

“If Christ Has Not Been Raised”

a sermon by

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Charlotte, North Carolina

April 12, 2009

**Text: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”
(I Corinthians 15:17)**

Dr. John Leith, in his book *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say that No One Else Can Say*, points out that the resurrection of Jesus addresses two of the most perplexing problems that we, as humans, face.

The first is the problem of historical evil. As we come to this Easter 2009, we are all aware that our world has changed greatly in these past twelve months. Who could have imagined a year ago that our nation would find itself today in the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression? Who could have imagined a year ago that great financial institutions such as Lehman Brothers, Bear Stearns, and Wachovia would no longer exist? Moreover, today we face an environmental crisis that is as great, if not greater than the economic one. Several weeks ago, New York Times columnist Tom Friedman spoke at Queens University on his recent book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*. In that lecture, Friedman sounded a number of themes that threaten the security and future of our world: the threat of global warming (or “global weirding” as Friedman calls it); the rise of the petro dictators, those strong arms totalitarian dictators in Iran, Venezuela, and Saudi Arabia; the dependence of America on foreign oil and the continued problem of carbon dioxide omissions.

A few years ago, we spoke freely about Informational Technology (IT). Friedman argues that the nation that solves the problems related to Environmental Technology (ET) will be the leader of the world order.

The second human dilemma to which the resurrection of Jesus Christ is directed is the problem of physical evil. Paul Tillich once observed that the painting of the *Crucifixion* by Matthias Grunewald is the greatest portrayal of the incarnation in visual art. The basis of this

judgment is the sheer horror of the dead body upon the cross and the obvious anguish of those who stood at the foot of the cross.

There is something devastating about the power of physical evil. Several months ago I conducted the memorial service for one of the outstanding attorneys of our church, who had committed suicide. For those of us who had known George, it seemed impossible to believe. We had played golf with him. We had watched basketball games with him. The most perplexing question was the question of why someone with so much ability, so much to live for, would be afflicted by a terrible form of melancholic depression that would cause him to take his own life.

I.

The Apostle Paul, in writing to the church at Rome, makes an eloquent case for the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. “If Christ has not been raised,” Paul argues, “then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” As Richard Hays points out in his commentary on I Corinthians, Paul uses the rhetorical device of “chiasma” to make an important point. In doing so, he lists three very troubling aspects of our existence, if Christ has not been raised: if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain (that is, we are found to be liars); their faith is in vain (i.e. they are still in their sins); and those who had died in Christ are lost.

In I Corinthians 15, Paul makes his most eloquent case for belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For Paul, resurrection is not simply one belief alongside all others. It is central to his understanding of the gospel. This is particularly important, given the fact that I Corinthians was written before the Gospels were in written form. Certainly, Paul would have known the stories of the empty tomb that are found in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. But these stories and the appearance stories as well had not been written down at the time Paul wrote to the church at Corinth.

The Apostle Paul understood the problem. There were those in the church at Corinth who did not believe in the resurrection. Paul had encountered that in Athens as well, when preaching to the Greek philosophers at the Areopagus, he encountered a fierce opposition to the notion of the idea of a person who was dead being raised from the dead.

But Paul was insistent. He understands that without the resurrection, the gospel is diluted of its power. If Christ is not raised, then sin and death have not been overcome.

II.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ was not only a scandal to the Christians at Corinth. It is a scandal to the church today. Carl Braaten, a prominent Lutheran theologian, wrote an article entitled “The Resurrection Debate Revisited” in which he notes that the deepest divisions within Christianity today are not the divisions between Catholics and Protestants, Lutheran and Reformed Evangelicals and Mainline churches. The deepest division, Braaten argues, is the fault line between faith and unbelief. Nowhere is this more evident than in the matter of the resurrection of Jesus.

In his book *Honest to Jesus*, Robert Funk, a member of the Jesus Seminar relates a time in which he once postulated to the seminar the following proposition: “The resurrection was an event in the life of Jesus.” He writes: “My proposition was received with hilarity by several Fellows. One suggested it was an oxymoron. Others alleged that the formulation was meaningless since we all assume, they said, that Jesus’ life ended with his crucifixion and death. Funk goes on to write, “I was surprised by this response. I shouldn’t have been. After all, John Dominic Crossan has confessed, “I do not think that anyone, anywhere, at any time brings dead people back to life.” That’s fairly blunt. Another scholar chimed in, “Jesus, regardless of where his corpse ended up, is dead and remains dead.”

N.T Wright, however, understands that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a peripheral matter. Wright observes, “The bodily resurrection of Jesus 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 different.”

In the Apostles’ Creed we affirm that we believe in the “resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” That is what we affirm on this Easter Sunday.

III.

That means of course that the risen Christ lives and sends forth his Spirit. The Spirit of Christ is the presence of the risen Christ in the world and the power of the risen Christ to work out his purposes in individual lives and in human communities.

Once, when he was in the midst of a great state of despair, the reformer Martin Luther wrote with his fingers on the dust of a table top: “Vivit, Vivit” – he lives, he lives. Let us say this to ourselves this morning: Christ is alive.

The New Testament is simple and chaste in what it declares about the resurrection. No one witnessed the resurrection. The New Testament simply declares, “This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses.”(Acts 2:32)

The resurrection means that human beings can be forgiven and also that they can be transformed. The New Testament speaks with enthusiasm about those who are in Christ being a new creation. It means that those who live with a sense of fear can now live with serenity. It means that those who have been self-centered and brutal can now be humane. Those who have lived lives without purpose can now understand their lives to be a part of the purpose of God. This is the transformation that we mean when we speak of the resurrection.

One of the most powerful sermons ever preached was preached by a Scottish minister named Arthur John Gossip who was then pastor of the Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen in 1927. Gossip’s wife had died suddenly and without warning on a Sunday evening. The next Sunday he preached a sermon he entitled “When Life Tumbles In, What Then?” It is said that the sermon took the whole city of Aberdeen by storm, and reading the sermon even seventy years later, the reader is stuck by the tremendous amount of passion that is retained in those words spoken decades ago.

In reflecting on his wife's sudden death Gossip says, "I do not understand this life of ours. But still less can I comprehend how people in trouble and loss and bereavement can fling away peevishly from the Christian faith. In God's name, fling to what? Have we not lost enough without losing that too?"

If Christ is right – if as He says, there are somehow, hidden away from our eyes as yet, still there, wisdom and planning and kindness and love in these dark dispensations – then we can see them through. But if Christ was wrong, and all this is not so; if God set his foot on my home crudely, heedlessly, blunderingly, blindly, have I not the right to be angry and sore? If Christ was right and immortality and the dear hopes of which he speaks really do lie a little way ahead, we can manage to make our way to them.

"You people," says Gossip, "in the sunshine may believe the faith, but we in the shadow must believe it. We have nothing else."

IV.

The resurrection that we celebrate on this Easter Sunday is finally the affirmation that the power of God is stronger than the power of sin and death.

Paul Tillich, in his book *The Shaking of the Foundations*, recounts a time in which he spoke to a group of soldiers after World War II. To these soldiers, who had witnessed so many of the horrors of war, the idea of a personal God seemed very remote. One of the soldiers told of a group of nearly ten thousand Jews, all of whom were ninety years old or older, who were evacuated from a nursing home in Southern France and sent to a concentration camp in Germany. Most of the ten thousand did not even survive the trip.

This particular soldier said that the thought of this unimaginable misery made it very difficult for her to believe in a personal God.

The Apostle Paul understood these forces. He knows them all: the horror of death and the anxiety of life. He knows them as well as we do.

But he knows something else. He knows the power of God to raise Jesus Christ from the dead. It is this power that allows him to ask the question "Who shall separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus?" and to answer that question by saying, "I am sure that neither death nor life, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor heights, nor depths, nor anything in all creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8: 27-39)

To believe in the Easter message is not to believe that somehow everything in life comes to a good end. There are some things that come to a very bad end. But it does mean that ultimately there are no dead ends in life, because there is no situation in which God cannot be present. It means that the demonic and destructive forces within ourselves and within our world can never have an unbreakable grasp on us, and that the bond which connects us with the fulfilling love of God in Christ can never be broken.

N.T. Wright is on target when he says, “Let’s make no bones about it: If Easter isn’t good news, then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed – then Easter Day and the Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.”

Amen.