

Resurrection

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[0 : 00] Good morning, church.

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Good morning, church. In other words, I want to know that I've done something meaningful with my life, that I haven't lived it in vain. This Easter morning, we're looking at one of the most famous and classic New Testament texts on the resurrection.

And what we find is that the resurrection of Jesus has everything to do with that deep human longing not to live our lives in vain.

[1 : 46] So turn with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. It's page 961 in the Pew Bible.

1 Corinthians 15. 961. We're not going to read all of 1 Corinthians 15 this morning, but we're going to read selections of it.

Let me pray for us before we turn to the Word. God, thank you so much for this Sunday when we can focus with laser-like intensity on the resurrection of Jesus.

Holy Spirit, we ask that you would open our hearts to see Christ afresh to your glory, Father. In his name we pray. Amen. Paul writes this, Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

For I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

[3 : 09] Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 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. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach, and so you believed.

Now, if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain, and your faith is in vain. 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.

[4 : 15] For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.

If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order, Christ the first fruits. Then at his coming, those who belong to Christ. Skip ahead down to verse 55.

Oh death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.

[5 : 18] But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ our Lord. Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

It's easy, isn't it, to get distracted from what truly matters. So Paul begins this chapter by reminding us of the gospel.

The good news that Christ died for our sins, was buried, was raised bodily on the third day, and was seen by many witnesses. And isn't that what Easter Sunday is really all about?

In the midst of everything else that fights for our attention, to remind ourselves again of the good news of Jesus' death, and above all, his resurrection. And Paul says this is of first importance. In other words, this gospel is not something that we kind of master, and then move beyond. Rather, it's the center that holds it all together. It's the life-giving well that we come back to again and again, and continually, continually draw water that satisfies.

[6 : 37] And you know, it's worth pointing out that 1 Corinthians 15, this chapter we just read from, is the climax of a letter to a very troubled church. If you were to read the rest of the book, you'd find that the church in Corinth was wrestling with issues of unity.

There were factions all over tearing it apart. They were struggling with holiness, wondering what kind of ethics they should live their lives by. They were struggling most of all with love, as they tore one another apart, even in their very worship services.

And now Paul brings it all to a head by saying, let me remind you of what's of first importance. Friends, could it be that each of these problems, in their life and in ours, come from a failure to understand and apply the gospel.

So we need to get the gospel straight, don't we? And in particular, on Easter, we need to get our thinking about the resurrection straight. Because in Corinth, and for us, I don't think we really grasp the significance of what we mean when we say, Christ is risen.

And we can begin by considering the very word gospel itself. Which if you've hung around Trinity long enough, you know that the word gospel means good news.

[7 : 59] And that means this, you see, Easter, the resurrection, all of what we're doing this morning, isn't just a really helpful metaphor about how there can be light after darkness, or hope from despair.

It's not a figurative way of saying that there can be new beginnings after loss. No. What the first Christians were spreading wasn't a metaphor, but news.

They were making a historical claim about something that happened in space and time. Easter wasn't a nice way of dressing up the belief that there's sunshine after the rain.

It's a concrete, flesh and blood, historical claim that something happened in and through Jesus of Nazareth. It's news. It's a claim.

And the first part of this claim, as we see here, is that Christ died. Now it's hard for us to imagine how paradoxical, even offensive, that would have sounded to a first century Jew.

[9 : 02] that God's long-promised king and liberator, the Christ, the Messiah, died. And died by Roman crucifixion like a common criminal.

It's about as absurd as saying that the Canadian military forces have successfully staged a takeover of the United States government. That doesn't make sense in anybody's universe, right? There's no such thing as a three-sided square and the Messiah wasn't supposed to die. The Christ was supposed to conquer, to get victory, to elevate Israel above her enemies, not be executed by the very oppressors he was meant to overthrow.

And so you see, from the moment of Jesus' crucifixion, around 30 AD, which no historian doubts, there was no reason, absolutely none, why the little movement from Galilee that had started to gather around him should have gone on existing at all.

There was no reason that it should have spread like wildfire, such that within the lifetime of those first disciples, there were followers of Jesus in nearly every corner of the Roman Empire.

[10 : 16] You see, there had been plenty, plenty of messianic or quasi-messianic movements in the first century. And most of those leaders end up being squashed.

And the reason why you've never heard of any of those people is because they amounted to nothing. Every single one of those movements collapsed practically right away. except for one. Except Jesus. And why? What made Jesus any different from all those other failed messiahs?

Well, the reason all the earliest followers gave for why they worshipped and followed a crucified messiah, following him even to the point of giving up their own lives, the reason why they went from a frightened and dejected band of nobodies who bet on a losing messiah and were transformed into a community of such joy and resilience that they laid down their life for their faith in Jesus, the reason that they gave was that three days after his burial, Christ was raised.

Now, understand what is and is not being said here in verse 4. When the earliest followers of Jesus said that God had raised him from the dead, it was not a nice way of saying that Jesus simply went to heaven.

[11:50] And it wasn't a nice way of saying that he was spiritually present to his followers. They had lots of words to describe that sort of thing.

But that is not what the words raised and resurrection meant. Now, if I told you that my family was having an Easter egg hunt with our neighbors this afternoon, which we are, you wouldn't think that that was just a nice way of saying that I'm headed home to take a nap.

Though I might take a nap after the Easter egg hunt. No, you see, we have words for taking a nap and we have words for hunting for eggs. And though they may be related in my little world, they mean different things.

And when the followers of Jesus said that he had been raised, they were saying something very specific and very concrete. Resurrection for first century Jews meant that Jesus was bodily alive again.

That he had broken the bars of death, come out through the other side into a fully embodied life, never to die again.

[13:04] That was the claim they all made. That the tomb was empty, that he had defeated death, and he was gloriously alive again, body and all. And that meant that this one who claimed to be Messiah, that this one was the one who claimed, not just to point to the truth like other religious leaders, but claimed himself to be the way and the truth and the life.

The resurrection means that he was and is who he says he is, the Lord. Of course, Jesus' bodily resurrection is a hard claim to wrap our minds around.

I fully get that. Maybe you're here this morning and that just seems completely implausible. How can we in the 21st century believe such a thing?

Well, you know, it would have been just as implausible in the first century, too. After all, the idea that dead people stay dead wasn't something we just all of a sudden discovered in the Enlightenment. Everybody kind of knew that in the first century, too. And what's more, nobody in the first century was even expecting something like this. Your typical first century pagan may have believed in some sort of afterlife and souls and spirits and the underworld and such, but they knew that you didn't come back, not in a body.

[14:38] Nobody beat death. And besides, many Greeks and Romans wouldn't have thought that coming back in a body was such a good thing anyway. Soma, Sema, they used to say. The body is a tomb.

The quicker we're released from our fickle, corrupt bodies, the better. So a bodily risen Christ certainly isn't something that the Greeks would have made up. They would have had a hard time wrapping their minds around it, too, you see.

But you know, the same is true for first century Jewish culture as well. You see, all the earliest followers of Jesus were good, monotheistic Jews, which meant that they most certainly believed in a great final resurrection of all God's people at the end of the day when God would come to put an end to evil and injustice and to heal his creation.

So yes, they were looking forward to a resurrection of all God's people at the end of history, but what they weren't expecting was the resurrection of one person in the middle of history.

That was off the grid. Think of baseball. We fully expect one team at the end of the season to win the whole thing, to be the victor.

[15:53] But what we don't expect is a single player in the middle of the season to be crowned the World Series MVP. It just doesn't work that way. So you see, Jesus' resurrection in the middle of history was something that no Jewish person would have made up.

So for Jew and Gentile alike, the resurrection of Jesus was unexpected, surprising, shocking, even hard to believe.

Just like it is for us today. So given all that, how did they come to believe it? our text tells us in verse 5, he appeared.

He came to them and they saw him with their own eyes. The account from John's gospel that we read earlier tells us that Mary even embraced him. And the gospel of Luke tells us that they ate with him.

And in Matthew's account of all this, we're even told that on those first occasions, seeing the risen Jesus, some of them still doubted. which shows how great of a worldview shift was happening for even the followers of Jesus.

[17 : 08] Also tells us some of the honesty of the gospel writers, doesn't it? So after the resurrection, Jesus spent 40 days with his disciples, teaching them, being with them, assuring them that he was risen, and then he ascended to the Father and sent them out as witnesses of his resurrection, of his lordship, and of his grace.

And it wasn't just single individuals who saw the risen Jesus, just two or one or two people here or there, isolated. We're told that the twelve saw him, and the apostles saw him, and even 500 at once saw him, Paul says.

And Paul's writing all this in a public letter as if to say, look, you can go talk to them, they'll tell you what they saw. And it wasn't just insiders that Jesus came to either, right? We know that the James mentioned in verse seven was Jesus' brother.

And we know from the gospel accounts that during Jesus' ministry, his brothers and relatives totally rejected him. They thought he was crazy. Which, by the way, you would have too if your brother was telling you that he was the Christ.

And yet we know that historically within a few years, the person leading the church in Jerusalem is none other than James, the half brother and once despiser of the crucified Jesus.

[18 : 28] What would have changed his life so radically? And then, of course, there's Paul who was a young, zealous Pharisee, had persecuted the early church for their blasphemy in claiming that the crucified Jesus was Lord.

But again, within a few years of Jesus' death, it's Paul who's risking his life to start churches that are proclaiming Jesus crucified and risen.

as Lord. Friends, this is the core of the gospel message. Christ died, was buried, and was bodily raised, offering his grace to all who believe.

Now, if you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, we're really glad you're here. You picked like the best Sunday to come to church, right? And I hope you're starting to see that this claim about Jesus' resurrection isn't just kind of a nice private thing for Christians to believe. I hope you're starting to see that from the very start, it's always been a claim about something that happened publicly in history that has changed the course of history and will change your life if you believe it.

[19 : 42] I wonder how you make sense of this claim. How do you deal with the resurrection? And you know, if we're being honest, there is one thing that we can't say. We can't say that Jesus' resurrection is just a legend that grew up over time.

Maybe like a great extravagant game of whisper down the alley. You see, Paul wrote this letter that we call 1 Corinthians in the early 50s, just a couple decades after Jesus' death.

And did you see what he says in verse 3? This gospel that I declared to you is what I also received. In other words, Paul is saying that this is the core teaching that the earliest followers of Jesus believed and taught and passed on to everyone else.

So what we've been unpacking in verses 3 through 7 is Paul citing for us one of the earliest Christian summaries of the good news. And this means that when Paul started his own ministry in the mid-30s, just a few years after Jesus' death, this was his message.

Christ died for our sins. He was buried. And he was bodily raised on the third day. And he was seen by many witnesses. You see, as deep as you go in the historical record, back to the earliest years after Jesus' death, this is the claim.

[21 : 02] He's risen. He's Lord. And it's time to decide. God's God. But you know, 1 Corinthians 15 was originally written for Christians, for believers.

So, fellow Christians, I wonder if you have a right sense of how important this is. Does the resurrection carry the weight of first importance for us? Or do we spend more time building and worrying and dreaming and contemplating about other things?

Paul goes on to say in verses 12-19 that if Christ hasn't been raised, look, if none of this is true, pack it up and go home. Stop making us use the balcony on Easter.

It's not worth it, right? Without the resurrection, it's all in vain. Our preaching, our faith, our hope is futile. The whole ship sails on the reality of the resurrection.

Take it away and it's empty and pointless. Nothing changes. We're still in our sins, Paul says, and nothing matters. If Christ hasn't been raised, we die, we perish, that's the end.

[22 : 11] The great yawn of non-existence. There's no halfway here. If it's not true, find something better to do with your time.

But if it is true, well then, Paul says, everything changes and everything matters. And how so?

Well, first, Paul says, it changes our future. Look again at verse 20. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. The first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Now, first fruits, as you might have guessed, is a metaphor from agriculture, from farming. The first fruits were the initial part of an incoming harvest. it was the initial crop that told you what you could expect from what was to come.

It was a taste of what was coming. Think of it this way. Imagine standing before a dam, solid, impenetrable, stories high, a whole lake of water behind it, a little sort of small river trickling from it, and suddenly, contemplating said dam, you see a stream of water come shooting out of a crack right in the middle.

[23 : 24] Now, you don't have to be a structural engineer to know that something is inevitably going to happen. That dam is going to break, and nothing is going to stop it.

And that stream is going to turn into a flood. Paul says it's the same with Christ. What's true of him will be true of those who belong to him.

He has broken the dam of death, and nothing will stop him from one day bringing the whole thing down. And those who belong to him, those who have believed in him, and taken him as their Lord, will be like that flood rolling over the rubble of death, rushing into the world to come.

We don't often get amens at Trinity. That's thanks. we're a pretty solid, stolid, sort of quiet bunch here.

Don't you see what Paul's saying in verses 20 through 23? What's true of the king will one day be true of the kingdom. If he has been raised, then so shall we. Next Sunday, Worcester Square will be having their Cherry Blossom Festival.

[24 : 45] Small group activity. There you go. And if you were to go to Worcester Square and stand in the park and face north, you'd actually be looking up a little street called Hughes Place.

And the trees along Hughes Place every year always peak about three to five days before the rest of the square. So you see, when you see them starting to come into bloom, you know that at any day that whole square is going to erupt into color and be transformed.

For my money, that's probably one of the most beautiful moments in our city. And it's the perfect metaphor for what Paul's trying to get us to see here.

The Christian hope, friends, is determined by Christ. He's the first fruits. If he has erupted into life, then so shall we. If he's been raised in a body, then so shall we.

If he's broken through death into incorruptible physicality and beauty, then that is where God is taking us. Now get this.

[25 : 54] This means that your future isn't as a disembodied spirit floating on a cloud in some ethereal afterlife. But it's in a renewed body, free of decay and death, filled with glory and the spirit of God.

And if that's the future Christ guarantees for us, then don't you see, the pleasures of this life are only a rumor. They are only a whisper of what's to come. The drink and the laughter and the love now, they're only a dim reflection of what's in store.

One of the main metaphors that Jesus uses for the new creation is of a wedding feast. Friends, what could engage our physical senses more than a feast? Where we eat and drink and dance and laugh.

That's what's in store. Not less physical, but more. And that means that no matter what happens or doesn't happen to you in this life, you are not ultimately going to miss out.

So if you never take that epic hiking trip through Europe, if you never land that dream job, if you never meet that someone special, you're not going to miss out.

[27 : 19] Your life isn't ultimately going to be incomplete. Christ has something in store for you that's more real than you can imagine, a feast. Do you see how liberating that is?

Here and now? The world to come is going to be a flood. It's going to be an explosion of cherry blossom leaves that takes our breath away.

And you'll be a part of it. So relax. Give. Make sacrifices. Forbear.

Forgive. Forgive. Easter's the great promise, friends, that death has been swallowed up in victory and what's in store is unmitigated, unashamed, material joy.

And if that's what the resurrection of Jesus means for our future, then here's what it means for our present. Paul ends this great chapter on the resurrection by saying, therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

[28 : 38] The reality of the resurrection, friends, doesn't make us less engaged in this life, but more. Because the bodily resurrection of Jesus is the great affirmation that God is at work redeeming this world.

And the work that we do in the Lord for his kingdom, out of love and gratitude toward him, that work will not be lost or wasted or useless.

In the Lord, your labor is not in vain. And that certainly applies to our witness bearing, right? To the work that we do to introduce others to Christ and to help others grow in the faith.

Because there's no doubt about it, that work can be hard, and sometimes it can feel like it's in vain.

When the neighbor that you've been praying for doesn't seem to show any spiritual interest. When the Christian friend that we've been encouraging and meeting with doesn't seem to be growing.

But this is what the resurrection means, that in Christ, God's new creation work has broken into the world. And that Christ is at work to bring life and renewal, even in the hardest and most unlikely of places.

[29 : 52] Friends, if Christ has conquered sin and death and a grave, surely he can soften a hard heart and cause us to grow. So our labors of witness-bearing are not in vain.

But this also applies not just to our witness-bearing, but to our image-bearing, to the work that we do as humans in bearing the image of God, in glorifying him in our endeavors of work and of artistry and creativity and of justice.

when we do these things as part of our loving response to Christ and his grace, they too are not in vain.

Christ has assured us by his resurrection that this world matters, that God created this world of matter, that he called it good, and though it's broken in sin, God isn't simply going to replace it, but renew it and heal it.

He's going to redeem it. And this means that the new creation work that broke out of the tomb at Easter in Jesus' own resurrection and continues now through the church will all be swept up in the symphony that's to come when Christ returns and his glory covers the earth like the waters cover the sea.

[31 : 13] The resurrection assures us that nothing will be wasted when it's done for him. Not in the lab or in the office. or in the classroom or in the studio or at home with the kids.

Friends, all of that work will find its fitting place and purpose and part to play in the new creation. We might not know how it will all fit in in the end.

Surely there will be surprises. Didn't Jesus say that the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed and sometimes the first are last and the last are first. But to be sure, nothing will go unadorned.

Nothing will be in vain. And so Easter, friends, is this great glorious bulwark against cynicism and nihilism and burnout.

Your labor's not in vain. It reminds me of a story I once read about Christopher Wren, who was a British architect who designed London's St. Paul's Cathedral. The story goes he was once touring the cathedral site during construction to talk to the various artisans who were working there about how things were progressing.

[32 : 34] And he was talking to masons and carpenters and sculptors and stained glass artists. And as he was finishing his story, he came across this old man whose job was to stir cement with his shovel to keep the cement from hardening.

And when the great architect asked the man what he was doing, the man, not knowing it was Christopher Wren who was asking, answered him, Why, sir, I'm building a great cathedral to the

glory of God.

Friends, in the same way, those who belong to the risen Christ can know that they too, no matter what their task, are part of a great project to the glory of God. The greatest project that there is. The project of God's new creation. So the great question that runs under the surface for all of us, is this making any difference?

Am I living my life in vain? Is answered in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. For those who belong to the risen Jesus, nothing is in vain.

[33 : 43] life. You see, friends, in his resurrection, he has ended our emptiness and filled us with life. And he'll do the same for all who believe.

Christ is risen, we say. Christ is risen, indeed.

Let's pray. Father, what a great act of grace it is that you have raised Jesus from the dead.

God, I pray that you would grant clarity to those who are still searching. God, that they would see Christ's resurrection as meaningful and true and real.

And God, for those of us whom you've brought to faith, help us to live lives in line with the truth of the gospel. God, fill our hearts with the joy of the new creation.

[34 : 56] Give us tasks that we might, like Paul, run with this grace that you've given us. We ask all this in Jesus' name.

Amen. Friends, let's