now Fixes*
 - And lastly, we practically deny the resurrection when our prayers are filled with requests for here and now fixes. It is not wrong to ask God for the money you need for this or that, or to ask him for the healing of a physical issue, but if your prayers are consumed with these kinds of things, you are practically denying the resurrection because you are showing that the here and now is where you are finding the ultimate meaning. But if you understand that this outer man is wasting away day by day, then you will be longing for the daily renewal and growth and transformation that the Spirit of God can bring to your inner man by allowing you to gaze upon the glory of Christ! Your prayers will then look less like a shopping list of needs for God to meet and more like cries of longing for God to increase your joy in Christ here in this moment as he prepares you more and more for the life to come.

Conclusion: If we have hope in Christ only in this life, we are the most pitiful people on the planet. But we don't! Jesus Christ has risen from the dead, and He will raise you from the dead too. Therefore, grow in your pursuit of that eternal paradise, and see in you every trial and trouble a chance to long for the ultimate fix which is coming in the resurrection, and tell others about the ultimate solution to their life's problems, and pray fervently about eternal matters! He is risen, and one day, all the dead will be raised as well!