

I Believe

*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.
(Genesis 1:1 ESV)*

*And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.
(Hebrews 11:6 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

The Third Day He Rose

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1 Corinthians 15:1-28

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Introduction:

Good morning Redeemer! He is risen! He is risen indeed!

We find ourselves this Easter Sunday at a most appropriate line in the Apostles Creed. Today we will consider the confession:

the third day He rose again from the dead

In order to unpack this doctrine, we are going to turn to 1 Corinthians 15.

In our text this morning, Paul is writing to a church that is living in a skeptical culture. By the way, that in itself is a helpful thing to note. Many seem to assume that ours is the first generation capable of rationality and skepticism. The technical term for that phenomenon is called “chronological snobbery.” The modern man proclaims: “Christianity is going to fade off into oblivion now that my intellectually elite generation has arrived!” He then proceeds to download the latest Cardi-B album and finishes binge watching Tiger King, but that’s neither here nor there.

The point is, there were skeptics LONG before the world was graced by our enlightened generation. In fact, as N.T. Wright notes:

Christianity was born into a world where its central claim was known to be false. Many believed the dead were non-existent; outside Judaism, nobody believed in the resurrection.¹

When the disciples and the earliest believers began to proclaim that Jesus had risen from the grave, the Greco-Roman world thought that they were INSANE! NOBODY believed in a resurrection of the body! Therefore, from day one, to confess this line in the creed to was to sound like a lunatic to the surrounding world. There has never been a culture that has heard the message of the resurrection and said, “Well that sounds reasonable.”

That being said, in our text today, the Apostle Paul is encouraging a young church surrounded by skepticism not to let go of the doctrine of the resurrection. These folks are feeling the push of their culture. Their neighbours think that they’re crazy. If only Paul would allow them to remove this stumbling block, they might really be able to make some inroads with the gospel. But Paul reminds them, “Without the resurrection, there IS NO GOSPEL!”

In this text, Paul addresses their resurrection question with three different but connected approaches. Therefore, we’re going to break the text into three separate readings this morning. Let’s begin now in verse 1 of 1 Corinthians 15 and we will read to the end of verse 11. Hear now God’s holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today:

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand,² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

³For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures,⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep.⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (1 Corinthians 15:1-11 ESV)

¹ N.T. Wright as quoted by Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 754.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In these opening verses, Paul is reminding the church in Corinth that it is the message of the gospel that saves and that there is no gospel without the resurrection! And he goes on to say, there is no need to jettison this doctrine because it is founded on solid evidence. Here, Paul presents us with the historicity of the resurrection.

The Historicity Of The Resurrection

Listen: Contrary to popular opinion, Christianity was never intended to be the “check your brain at the door” religion. If you are going to march into a world of unbelief and proclaim, “Jesus rose from the dead!” then you should expect some pushback and you should be prepared with some answers. As one commentator notes:

If supernatural Christianity was to be believed, valid eyewitnesses must be cited to attest this historical event and set to rest doubt about the resurrection of the dead.²

So that’s what Paul does here. He reminds the Corinthians that it was no myth that Jesus rose from the grave. For forty days between Jesus’ resurrection and his ascension, he revealed himself to his people. Paul is here providing a “Cole’s Notes” list of those who saw the risen Christ and he is reminding the church that they can even track down some of the witnesses! In verse 6, he says:

Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, **most of whom are still alive**, though some have fallen asleep. (1 Corinthians 15:6 ESV)

This is such an important verse when it comes to understanding the historicity of the resurrection. Remember, the culture thought that the resurrection was absurd. The powers that be – both in the religious sphere and in the political sphere – wanted to squash this movement before it could get rolling. In this fledgling church, believers were often tortured and killed for their claim. Therefore, if the resurrection was a hoax, the disciples would have wanted to keep the circle of confidentiality small. It would be next to impossible for 12 men to commit themselves to a lie in the face of

² W. Harold Mare, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary (Romans - Galatians)*, ed. Frank A. Gaebelin, vol. 10, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1976), 591.

torture – but to expect a crowd of 500 people to go along with the lie? That’s absurd. As Tim Keller notes:

Paul refers to a body of 500 eye-witnesses who saw the risen Christ at once. You can’t write that in a document designed for public reading unless there really were surviving witnesses whose testimony agreed and who could confirm what the author said... For a highly altered, fictionalized account of an event to take hold in the public imagination it is necessary that the eyewitnesses (and their children and grandchildren) all be long dead.³

Paul says, “You don’t believe me? Go ask Jimmy. Ask Suzy. They were there. Bobby’s granddad was there, though he’s since passed away. Go ask them if we’re making this up!”

There is literally no more evidence that we could offer to the modern skeptic than what God has already provided. You want written witness accounts that have been faithfully transcribed and passed down for 2,000 years? We have them. Do you want 1800-year-old manuscripts that we can cross-reference to see if the message has been altered over the centuries? We have those too. And, P.S. the message hasn’t been altered! You want compelling evidence that they were telling a true story? How about the fact that they were tortured and murdered for their testimony and yet they never recanted? How about the fact that, in spite of fierce persecution in both the familial and the political realm, the message of the risen Christ spread like wildfire and changed the world? David Platt notes:

There’s no question, even among the most secular of scholars, that around 2,000 years ago an entirely new religious community was formed – almost overnight. And immediately, hundreds of people started claiming that Jesus rose from the grave, even when it meant they could die for such a claim. A fast-growing movement of people, which now makes up one-third of the world’s population by some estimates, survives as a result.⁴

Blaise Pascal wisely said: “I [believe] those witnesses that get their throat cut.”⁵ Yet, in spite of all this, the skeptic still demands more evidence. To which I say: “What exactly are you looking for? Some high-definition footage of Jesus walking with the disciples? A polaroid of Thomas putting his hand in Jesus’ side?” It’s just as Jesus said:

³ Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 105.

⁴ David Platt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in Matthew*. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2013), 358.

⁵ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism*. (New York: Riverhead Books, 2008), 218.

‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:31 ESV)

They won’t believe even if one should rise from the dead. And that is exactly what happened. Church, HE IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED!

Before we move on, I want to point out one last detail. After listing off all of these other witnesses, Paul says:

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (1 Corinthians 15:8-9 ESV)

The final testimony that Paul cites is his own. After providing all of the historical evidence, Paul says, “And I’ve seen him too. And you should believe that I have seen him because look at my life! I was a terrorist! I persecuted the church! But now, here I am, by the grace of God.”

Christian, listen closely: If you want to reach your neighbour, or your co-worker, or your child, or your dad – don’t ever underestimate the power of a transformed life. Do your homework. Point towards the historicity of the resurrection. But understand that some of the most compelling evidence of the resurrection is going to be the resurrection life that they see in you! So grow! Change! Work harder than all the rest by the grace of God working in you! And then, don’t shy away from telling the world about the miracle that God has worked in your life.

Now, after making his argument for the historicity of the resurrection, Paul moves on to a series of negative arguments that prove the necessity of the resurrection.

The Necessity Of The Resurrection

Look with me now at verses 12-19:

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵We 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. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:12-19 ESV)

Remember, there were some in this congregation who were tempted to let go of the doctrine of the resurrection. In a city like Corinth, to suggest that the dead would one day be raised was ridiculous and offensive. Some in the church wondered if it wouldn't be better – for the sake of the gospel of course – to tone down the part of the message that the culture was struggling with. In these seven verses, we find Paul's response to that suggestion. He reminds them that, if they choose to let go of the resurrection, they will need to let go of some other things as well. First, he says:

1. **No resurrection, no Bible**

We find this in verse 15:

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. (1 Corinthians 15:15 ESV)

Paul says, “If the resurrection is false, then you can't trust me or any of the other Apostles. If you think that we're lying to you, then you should throw our letters in the trash!” Contrary to public opinion, this isn't a book of moral lessons hidden in mythological fables. This is a historical book making historical claims. Paul just finished explaining that. Elsewhere, Peter made the same declaration. He wrote:

For **we did not follow cleverly devised myths** when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. (2 Peter 1:16 ESV)

“This is no myth!” Peter declares. “I was there, and I SAW!” And, to his credit, he held to this confession even as he was crucified upside down for his claim. But, if the Apostles were lying about the resurrection, then why would we believe anything else that they wrote? And they cited Old Testament prophecies like this one in Psalm 16:10 which reads:

For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption. (Psalm 16:10 ESV)

We find the promise of the resurrection all over our Bibles – Old Testament and New – so if you're going to toss the resurrection, then you might as well go ahead and toss your Bible as well. That's what's at stake here, and Paul doesn't mince his words.

But that's not all. He goes on to say:

2. No resurrection, no forgiveness

We find this in verse 17:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. (1 Corinthians 15:17 ESV)

Why is it that the grave had no hold on Jesus? We talked about this on Friday – do you remember? The grave had no hold on Jesus because he was the sinless Son of God. The consistent testimony of Scripture is that the penalty for sin is death. That's why everyone who ever died before Jesus remained in the grave.

If Jesus had sinned, then the grave would have had a rightful claim on him. But three days later, like the whale spitting Noah out onto the shore, the grave spat Jesus out because he did not belong there! He did not belong there because he was the SINLESS Son of God.

Therefore, when Jesus hung on the cross bearing the curse of sin, he wasn't bearing his own sin. He was bearing your sin, and my sin, and the sin of all of his people past, present and future. He bore our sin, then He suffered the wrath of God against our sin until finally, he could proclaim: "It is finished!" He breathed his last and his lifeless body was lifted off the cross and placed in a tomb. If his body stayed in that tomb – if there was no resurrection – then we have no reason to believe that our debt was paid. The only way of knowing whether or not the curse of sin had finally been broken was that tomb.

If you let go of the resurrection – if you deny that empty tomb – then you might win a hearing with your friends but IT DOESN'T MATTER because you are still did in your sins! And that leads right into Paul's next point:

3. No resurrection, no hope

If Christ wasn't raised, then neither will we be raised. And, worse than that, neither will our loved ones who had put their trust in Christ be raised. Paul's not afraid to go there. He says in verse 18:

Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. (1 Corinthians 15:18 ESV)

If you let go of the doctrine of the resurrection, then you've let go of hope all together. John Calvin summarized the logic of Paul's argument when he wrote:

Sin was taken away by his death; righteousness was revived and restored by his resurrection. For how could he by dying have freed us from death if he had himself succumbed to death? **How could he have acquired victory for us if he had failed in the struggle?**⁶

If Christ didn't defeat death, then neither will we. If death has the final word, then hope is a mirage. I'll never forget an interview I heard with the famous astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson. The interviewer asked him what happens to us after we die, and he explained how, after a long process of decomposition, eventually some of our atoms will make their way out of the earth's orbit and into the heavens where we will become stardust.

If Christ is not raised, then that's the best hope we've got. Worm poop and stardust. No resurrection? No hope. And that leads into Paul's final argument for the necessity of the resurrection:

4. No resurrection, no point

That's what he says in verse 19:

⁶ John Calvin as quoted by R. Albert Mohler, *The Apostles' Creed: Discovering Authentic Christianity In An Age Of Counterfeits*, (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2019), 99.

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19 ESV)

Let me say this as clearly as I can: If the resurrection is a myth – if Christianity is just a bunch of fictitious fables designed to teach us how to treat our neighbor – then let's get out of here! It's a beautiful day outside! No offence to our unbelieving guests this morning, but why would you waste an hour-and-a-half of your life sitting in a gymnasium listening to stories about how to be nicer? If there is no resurrection, then we only have a limited number of hours left before we CEASE TO EXIST FOREVER! Don't spend them sitting in here!

If there is no resurrection, then the Apostle Paul absolutely WASTED his life! He was mocked, beaten up, pelted with stones, shipwrecked, imprisoned and whipped. If he went through all of that just to teach people how to be NICE then his life story is an absolute tragedy.

Paul is using these negative arguments to hammer home this one point: If Christ is still in the tomb, then let's eat, drink and be merry because tomorrow we die. However, if Christ IS risen, then nothing else matters! There is no in between. Of course, Paul means for us to flip these negative arguments upside down.

Christ IS risen so you CAN trust the Apostles and the Prophets!

Christ IS risen so there IS forgiveness for your sins!

Christ IS risen so there IS a glorious hope for us and for our loved ones who have died in Christ!

Christ IS risen so there IS hope and purpose – there is even meaning in the suffering!

CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! That's where Paul lands this argument.

He Is Risen!

Look with me now at verse 20:

²⁰ But in fact **Christ has been raised from the dead**, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. ²³ But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸ When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:20-28 ESV)

We could (and probably should) preach a whole sermon on this final section, but I’m mindful of the time this morning. In a few weeks, we will be studying the line “I believe in the resurrection of the body” at which point we will come back to this chapter to unpack some of the things that I am going to pass over today. Right now, as we conclude, I want to highlight one glorious implication of Christ’s resurrection. When we proclaim that on the third day he rose again from the dead, we are saying:

1. He is the way home

You’ve heard us say that the two most important people in the Bible are Jesus and Adam. Adam is the father of mankind, and when he sinned, we sinned. We are born into his rebellion. His blood runs through our veins and we are under his curse. Therefore, we all die.

Paul is reminding us here that Adam was the head of humanity, and where the head goes, the body follows. Perhaps it would be helpful to use an analogy here. Have you ever ridden a roller coaster and sat a few seats back from the front? If you have, then you know the feeling you get when the roller coaster reaches the top of the climb and the first car disappears over the horizon. There’s no question at that point as to what is coming next. Where the lead car goes, the train will follow.

Well, Adam is the lead car for humanity, and he has crashed off of the rails. He descended into sin and death and since then, every man, woman, boy and girl has tragically followed him off the ledge. And in the midst of the chaos, as we all march toward that same end, there is an overwhelming sense that it was not supposed to be this way.

Because it wasn't supposed to be this way.

There was no death in the Garden of Eden before Adam sinned. There was no sickness or shame or separation from the God who made us. The “home” that we were made to enjoy – the “home” that we will enjoy in the new heavens and the new earth – will be perfect just like the original garden. That's why death, sickness, shame, conflict and every other effect of sin feel so FOREIGN to us. They leave us feeling homesick – like we are not yet where we were made to be. We're homesick for a home we've never been to; a home that – thanks to our father Adam – we can't get back to.

But Jesus came to bring us home! Jesus descended into our brokenness so as to LIFT US OUT! He came to pull us off of that train that leads to death and to get us onto the train that leads home! That's what Paul is saying in this text.

For as in Adam all die, **so also in Christ shall all be made alive.** (1 Corinthians 15:22 ESV)

As one commentator summarizes:

His point is that Christ as the last Adam retrieved the situation the first Adam lost...The glorious destiny of humankind to be crowned and receive dominion, which we failed to grasp, is fulfilled for us through Jesus.⁷

Where Adam sinned in the perfect, trouble-free garden, Jesus obeyed in the stormy, sorrow-filled desert. Adam's disobedience plunged us into ruin. All who are born of Adam are born into the rebellion. But Jesus' perfect obedience positioned him to once and for all fulfill the requirements of the Law – which he did – so that he could settle our debt on the cross – which he did – so that he could vanquish our death with his life – which HE DID – so that HE COULD RISE UP OUT OF THAT TOMB – WHICH HE DID! HALLELUJAH!

So that we could rise with him and finally go home.

⁷ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 776.

And we will.

If we have turned from our sin and placed our trust in Jesus Christ as our Lord and Saviour, then we are riding a train that leads home. We know where it ends, because Jesus is riding in the front car. He's already come out of the other side, and where he goes, we will surely follow. As he suffered, we will suffer. As he died, we will die. As he was buried, we will be buried. But then AS HE ROSE, WE WILL RISE! As Athanasius once said:

we no longer die as those condemned but as those who will arise.⁸

We will rise because Christ has removed our sin as far as the East is from the West!

We will rise because Christ has conquered death and the devil with his righteous life!

We will rise because Christ holds the keys of death and Hades!

His enemies have been disarmed, and the day is coming when they will finally be destroyed. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. Then, Paul says:

When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all. (1 Corinthians 15:28 ESV)

Jesus came to destroy our enemy and to bleed out the venom that had poisoned God's good creation – the venom that Adam introduced with his sin. Now, the road has been paved for us to finally and eternally return home where our bliss will be complete because God will be all in all.

We can look forward to this day with settled anticipation. We can live with unwavering hope. We can know beyond the shadow of a doubt that we are on the train that leads home because Christ is the head of this train and CHRIST IS RISEN! HE IS RISEN INDEED! Amen! Let's pray together.

⁸ Athanasius as quoted by Ben Myers, *The Apostle's Creed - A Guide to the Ancient Catechism* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 84.