

# Certain Hope

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[ 0 : 00 ] Good morning everyone. Welcome to St Paul's this morning. My name is Steve. I'm the senior pastor here at St Paul's and great to be with you in church on this fantastic day.

What a day to be as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus. In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, the late American sociologist Rodney Stark, who himself not a Christian, showed that the early Christians, the very first adopters of Jesus as who he said he was, they showed that they were incredibly different than their neighbours, remarkably different than the rest of the people in the Roman Empire.

And he goes through a bunch of how they were different. During two epidemics in AD 165 and the other one in AD 225, I think it was, which killed, both of them killed up to one third of the population of the Roman Empire each time.

He said that as others fled the cities and abandoned their sick and their dying in their homes and on the streets as they left, literally they just abandoned them where they were.

He said it was at those points that Christians stayed behind ministering to the dead and the dying and caring for them and losing their own lives in the process.

[ 1 : 39 ] He made the point as well that Christians did not fight against their persecutors. In other instances, there was open violence, there was guerrilla warfare against the Roman Empire.

The Christians didn't, but willingly went to martyrdom while praying for their captors with a deep sense of joy and contentment.

A further reason was that as the Roman Empire expanded, it was Christians who were crossing racial and cultural and social barriers to form new united communities where those differences that had historically been resulting in open conflict were actually pushed down as being something that wasn't important and that they were actually united communities reaching across the barriers.

So the minorities in society and so on. So the question that it all raised was, why were the Christians so much more compassionate to the sick, forgiving of their persecutors, more ethnically inclusive than anyone had ever seen before?

You know, was it just that they were just so, they were just liberal progressives and they were just clearly more ahead of their time than everyone else? Were they just generally more positive people than everyone else?

[ 3 : 19 ] Were they just nicer people than everyone else? No, Stark would argue. No, it wasn't. It's because of the hope that they cling to.

Now, and Stark himself, not a Christian, would say it was because of the hope that they had embraced. What they believed their future to be changed their life in the present so radically, as it does for everyone, which is in the last couple of gatherings I've been talking about hope.

We are humanity, all people are hope-driven people. Whatever we perceive the future to be, we will determine our present now, how we live it, and in fact, how well we live it.

All humans are hope-driven. Whatever we perceive the future to be determines how we live in the present. And the hope that radically changed the early Christians, what they themselves declared, and what the Bible says and what the Christian church has maintained throughout history, is that after Jesus was crucified, he was dead, he was put in a tomb by the people who crucified him, he came back to life and appeared to his followers.

That is, the foundation and the dynamic of the early Christian hope, what so transformed their lives, was the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

[ 4 : 52 ] And what they declared and what the Apostle Paul declared, and you see it's in the New Testament, and what I'm saying to you now, is that the Christian faith is of no value whatsoever.

It has no value whatsoever. It is not livable, it's not plausible, it's not good in any way. It will crush you if you try to live by it as a set of morals, something to be doped, if the resurrection did not happen.

It's of no value at all. I'm entirely wasting your time here this morning. Well, I'm not, you are, wasting your time here this morning. As we read, a little bit further down in 1 Corinthians 15, verse 14, if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

He goes on, we are to be pitied above all people if Jesus was raised from the dead. But we can have the same certain hope that the early Christians have, if we allow the resurrection of Jesus to speak to our mind, our consciences and our hearts.

And that's the kind of three-step journey we're doing this morning. So, first of all, a certain hope. Up on the screen, Aidan just read this to us. 1 Corinthians 15, 3-9 gives us the historical case for the resurrection of Jesus.

[ 6 : 20 ] And there are three main lines of arguing here. Three main lines of reasoning that draws to the conclusion that the resurrection actually happened.

The first line of evidence is the empty tomb. It is without dispute, whether Jewish scholars, Roman scholars at the time, Christian scholars, would all declare there was an empty tomb.

It says in verses 3 and 4 that Jesus was dead, he was buried, and on the third day, he rose again. Now, it doesn't talk about an empty tomb there.

It's just implied. He was dead, he was buried, he rose again. In the same way, yesterday, for instance, I walked to Westfield. I don't need to include in there, I used my feet.

It's just assumed when I say that I walked to Westfield. So, it's assumed that the tomb is empty. The rest of the New Testament talks about it. The second line of evidence is the resurrection was witnessed by literally hundreds of people.

[ 7 : 26 ] People who saw Jesus, who touched Jesus. And Paul is writing these words somewhere between 15 and 20 years after the very first Easter events.

And that's why he says in verse 6, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. In other words, if you don't believe me, go and speak to them. You know, there is no way that you can propagate a hoax like this when the same people are still alive.

Like, you can't do it. And the third line of evidence is the changed lives of the people who met the risen Jesus, what Rodney Stark was pointing to.

And Paul himself is an example of this in verse 9. But he also could not have included this as a line of evidence if the rest of the people who witnessed the resurrection of Jesus had not been changed and had themselves not been testifying to what it was that they had saw with Jesus.

That's the three lines of reasoning. The empty tomb, the eyewitnesses and the changed lives of those who saw Jesus.

[ 8 : 47 ] And put together, they're very powerful pieces of evidence. The early Christians could not have publicly declared the resurrection successfully if there wasn't an empty tomb.

They could have done it. And if there weren't eyewitnesses. N.T. Wright, on his massive work on the resurrection of the Son of God, says, one or the other you can kind of pull apart.

Put together, you cannot. It's an incredibly powerful, powerful piece of evidence. If there was only an empty tomb but no eyewitnesses, then people would believe that the body was stolen.

If there were only eyewitnesses claiming to have seen him but the tomb had a body in it, then everyone would conclude that these bunches of people are just hallucinating wackos.

You just need to open the tomb. There it is right there. And only if all were true, the empty tomb, the sightings, the permanently changed lives of the eyewitnesses, could Christianity have ever begun in the Roman Empire.

[ 9 : 58 ] And so we go, well, that's a lovely little piece of history, a little bit of an idea there. What about us now?

We weren't there. How are we supposed to believe if we weren't there? And I'm totally glad you asked that question because that's ironically my next point.

And Paul gives us, the guy who wrote this in 1 Corinthians gives us an example of this in Acts 26, which I haven't read out to you, but if you've got a Bible, you can flick Acts 26 if you want.

Paul, by this stage of his life, towards the end of his life, is a political prisoner in Caesarea and is on trial before a guy named Festus. He's the governor of Caesarea.

And Festus asked King Agrippa, he's the Roman appointed ruler of Judea and Galilee, and he asked King Agrippa for his opinion on Paul because King Agrippa was in that area when all this transpired.

[10:59] He was there. He was the king. And Paul talks in his defense in front of Festus and Agrippa about the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus.

And when he gets to the resurrection of Jesus, Festus just mocks him. You are out of your mind, Paul, he shouts. Your great learning is driving you insane.

Now he acknowledges Paul's not some sort of a peasant, you know, a simple man. He acknowledges Paul is an incredibly, incredibly intellectual, philosophical, smart man.

And he's incredibly derogatory here of Paul. You know, all of your PhDs, they're just driving you absolutely insane. That's the sense of it. And Paul comes back to him respectfully, doesn't fight fire with fire.

Verse 25, I'm not insane, most excellent Festus, Paul replied. What I'm saying is true and reasonable. But in other words, what I'm saying to you right now makes sense.

[12:03] And verse 26 is Paul's appeal to the true and reasonable. He turns to Agrippa. This king is familiar with these things and I can speak to him freely.

I am convinced that none of this, what I've just said, has escaped his notice because it was not done in a corner.

Not done in a corner. Paul is saying to Festus, when I'm talking here about Jesus and I'm talking about the resurrection of Jesus, I'm not talking philosophically or emotionally or spiritually.

I'm talking historically. Paul himself did not have a subjective experience of Jesus. He has an objective experience of Jesus.

Paul didn't want to believe in Jesus. But he had no alternative with the resurrection. You see, unlike Festus, Agrippa knows the facts.

[13:17] His family dynasty had lived in Judea for generations. The events surrounding Jesus Christ were so significant that anyone who lived in that area around that time, in Judea, in the past 20 years, could not have laughed off what Paul had just said in the way that Festus had just done it.

Could not have laughed it off. Agrippa could not escape it. The events were public. His own historians had written about it.

Agrippa knew that the tomb was empty. And he still did not have a plausible explanation as to why the tomb was empty. It was a cold case. And he knew, as the king, what the guards told him.

We were there all night. The door was closed. He knew what the eyewitnesses claimed.

But Agrippa did not want to deal with any of it. Paul says to Agrippa, you know all this stuff. You can't laugh it off. You know I'm not crazy.

[14:34] You know there's a lot of evidence of what I'm talking about. You may not believe it, but you cannot ignore the facts because it's not done in a corner. There is public evidence of this.

And notice that Agrippa doesn't say, join me Festus. Oh, you're mad, Paul. You're an idiot. Notice he actually doesn't argue with Paul about the evidence.

He just jumps straight to the conclusion or the concession here in verse 28. He said, do you think in such a short time you're going to make me a believer in Jesus too?

That's exactly what Paul's doing. Because what happened in this space of time in Jesus with the resurrection is not just for Paul and for a bunch of followers.

It is for everyone. And what's more, in the last two verses of Acts 26, Agrippa declares Paul to be innocent.

[15:38] He's dodging. Agrippa's dodging the real issue because he does not want to submit to the evidence. You see, Christianity claims to be fact.

Fact for all people. Not entirely watertight, conclusive evidence, but substantial evidence. You need to wrestle with.

It claims historical evidence that can be tested. Jesus Christ rose from the dead. That's at the very heart of it and the foundation of it all.

And this is quite discomfiting, I acknowledge, for modern people. You know, many people prefer to say, well, you know, in our day and age, and I spoke about this a couple of weeks ago. If it works for you to believe in Jesus, that's really good for you.

But you shouldn't insist on others believing because it might not work for them. Paul did not believe in Jesus because it worked for him. Or because it fulfilled him.

[ 16 : 38 ] Jesus was a threat to every single thing he held dear in life. Which is why he persecuted violently the first Christians.

He believed in Jesus because he had to. The evidence left him with no choice. And the reality is, every single person who's got breath in their lungs right now is in the same boat as King Agrippa in this moment and Festus.

We must account for the evidence. Let the public facts of the resurrection of Jesus Christ argue with you.

How do we account for the fact that the enemies of Christianity would have loved nothing more than to be able to wheel the body of Jesus out in a wheelbarrow in the middle of the town square and just dump his body and say, there's your saviour right there.

They never could. The Romans stationed their own soldiers at the entrance of the tomb and it was empty. There was no dead body. And the view that these scared disciples who all abandoned Jesus from his trial would suddenly, now that he's dead, agree with themselves to come up with his little hoax.

[ 17 : 58 ] And then come together, steal the body of Jesus overnight at great risk of their life in front of the Roman soldiers. And then die for something that they knew was the entire lie.

That is just insane. There is not a single scholar worthy of any credit would even agree with that concept nowadays. Christian or not.

And so just let the evidence argue with you. I've got a bunch of resources. I meant to bring them up here, but they're out there on the way to the bathroom. Free resources about Easter.

Grab them, take them, digest them, explore them. You see, in the end, if you don't want to grapple with the evidence as it stands, then we actually need to come up with another historical plausible reason why this Christian movement exploded like it did and continues to do so across the world. Mostly at this point in South America, Asia, Africa, and amazingly in the last two years, great rising again in the Western world.

[ 19 : 11 ] And when I say that grapple with it, I mean historically, plausibly grappling with it. To say just, well, look, frankly, dead people don't come back to life, that's not historical argument.

That's a philosophical argument. Not a historical argument. And you have to come to that conclusion against the historical evidence.

You see, no Christian believes that the resurrection of Jesus was just a metaphor of triumphing through difficulty. Or it's a psychological or just an experiential experience, an apparition of some sort without substance.

When we Christians say Jesus is risen from the dead, we're not speaking mythically, blindly, symbolically, spiritually, emotionally.

We're speaking historically. He died for our sins, was buried. He was raised to life on the third day, and he appeared to many eyewitnesses.

[ 20 : 20 ] So the first step to certain hope is to accept the fact that the resurrection of Jesus really happened physically, in history. However, accepting the facts by itself doesn't automatically produce life-changing hope.

We need to grasp also what it means if we are to know the power of the resurrection in our life. And that's what really the rest of 1 Corinthians 15 unpacks in various ways.

In verse 9, Paul himself makes a reference to his past life. When he persecuted, tortured, put into prison, approved the murder of innocent people.

And when he looks at his past, he says, I'm not worthy to be an apostle. I'm not worthy to be a messenger of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And then in verses 10 through to 11, he says that, you know, despite all that, I'm in fact the most successful apostle there is.

[ 21 : 33 ] That is, I've worked harder and been more successful. Why would he do that? Why would he say, on the one hand, I'm not worthy.

I am, my life makes me not worthy. And yet, on the other hand, I've done more than the rest of them. How can you have such a confidence?

On one hand, as I said on Friday, Paul on one hand is a self-beater and a self-prover. How do you reconcile that? Three times in verses 9 and 10, he uses the word grace.

It's what we just sang about a moment ago. It's the gospel, the heart and the center of the Christian faith. The gospel of Jesus Christ declares that people are so wicked that Jesus, in fact, God himself

had to step into our shoes, die for us because we cannot save ourselves from God's judgment. And it also declares that God was willing to do that for us. You see, the Christian confidence is a realistic confidence.

[ 22 : 44 ] The Christian realizes that they are more sinful than they ever imagined, more worthy of condemnation than they ever imagined. And yet, at the same time, more loved and accepted and affirmed than they would ever dream.

Ever dream. At the same time. Paul's confidence is not because he's playing down his past. You know, let bygones be bygones.

He's not ignoring it. He's not trying to blame it on someone else. You know, I didn't take my medication that day. He's not trying to blame it on anything else. He's not crushed by his past failures, nor is he affirmed because of his current success.

He doesn't say, well, my current success balances out the past. See, Easter Day declares that Jesus has risen, and because he has risen, the debt of sin is paid in full.

A Christian is no longer in sin. They are in Jesus. The slate has not just been wiped.

[ 24 : 00 ] The slate has been destroyed. It no longer exists. To be in Jesus Christ means that God doesn't look at us in terms of our sin.

He regards us in terms of Jesus and his finished work. There's another little book out there that you can take for free.

I think it's something like, I forget what it's called, How Much Jesus Loves You, or something like that. I forget exactly what the title is. A cracking little book to understand how much his love is for you.

The more we grasp the reality of God's affirmation and approval because of Jesus, the more we are free from our past failures, and also our present moral and religious performance, assuming that it matters something.

Christianity, unlike any other religion or philosophical system in the history of humanity, does not start with, here is how you are to live.

[ 25 : 12 ] It starts with, here is what Jesus has done for you in history. And so Romans 8, 1 and 2 declare, There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus, the law of the Spirit, who gives life, has set you free from the law of sin and death.

That, it clears your conscience. We can have a certain hope, not just because it is historically plausible, but also because of a clear conscience.

And that drives us to a personal hope which penetrates the heart. You see, the resurrection of Jesus Christ speaks to our mind, it speaks to our conscience, but also the deepest desire of our hearts.

The resurrection of Jesus, and I'm going to unpack this more next week, next Sunday, there's a plug for you, doesn't just give Christians hope for the future, out there somewhere in the future, but they have a hope that comes from the future into the present.

The Christian hope is a present hope that changes the way we live right now. Notice what Paul says a little bit later in this chapter, in verse 30, He says, Now, it's not clear exactly what Paul's referring to here, historically.

[ 27 : 19 ] What is clear, though, he's saying that every single day he faces death because of his service of the resurrection of Jesus. And he says that I don't care what it costs me to share the good news of the resurrection of Jesus.

He says right there that there, in fact, without the resurrection, there is absolutely no reason to love your neighbour at all.

There is absolutely no reason at all to do anything good, anything for any other person, if it wasn't for the resurrection of Jesus.

No reason at all to live for some other person. Without the resurrection, we might as well eat and drink and enjoy the moment because tomorrow we die.

However, because Jesus has risen, not only has sin been paid, but death has been defeated. The resurrection doesn't just free the conscious.

[ 28 : 30 ] It actually frees us from fear in life now because death has been defeated. That God himself has entered our world, died for our sin, risen again, confirming not just that our sin has been forgiven, but that life is forever.

It frees us from fear of death to get on doing the things that he's called us to do. As he writes at the very end of this chapter, death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God.

He gives us the victory through Jesus Christ, our Lord. In his book, *Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering*, the late Tim Keller gives a great illustration.

It's illustration of another pastor, a guy named Donald Barnhouse. American pastor, his wife had died. And his wife died when their daughter was still very young, a young child.

[ 29 : 44 ] And Dr. Barnhouse was trying to help his little girl process the loss of his mother. And they were in the car one day driving along when this large truck passed them.

And the shadow of the truck sort of, you know, plunged the car into darkness as it went past. And Barnhouse turns to his daughter and said, Sweetie, would you rather be hit by the truck or by the shadow?

And she said, Well, you know, of course, you know, I'd rather be hit by the shadow, you know, than the truck because the shadow can't hurt me, but the truck can.

And Barnhouse replied, Yes. If the truck doesn't hit you but only its shadow, you're fine. He said, Well, sweetie, it was only the shadow of death that hit your mum.

Only the shadow of death that went over your mum. She's actually alive. In fact, more alive now than she ever was before. And that's because 2,000 years ago, the real truck of death in all its force hit Jesus on a cross.

[ 30 : 56 ] And because Jesus was crushed. And if we believe in him and his resurrection and the fact that he is alive now and reigning, the only thing that could come over us right now is the shadow of death.

And the shadow of death is just simply our entrance into eternal life of glory and bliss.

That's the hope of the Christian faith. George Herbert, speaking about death and of the hope of Easter Day, said that what was once an executioner is now but a gardener.

Only in the gospel of Jesus Christ do people find such hope and confidence for life now.

Not just for the future, but life now, day by day. The resurrection means you can face the worst things in life with joy and hope. And if we allow the resurrection of Jesus to speak to our minds, then we can know the freedom of a clear conscience, sins forgiven, freedom from religious performance and vague hopes.

[ 32 : 19 ] And then the power of the life lived without fear of death is what happens. You see, the resurrection sets you free. Free from this life enough to be brave and courageous and sacrificial and generous and patient and joyful.

Free now despite the circumstances because the resurrection of Jesus Christ guarantees the best is yet to come. Easter Sunday is the most revolutionary day the world has ever known.

For an atheist, it's the day of the greatest hoax in human history. For a Christian, it's the day that Jesus triumphed over death and his promise of eternal life became a physical reality in history.

And if that's true, it's true for everyone in the world, not just for Christians. You see, the resurrection of Jesus imposes a startling, unavoidable, unavoidable, binary on everyone who encounters it.

Everyone who encounters it. Either you believe it's a lie and Christianity is entirely worthless. In all of its entirety, it is worthless.

[ 33 : 48 ] Or you believe it happened and Jesus is God. That's it. Only those two options. And so I say to you as, like me, fragile people, living with the possibility of death at any moment, in a world of great uncertainty right now, people with a rise of people looking, longing to grasp for some kind of hope for the future, there is no better, there is no more certain place to look for that hope than the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Let the evidence speak to you today. Let the ■