

Steadfast Hope

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning, friends. Christ is risen. He's risen indeed. Would you open your pew Bible with me to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. That's page 903 in the pew Bible.

We're going to be looking at 1 Corinthians chapter 15 this morning. As you turn there, page 903, let me pray for us as we come to God's Word together.

Father, you have caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus, our Lord, from the dead. Let our minds and our hearts grasp not just the reality, but the significance of his resurrection this morning, that we might be people of the resurrection, full of hope, living hope, as your Word says. In Christ's name and by the power of the Spirit, we pray. Amen. Amen. Well, 1 Corinthians 15 is a long chapter. We won't look at all of it this morning, but I'm going to begin by reading 1 Corinthians 15 verses 1 through 19. But keep your pew Bible open because we'll look at more of the verses as we go, but we'll start with verses 1 through 19. This is the Apostle Paul writing to the church in Corinth around 53 or 54 AD, and he writes this, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve, and 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 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. 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're 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. Hope's a funny thing, isn't it? Most often when we think of hope, we think that it's something that we do, right? I hope it doesn't rain today because we're going to have an epic Easter egg hunt in our backyard, right? I hope that I pass my exams. I hope I meet someone and fall in love.

[4 : 0 3] When we think about hope, we usually think that it's something we do, and it sort of feels like something that's not too far off from wishful thinking, right? But notice that the Apostle Paul talks about the Christian's hope not as something that we do, but as something that we have.

This is true across the New Testament. Hope isn't something we do. It's not wishful thinking about the future. It's something that we have. It's a certain future. Hope in the New Testament is something solid, reliable. It's sort of like an anchor fixed to a point that will not give way, but will keep you secure and steadfast until you arrive at the destination.

Now, you don't need me to tell you that we live in an age of deep anxiety and fear and unrest.

I feel it just as much as you do. But what if, rather than living in fear and unrest, we could live in hope, solid hope, steadfast hope, hope that takes our wildest dreams and actually makes them look like child's play? That's what 1 Corinthians 15 is all about. It's all about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the certain hope that we have in him because of it.

In a nutshell, what Paul's going to say in the rest of this chapter is that because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, there's hope. There's certain hope. There's hope for the world and there's hope for you. But before we get to those two main points, we have to consider first what Paul says if Christ hasn't been raised. That's the paragraph we just read. If Christ has not been raised, then he says we're hopeless. No resurrection of Christ, no hope. Now, it would seem that some Christians in Corinth had begun to believe that the physical body, the material world, especially our material bodies, they had begun to believe that it doesn't really matter. You see this earlier in the letter of 1 Corinthians. As Paul grapples with certain ethical questions with the Corinthians, they seem to think that it's the spirit or the soul that's the only important thing. And if that's true, then it doesn't really matter what we do with our bodies. You can eat what you want to eat. You can sleep with whoever you want to sleep with. Who cares? It's just your physical body. That thing doesn't matter. But Paul in this letter is saying, no, God made your physical body. God will redeem your physical body. And in fact, you don't belong to yourself anymore. You belong to Christ.

[6 : 58] Christ. But here in chapter 15, this downgrading of the importance of the body at Corinth has seeped into their thinking even about the resurrection of the body. It seems they were thinking something along the lines of the resurrection of a body. That's weird. Who needs the body?

But think a minute, Paul says, if there's no resurrection of the body, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ hasn't been raised, he says, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. In other words, it's all empty. The Christian message, the preaching is empty, and the Christian life, the faith is empty. To remove the resurrection from Christianity is sort of like removing all the air from your car tires, right? You might sort of clump along for a few blocks. You know, if you ever had a flat tire, you're like, you know right away, right?

It's like, and you're like, you can go for a few blocks, right? But eventually you just grind to a halt. And then you've got to replace your rims, which is really expensive. Don't do that.

I've been there. Takes a lot of money. But why is that? Why is it like taking all the air from the car tires if we get rid of the resurrection? Well, as far as the Christian message, the preaching goes, Paul says, if there's no resurrection, then we're misrepresenting God.

You know, you can't read the New Testament for long until you realize that what all the apostles and the earliest followers of Jesus were saying was not that Christ had been sort of spiritually preserved through death. They were not saying that they had had some kind of strong impression of Jesus living on in their hearts after death. No. What they said and what they meant was that Jesus rose bodily from the grave and they met him. And it's hard to go on trusting a message when you don't really believe the central thing about it. So the preaching is empty if there's no resurrection.

[9 : 12] But the faith is empty too, Paul says. Why? Well, because, he says, then you're still in your sins. If Christ died and stayed dead, Paul seems to be saying, then maybe his death would have been the death of a martyr, but it would not have been the death of a redeemer.

You see, Jesus claimed during his earthly ministry that his death would be our ransom from sin and death. But if his death was the end, then we have no reason to think that his crucifixion achieved anything along those lines.

So then, if Christ has not been raised, we Christians are, as verse 19 says, of all people, most to be pitied. We don't really have any hope.

So, Christian, on this Easter Sunday, remember the centrality of the resurrection. All of life for the Christian really is nothing more than a witness in word, in deed, in affection.

All of our life, corporately and individually as Christians, is really nothing more than a witness that Jesus Christ is risen. But if you're here and you're not a Christian, can I submit to you that you're also in the same boat?

[10 : 40] That is, if there's no resurrection, admittedly, Christianity is pretty empty. We should probably just go straight to the egg hunt, right? But what about what you believe, friend?

Without the resurrection, do you have hope? Or the older you get, do you also feel the air leaking out of your tires, as it were?

You know, this seems to happen kind of in a progression. You get into the school you always wanted. You land a dream job. You get your first big success. But then the glory of that starts to wane.

And it doesn't quite satisfy. So you trade success for duty and for doing something good in the world. And you try that, and then you see, no matter how hard we try to live moral lives, lives of duty, of service, of justice, that at the same time, there's also just an intractable brokenness in the world.

And at times, there's no better word to describe it than evil. Not all the world, but there's something in the world that's broken.

[12 : 02] And then you have that moment when you realize that the brokenness, the warped nature of things, isn't just out there, but it's in here too. And what is there to do about it?

And the air keeps leaking out, and your tires get lower and lower to the pavement. And then maybe you get a phone call that a loved one has died. And then the air really starts leaking out.

And you realize one day, someone else will get a call, and it will be news of your death that's getting passed along. And then maybe, no matter what it is that you believe, you start to realize that if the only hope we have is hope in this life only, it all starts to look pretty empty, pretty vain.

But wait, the apostle Paul says, wait, that doesn't have to be the end of the story. Yes, if Christ has not been raised, if there's no resurrection, it's pretty bleak for all of us.

But let's pick up in verse 20 of our text. In verse 20, Paul says, but, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.

[13 : 20] 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. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father, after destroying every rule and every authority and power.

For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 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 accepted who put all things in subjection under him. 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.

Let me translate. Paul's saying, there's hope. There's hope for the world and there's hope for you. First, consider how this paragraph points us to hope for the world.

[14 : 37] There's talk here, right, of kingdoms, of rule, of authority, of power, of all things being subjected to God. And all that language kind of seems a bit foreign to us.

But what Paul is saying is that because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, one day, the world, in all of its brokenness, will be put right.

All the misuse of power, all the destructive twisting of authority, all the hurt and suffering and death that that causes, one day, it will all be put to an end.

And God's kingdom, God's way of power and authority, a way of goodness and rightness and compassion and love, one day, that will be all in all.

No more injustice, no more oppression. God will be all in all. The creator will put creation right again.

[15 : 43] It's a bit like a broken bone, you know. You know, if you're out of shape, like me, and you go to the gym, and they put you on a new diet, and they give you an exercise plan, all of that's probably going to do you much good, right?

But what if your leg is broken? Well, the new diet will be good for you, probably, and many of the exercises might be good, too. But there's still a deep brokenness that needs to be fixed, right?

Your broken bone needs to be reset. It needs to be mended. It needs to be put right again. And the Christian hope rooted in the resurrection of Jesus is that God will one day put it right again.

Not just this thing or that thing, but the whole thing. In another passage, Romans 8, Paul puts it this way. He says, for the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God.

For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

[17 : 03] For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. All of creation is groaning and grinding and waiting, Paul says.

Don't we feel that? God will set it free and release it from its bondage to decay. Even death, the last enemy, will be destroyed.

But how, you might ask, is the resurrection of Jesus connected to all that? How does the resurrection of Jesus connect to any of that?

Well, the answer is found in that little word in our passage, that little word, firstfruits. Sort of a strange word.

Anybody here grow up on a farm? No one, right? We're in urban New England. No one does. No one does a farm. Firstfruits is sort of a strange word, right?

[18 : 08] It's a term from agriculture. It's a term from farming. And the firstfruits literally were just that. They were the sort of first part of the coming crop that you would harvest. So if you had an olive grove or a fig tree and the sort of growing season was coming to an end, the firstfruits were that initial sort of batch or basket or plucking of olives or figs that you could pick and enjoy.

And here's the thing. The firstfruits, that first initial part of the harvest, would be like an indication of what was to come with the rest of the harvest. So if you got a good initial batch of olives, you'd expect a good year, a good harvest.

It was a bit of a guarantee of what was to come. Now we do sort of get this living in New England, right? Because our winters are so dreadfully long and dark, right?

We spend months in the cold and then sometime around February we all think, why do we live here? Why aren't we moving to like Virginia or North Carolina or St. Vincent, you know?

The trees are bleak, the grass is withered, and then one day, pushing up through the dirt is a crocus. This little flower, seemingly where it doesn't belong, this little like burst of color amidst all the dead grass.

[19 : 28] And then you know, then you know, the winter's passing away and the spring is coming. it's the first fruits of what's to come.

It's the guarantee. Paul says the resurrection of Jesus Christ is just like that. It's the indicator. It's the guarantee of what's to come.

It's the advance in breaking of a coming harvest. Now think with me about the life and death of Jesus. In Jesus, God took human flesh and lived among us.

And he taught and he healed and he loved and he instructed. And what did we do? How did humans respond? You know, sometimes we can think to ourselves, I wish God would just make himself clear.

I wish God would just quit hiding and let me know he's there. And the truth is, God did just that in the person of Jesus. And he even had it all written down so that we could keep reading it generation after generation.

[20 : 34] God's not trying to hide or be secret. There was no secret. There was no hiding. God came right into our midst in the best way we could understand how in our own flesh and said, this is what I'm like.

This is who I am. But what did we humans do? We saw him. We heard him. And then we rejected him.

Humanity ended up doing its worst to Jesus. We crucified him. The living God walked in our midst and we consumed him in our anger and jealousy and hatred and fear.

It was as if all the injustice of human history and all the twisted self-centeredness of humanity was gathered up into a single moment and we unleashed it on the very God who made us and who loves us but whose presence and rule we wanted nothing to do with.

And what was God's response? Imagine if God had given us what we wanted in that moment. Imagine as we crucified God, God turned and said, okay, you want this world without me.

[21 : 58] You can have it. Thy will be done. What kind of world would it be? A scary place. But that's not what God did.

Instead, God bore the full verdict of our enmity and hatred, went down into the grave and then he issued a new verdict.

In the place of the death that we dealt, God spoke life. And in the place of our hatred and jealousy, God spoke forgiveness. God said, you've done your worst.

Now, my will be done. And Jesus Christ rose from the dead, overturning our evil and our death and in its place bringing forth goodness and life.

In other words, in the resurrection, God put it right. And that putting right on Easter morning was, as Paul says, the first fruits.

[23 : 05] As in Jesus Christ, one day, one day, over all creation, every injustice and every evil and every disordered rule and authority will be overturned and put right through the one who was raised, the Lord Jesus Christ, who bears in his own resurrected body the verdict of God, the verdict of God that human evil and injustice don't have the last word.

No, that God will be all in all. Now, is that just wishful thinking? That God could overturn the deeply entrenched brokenness of the world and set creation free from its bondage to decay?

Is that just some wish dream? not if Christ has been raised from the dead. It's as certain as the crocus speaking of the coming spring.

And that means if the bodily resurrection of Christ is true, then all those deep longings you and I have for justice and for a world made right and whole, all those deep longings that are so deep in our heart we can't escape them, they're not just daydreams.

They're harbingers, they're signs within us of what's actually to come and of which God gave the guarantee in raising his son from the dead. And that means when we act on those longings, when we love and when we serve and when we even sacrifice, you know, we're not just arranging deck chairs on the Titanic because if everything's just going to peter out into the frozen waste of an ever-expanding universe, what more are we doing?

[24 : 58] But if Christ has been raised, every act of love and justice and service is enacting the future. We're witnessing to what will be true forevermore.

We're saying there's hope for the world in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But it's not just hope for the world, friends.

It's hope for you. Paul says in verse 20 that all this isn't just about kingdoms and rule and authority and putting the world to rights. It's also about those who have fallen asleep, which, as you probably guessed, is Paul's way of talking about those who have died.

what hope is there for you and me facing the very real, ultimately inevitable prospect that we will die?

Now, many religions have some sort of notion of an afterlife, whether it's sort of existing in a spiritual state or being reincarnated into a different life altogether and sort of going through cycles where you can eventually sort of be united with sort of the oneness that is the universe.

[26 : 11] There are lots of ways of thinking about the afterlife, but Christianity is actually quite unique. Christianity says not just your spirit or your soul, but your body is going to be rescued from death.

A number of years ago, a French philosopher named Luc Ferry wrote a book called A Brief History of Thought, A Philosophical Guide to Living. And in this book, which is quite interesting, he sort of traces different worldviews and different philosophies and sort of what makes them able to carry the weight of living and ultimately of facing death.

And even though he's not a Christian himself, he writes in that book about how Christianity was actually incredibly unique because only Christianity, he says, is the one philosophy, the one worldview that says we will eventually see the face of our loved ones face to face.

Not spiritually, not metaphorically, but actually because of the resurrection of the body. And then he goes on sort of as a historian of philosophy to say, and in the first century and second century and third century, Christianity just swept the field.

No one could compare to it. There were beautiful systems of thought. There was a beautiful system of thought called Stoicism, which was about sort of self-control and determination and ultimately this hope that the good that you do will sort of echo out into the world and you'll be sort of combined with the one, the sort of all soul that guides and governs all.

[27 : 50] But Ferris says, that might be a nice thought, but it can't hold a candle to seeing your loved ones face to face.

But how could that be? How could that be? How could there be hope for you and me in the face of death? Paul puts it this way.

He says, 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 firstfruits, there's that word again. Then it is coming, those who belong to Christ. Paul's sort of saying, it's your birthright, you know. It's your birthright that you gained from our first parents in Adam.

It's your birthright to die. That's what you get for being a human. Mortality. But there's a new family you can be part of. Because a second Adam, a new Adam has come.

[28 : 59] And in this new Adam, in Christ, death has been overcome. He actually went through death and was raised. And if you belong to him, you too will be raised.

Now does that seem too hard to believe? They scratch their heads about that in the first century too, you know. Later in this very chapter in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul kind of speaks to that very question.

How can the dead be raised? What sort of body could that be? Well, Paul says, you know, when you put a seed in the ground, what happens? The seed dies, as it were. It sort of nearly falls apart. But then something wonderful happens.

From the ground, up springs new life. Now just think. Think of all the bodies. God the creator has made. Think of the millions of species of animals and plants and birds and fish, each with its own unique, perfectly suited body.

Think of the stars and the planets. If God is able to make earthly bodies and heavenly bodies, don't you think this God could make a resurrection body? And that's just what he's done.

[30 : 10] It's not wishful thinking because God's already proved he can and will do it. On Easter morning, when the tomb was found empty and the risen Jesus met the disciples, he wasn't just showing them what the Father had done for him.

He was showing them what was going to be true of them because of him. He had broken down the door. He had put the crack in the dam.

He was the firstfruits, the guarantee that, yes, God can and will do it. Do you wonder what this resurrection body will be like?

Again, later in this chapter, Paul will speak to that too. He says, right now, our bodies are perishable. They wear out. They get old. But what is raised will be imperishable. They'll never get old, wear out, or die.

Right now, he says, our bodies carry the weight of dishonor, of shame. How deeply we feel that. How deeply we're coming to understand how our bodies carry the wrongs that we've done or the wrongs that have been done to us, the trauma and the sin and the scars.

[31 : 23] Paul says, our bodies right now carry that. But in the resurrection, he says, we'll be raised in glory. The body will no longer carry the weight of sin.

Right now, he says, our bodies are weak. There are things we wish to accomplish, goals we wish to reach that we know will never complete. I read somewhere that that's basically the definition of middle age when you realize that you're not going to accomplish all your goals.

If you're 20, sorry, it's coming. You know, we're weak. And we're weak not just because of good creaturely limits.

There's good limits to our life, but we're weak because of the fallen weakness of our present bodies. But these bodies, Paul says, will be raised in power. Imagine having the freedom.

The freedom not to exceed our creaturely limits, but to live within them and to accomplish the very things for which you were created. This is the Christian hope grounded in the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

[32 : 36] Because he has been raised, so will all those be raised who belong to him. And that means something very powerful.

It means that the frustrations of this life, the limitations of this life, all the things you never got to do in this life, they're not the final word.

Paul will end this chapter by saying, therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

The work of this life, Paul is saying, is not in vain. It's not empty. Even when it seems incomplete, even when it seems riddled with setbacks and disappointments, it's not in vain.

Why? Because of the resurrection. Because the future that God has in store is not some alternate reality or some escape or wholesale rejection of what's happened in this life or in your life.

[33 : 46] No, the deeds that you have sown, the labors you have expended, the weariness that is gathered in your bones as you've run this race with endurance, none of it's in vain. Because God's going to take what's perishable and what's weak and yes, what's even dishonorable and he's going to sweep it up and make it new in the resurrection.

The question is, will you and I on this Easter Sunday give ourselves to the resurrected Jesus to belong to him? As Paul says in verse 23, can you and I say, can you say that you belong to Christ?

If you are a Christian, then that's true of you and you have this hope. So live it, brothers and sisters. Live it out. Be steadfast. Be immovable.

Always abounding in the work of the Lord and do it with joy and peace and faithfulness because you have a hope that cannot be taken away. A hope that's as certain as the coming of spring.

A hope of a world made right and you made new right in the midst of it. But if you're here and you're not a Christian, then I wonder, what would it take for you to consider giving yourself to the risen Christ?

[35 : 13] Perhaps you need to spend more time considering the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. After all, if this is what's at stake, isn't it worth taking just a little time to consider whether it's true?

There's actually a book table at the back Pastor Matt mentioned with lots of great resources to do that. Take one. Consider it for yourself. No one should go through life without seriously considering the claims of Jesus' resurrection.

This is your chance. But of course, belonging to Christ is more than just an intellectual endeavor, right? You can believe something is true without really giving your allegiance to it.

I believe that the Chiefs won the Super Bowl this year. But my heart still belongs to the Philadelphia Eagles, as silly and strange and as perpetually heartbreaking as that will be, right?

What keeps you from giving your allegiance to Jesus Christ? What keeps you from belonging to Him? You know, whatever it is, however you would answer that question, and we all have to answer that question at some point in our life, whatever it is that keeps you from belonging to Him, I hope you see, I hope you see that long before you and I ever considered whether or not you should give your life to Him, He decided to give His life for you.

[36 : 46] And who else would do such a thing? Your work, your friends, your family, these are all good things, but none of them ever gave themselves so fully for you as He did.

Whatever it might cost you to belong to Jesus is nothing compared to what you gain. a lover of your soul, a friend in the darkest night, and hope like an anchor that cannot be shaken, the defeat of sin and death and resurrection life.

Friends, let's give ourselves to Him. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father, in the midst of the busyness of a holiday weekend and just the general busyness of our lives and the noise of so much that crowds in around us, we pause just for a minute now in silence and stillness before you, asking for your Spirit to come and open our hearts to you.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Father, by your Spirit, help us to live as people of the resurrection and open the eyes of the hearts of those who want to believe in you but who have such a hard time doing so.

Lord, come with your grace. Make yourself real. And draw your people to yourself, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.

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