

Jesus Christ is Risen

It was the winter of 1998, and the four oldest Fox children had walked from our house on Harden St. in Graham over to the Pine Cemetery, pulling their sleds behind them. There's a great hill in the cemetery that a lot of the kids in the neighborhood would sled on. They had been gone for about an hour when Jesse, then 4 years old, asked his Mom, "When are they going to come back from the grave?"

We celebrate the greatest news the world has ever heard today, the news that Jesus Christ came back from the grave. He is risen! He is risen indeed. For centuries Christians have lived with hope in the midst of suffering, have read His Word and kept His commandments, have gathered with others who believe and given their lives to telling the story, and have even given up their lives to follow Him. But saints, we live in a world that is increasingly skeptical of the absolute truth of the gospel, a world that is willing to believe almost ANYTHING except that Jesus Christ is God and died for their sins and rose from the dead and is the only way to the Father. But that is the very foundation of what Christianity is all about.

I read this week that a Barna Research poll last year revealed that 30% of those who claim to be born-again Christians do not believe that Jesus came back to physical life after He was crucified. What? That's like saying, "I believe in Islam, but don't give me this stuff about 'Allah is God, and Mohammed is his prophet. And the Koran? Ha! Just a bunch of lies.'" No, if you claim to be Muslim, then you believe in Allah and Mohammed, and the Koran is your holy book, filled with contradictions though it may be. Not believing that Jesus returned from the dead with a physical body would be like believing that Michael Jordan is a good guy but he was never a basketball player. No, in fact he may not be such a good guy, but there is no question that the man could play roundball. Saying I believe in Jesus, in fact I am born again, but I don't believe He was physically resurrected is like saying you believe in Christmas but not in Jesus' birth. "Oh yeah, I believe Jesus lived on the earth, but don't give me this stuff about how He was born." What, did He beam down?

This is the high holy day for believers. This is our Superbowl Day. This is our Final Game of the Final Four and we don't even have to go through the agony of watching, hoping our team is going to win but scared to death that they are not. He won! It is finished! Death and sin and the grave have been defeated! Jesus is alive. He took death's worst and came out of the grave. He was despised and rejected by men, but He won! He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, but he won! He was smitten by God and afflicted but He won! He was wounded for our transgressions, but He won! He was bruised for our iniquities, but He won! He was chastised for our peace, but He won! The Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all, but He won!

Let's look at Paul's argument for the resurrection, which is still being used in some law schools today for a classic example of sound reasoning. Before we go there, though, look at the first part of chapter 15. Paul says this teaching is of first importance! Four primary truths. Verse 3: 1. Christ died for our sins. 2. He was buried. (No swoon theory where Jesus was later revived in a back alley somewhere and then pulled off the greatest hoax in history. No, he was dead and buried.) 3. He was raised on the third day. (without this truth, the first two are meaningless). 4. He appeared. (Peter, the apostles, more than 500 at one time, and to Paul). Without this truth, the third truth is cast into shadow. His body is gone, but where is He? There were some in Corinth, as there are in Burlington, and every city in the world, who did not believe in the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul gives them, and us, these reasons to believe and to proclaim it!

1. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then my preaching is worthless.

- 1 Corinthians 15:12-14
- What is Paul saying here except that if you remove the resurrection from Christianity, then you have nothing to preach about, and you have nothing to believe in. What would a preacher preach about if he did not believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead? What would I preach if I believed this is all there is? Well, I might preach about how we should work harder to save the environment. Or even to save the skeets. (A student in my class said the first day that his favorite thing to do is to shoot skeets. That caused great consternation with one young woman in the class; she looked at me with concern and asked, “What are skeets?” We had some fun with that one, and I encouraged her to start a Save the Skeets Foundation at Elon.) I might preach about human rights and equal protection under the law for all people. I might preach about how to manage your anger problem or your gambling problem or how to ‘manage’ any number of sins. And the church would be dying by attrition, people leaving in droves, looking for a place where they can learn how to be free, not how to manage their sin more effectively! The sad truth is, though, that many of them simply leave the church. The Presbyterian church (PCUSA) lost nearly 100,000 members in 2015 and 15% of their membership in the last three years. In fact, there has not been an increase in membership since 1983. A Harris Interactive survey revealed that only 36% of U.S. adults say they attend a religious service once a month or more often. The highest number is 45% in the Midwest, the lowest is 27% in the West, and where we live, in the South, it’s 40%. That means that on any given Sunday as we are here worshiping the resurrected Lord, 60% or more of Burlington is doing their own thing. But can you blame them if the only thing they heard in church was how to manage their sins?
- Paul says not only would my preaching be worthless without the resurrection as its underpinning, but so would your faith. ***Your faith is in vain***, Paul says in verse 14. The word for vain means “empty, devoid of truth, fruitless, without effect, of no purpose.” Your faith would be worthless if Jesus did not rise from the dead because he would be a liar and the Bible would be great literature but have no more eternal significance than Mother Gooses Nursery Rhymes. I had a great friend in grad school who went on to get his PhD in English and is teaching now at UC-Davis. We had lots of discussions about God and Jesus and the Bible, most of which he just would not believe. When we had our first child, Steve, my friend, sent me a copy of Mother Goose and wrote in the margin to Micah that his Dad should read these to him every day. Well, if Jesus is not raised from the dead then we might as well read Mother Goose for devotions and memorize the rhymes and believe in Humpty Dumpty. Maybe, just maybe, the king’s horses and the king’s men will be able to put him back together again. It’s our only hope, without the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

2. If there is no resurrection, every Christian leader we esteem is a liar.

- Verse 15: ***We are even found to be misrepresenting God...***
- James Macdonald writes that if Jesus was not raised, the disciples must have gotten together after his death and said, “OK. Here’s what we’re going to do. We have got to make these last three years mean *something*, so let’s spread the word that Jesus is not dead, but he is risen. Yeah! We’ll go get the body, never mind the Roman guards and the huge stone, well figure it out. We’ll get his body somehow, hide it somewhere no one will ever find it, and then we will start a new religion in his name.” Yeah, and then they went out and did miracles, somehow, healing the sick, even raising the dead. Oh, and to top it all off, they died bloody and violent deaths just to PROVE this lie was for real. Peter even asked to be crucified upside down because he didn’t consider himself to be worthy to die as the Lord died. They all went to their deaths with the nasty little secret that Jesus Christ was smoldering in a grave somewhere. If Jesus Christ is not risen, then the disciples were liars. So were Mary, Martha, Mary Magdalene, and even Jesus’ mother. So were Augustine, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Knox, William Carey, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, DL Moody, Mother Theresa. And every Christian leader we look up to today is a liar if Jesus is not risen.

- But it gets even worse.
3. If there is no resurrection, you and I are still in our sins.
- Verse 17: ***And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins!***
 - The Bible teaches that man is a sinner from birth, and as Malcolm Muggeridge astutely observed, “it is the depravity of man that is at once the most unpopular of all dogmas, and yet, the most empirically verifiable.” If you don’t believe man is a sinner, just read the news one day. Or, as one writer put it, read your own diary! We are lost in sin from birth. As Isaiah said, ***All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way...***(Isaiah 53:6). As Paul put it so succinctly, ***for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*** (Romans 3:23). And, ***None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks seeks for God.*** (Romans 3:9-10). Oh, beloved! If there is none who seek after God, and if it is true that Jesus is not raised from the dead, then this is the greatest horror of all: there is **NO ONE** who seeks after us! God has left us in our sins.
 - But it gets even worse.
4. If there is no resurrection, then all will perish.
- Verse 18: ***Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.***
 - Let me translate that for you. Asleep=dead; perished= in hell. If Christ is not risen from the dead, then all those who believe in him who have died have also perished, or, gone to hell, to the place of everlasting destruction.
5. If there is no resurrection, then we are pathetic.
- Verse 19: ***If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.***
 - Why? Because everything we do is pointless. Why read your Bible every day and pray? Why talk to your children about a Christ who is dead in a grave? Why go to church and worship a God who did not do what he promised? Sure, we would be more moral people and maybe have a more pleasant life if we followed a moral code, but for what? As Paul said later in the chapter, ***If the dead are not raised, Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!*** (Verse 32)
 - I was running one morning several years, couldn’t see much, but as I crested the hill on our road at the cul-de-sac we live on, I saw Honey our cat. She had come out to the cul-de-sac as I was running and appeared to be waiting for me there. I ran up to her, then turned around and ran back down the hill again. I imagined her little cat brain whizzing and whirring as she processed this information; I know cats can’t reason, but I imagined her saying to herself, “Here comes my owner, the big ugly one. Maybe he’s got something good for me to eat. Hey! Where’s he going? Why is he running back down that hill? Must be a BIG mouse down there he’s trying to catch!” I know, that’s a lame illustration, but if Christ is not risen, then my running after him for my whole life makes me look about as pathetic as my cat thinks I look when I am running after nothing. She only runs when she is trying to catch a bird or a mouse or to get away from me. But I run for no apparent reason. I am a pathetic excuse for a human being if Christ is not risen.
5. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (verse 20)
- Paul then goes on to build his case for the resurrection, and it is a wonderful passage of Scripture to soak in on a regular basis. But the great news this resurrection day is that Jesus Christ IS risen from the dead! That means that our preaching has meaning and value, and so does your faith have a firm foundation. That means the Christian leaders we esteem are deserving of it because they pointed us to Christ. That means we who believe are not in our sins any longer, and it means that when we die

we will not perish! He who believes in him ***should not perish but have eternal life***. And Jesus said in John 11:25, ***I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live***. Yes! Because Jesus is risen from the dead, we are NOT pathetic but we have hope for this life and the life that is to come. That is why we didn't say Goodbye to Hope Victoria Laing yesterday at the memorial service; we said, "See you soon, and very soon." She cannot come to us, but we will go to her. And that is true for all who are in Jesus because He conquered sin, death, and the grave!

- There is nothing more exciting than the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Perhaps that's why Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:31, ***I protest, brothers, by my pride in you, which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die every day!*** You can't have a resurrection without a death, and if I am to experience daily the power of His resurrection, then I must lay down my life daily. Death to self doesn't have a sting anymore if in exchange we get His life, His resurrection life.
- Hallelujah! He is risen!