

# “If Christ Has Not Been Raised”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church  
Charlotte, North Carolina

April 16, 2006

**Text: “And if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith is in vain” (I Corinthians 15:14).**

Someone has observed recently that we live in an “Age of Skepticism.” That has been borne out to me in a number of ways in recent weeks. Several weeks ago newspapers carried a story about a Florida State University scientist who speculated that Jesus did not really walk on water; he walked on ice. The scientist theorized that there must have been an unusual cold snap two thousand years ago that froze the Sea of Galilee. Apparently, the scientist was not able to explain adequately the New Testament insistence that while Jesus was able to do this, Simon Peter, Jesus’ disciple, sank into the waves. Then several days later *The New York Times* piled on by trumpeting the discovery of a fossil in Arctic Canada as a “missing link” between sea creatures and land creatures proving as the discoverer put it, that “all humans descended from fish.” I couldn’t help but wonder if that were true, how some of us ended up on the top floor of the Bank of America Building, while others were still lounging at the bottom of the Catawba River.

Then, two days before Palm Sunday, the *National Geographic Magazine* announced the discovery of the “Gospel of Judas,” an ancient Gospel from a Gnostic sect in Egypt in which Judas is not portrayed as the betrayer of Christ and as one whom Christ chose to deliver him to the Romans in order that he could die and liberate himself from the enslavement of his earthly body.

## I.

There is certainly nothing particularly new about the “Age of Skepticism.” The Apostle Paul certainly faced this at Corinth. There were skeptics there. They were the inheritors of the great civilization of the Greeks. They were intellectuals who did not believe that it was possible for the dead to be raised. Their position caused Paul to go on the attack to show them the logic of their position. “If the dead are not raised,” he argues, “then Christ was not raised. And if Christ was not raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” “If Christ is not raised,” he goes on to say, “then your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

I think there is something about Easter that puts our faith on the line in a way that no other Sunday quite does. I believe that underneath the Easter crowds, the Easter clothes, the family gatherings and celebrations there is a deep hungering and wondering if there is any real truth to Easter. If what we say on Easter is true, then what we say on other Sundays may not matter much. But if what we say on Easter is not true, then it really doesn't matter what we say on the other Sundays. N.T. Wright, an outstanding New Testament Scholar, put it well when he observed, “The bodily resurrection isn't a take it or leave it thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe it and others are welcome not to believe it. Take it away, and the whole picture is totally different. Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christians of ignoring the problems of the material world. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is a wish fulfillment religion. Take it away, and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that Christianity is for the weak. Put it back,” says Wright,” and you have a faith that can take on the postmodern world that looks to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche as its prophets. You can beat them at their own game with the Easter news that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

The New Testament and particularly the writings of the Apostle Paul insist that the resurrection is good news for a number of reasons.

## II.

First, the resurrection is an answer to the problem of historical evil. Some historians have characterized the Twentieth Century as one of the most violent in all of human history. The holocaust in Germany that resulted in the death of six million Jews, the programs of Stalin in the USSR demonstrated terrible power of evil within history. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, those of us in this country witnessed firsthand the terrible deaths in New York City and Washington, D.C., and in Pennsylvania caused by Al Queada terrorist who were willing to fly airplanes into buildings killing themselves and thousands of innocent people.

On Good Friday a good man named Jesus of Nazareth was put to death by a weak and vacillating Roman governor name Pilate and by a conniving high priest, Caiaphas,

along with a howling, senseless mob. On Good Friday it seemed that the politicians had done their worst. When Pilate and Caiaphas went home on that Friday afternoon, they believed that they had put to rest this whole matter of Jesus of Nazareth.

Martin Niemoller, a German pastor who had been placed in prison because of his opposition to Hitler and National Socialism, preached a sermon in prison he entitled "But God." In that sermon he pointed out that on that Good Friday it seemed that the forces of evil were triumphant. But God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Therefore, the Hitlers of the world, the Pilates and the Osama bin Ladens of the world have to barricade themselves against a word spoken from the grave, the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

### III.

Second, the resurrection is good news because it is an answer to the problem of physical evil. Paul Tillich once observed that the painting of Matthias Grunewald entitled "The Crucifixion," is the greatest portrayal of the incarnation in visual art. It demonstrates in a powerful manner the sheer horror of a dead body on the cross and the obvious anguish of those who stood and watched the death of Christ.

This past September we witnessed the terrible destruction of Hurricane Katrina and the terrible devastation that this deadly storm unleashed on the residents of the Gulf Coast. We were also witnesses of the terrible suffering that took place as thousands of evacuees crowded into the New Orleans Super Dome and Convention Center waiting for help that either never arrived or arrived too late.

Often we see this kind of physical evil up close and very personal as we watch loved ones suffer with mental illness, cancer, and a host of other diseases and afflictions. Dr. Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, once spoke to a group of University students about his own faith. He was an elder in the Presbyterian Church and spoke about his own belief in the "resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." During the question and answer period following his address, one of the students observed that he did not believe in the Christian hope. In fact, he went on to say that it was nothing more than "pie in the sky." Menninger replied by saying that if there was no "pie in the sky," that is, if there was nothing beyond this present life then as a psychiatrist he would have to say that "there were a lot of people who would never receive any pie." That is precisely what the Apostle Paul meant when he said, that "if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied."

### IV.

Third, the resurrection means that human beings can be forgiven and also that they can be transformed. The New Testament affirms that through the resurrection, the risen Christ lives and sends forth his spirit. It speaks with enthusiasm about those who are in Christ being a new creation. It affirms new possibilities for individuals. It dares to believe that those who quake in the presence of life's perils can learn to live with serenity and

dignity. It acknowledges that not even the powers of death, addiction, and hardship can overwhelm us.

This past Sunday David Brooks wrote in the *New York Times* about the tragic events that have engulfed the campus of Duke University in the aftermath of allegations made against a number of students there. Brooks points out that most people have viewed the situation there in sociological terms: town versus gown, black versus white, a privileged elite over against students from more ordinary backgrounds. Brooks goes on to say that very few have viewed the actions as questions of character as well. One of the functions of education is to build character, to repress the darker sides of human nature and to encourage those things in us that encourage compassion, kindness, and thoughtfulness.

Reformed or Presbyterian theology has always rested on two very basic beliefs. The first is a conviction about the sovereignty of God. To say that God is sovereign is to say that there is nothing that can happen to us apart from God's knowledge, care, and control. To say that God is sovereign is to say that our lives are not an accident and that our lives are lived in light of God's intention and purpose for all humankind.

The second belief is our confidence that God is not only sovereign, but that God is gracious as well. That means that salvation is not something that any of us can earn. It is something that is given to us by God through Jesus Christ. The resurrection is a reminder of these two basic beliefs. Because God has raised Christ from the dead, the powers of death no longer overwhelm us. The resurrection reminds us that this is not something we do, but something that is done for us.

Once, when the great reformer Martin Luther was going through a very trying time, his friends saw him writing with fingers on the dust of a table top: "Vivit, Vivit"--he lives, he lives. Let us say that to ourselves this morning. Christ is alive. His spirit is present in the world around. That is what gives us hope. That is our only hope. In a world in which terrorism and war are all about us, in a world in which the forces of evil seem ever so strong, in a world in which hurricanes and natural disasters seem ever so strong, it is ever important to acknowledge the one who is the lord and giver of all life.

So let us make no bones about it. The stakes are high today. If Easter isn't good news, then there is no good news. But it is--if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed--the Easter Day, and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it shines, puts all other suns to shame.

**Amen!**