

Risen Indeed, I Corinthians 15:12-26

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Introduction

For nearly two thousand years the church has been announcing that a man named Jesus was killed, came back to life, and has been living ever since. If Jesus were only an escape artist who had discovered how to cheat death, that would have been big news. The illusionist Harry Houdini was supposedly on such a quest, and that was big news in its time; he failed but he continues to be famous. We do not call Jesus rising from the dead “big news,” we call it “good news,” because of its effect on all of us: Now death is no longer the end for us either, it is the doorway into eternal life.

Many people claim to follow Jesus and call him a teacher, but they do not know him as the risen Lord who saves them from sin and death. Writing to such confused Christians in Corinth, a Greek city, the Apostle Paul states in chapter 15 verse 17, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile...” True faith is this: To confess with the lips “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in the heart that God raised him from the dead. He is risen indeed.

Let us pray: God in Heaven, you have raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now open our minds and hearts to receive this as true, that we may live in him and before you forever. Amen.

1. Futile Faith

Paul states in verses 17-20: **“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If for this life only we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all people. But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since**

death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.”

Paul makes three points: First, he corrects a common error among Greeks, who said that the resurrection was merely the soul of Jesus returning to God. No, writes Paul: since death on all flesh had come through one human being, Adam, the first sinner, the defeat of death must also come through the flesh one human being. Jesus Christ was fully human, flesh and blood and will, and in flesh, blood and will he rose from the dead. Second, his resurrection in his body is not a gift God reserves to him alone. We can join in it, we shall be raised from the dead. Paul calls Jesus the firstfruits; the rest of us are the great harvest that God will gather into eternal life. More on that in a few minutes. Third, Paul confirms that the resurrection of Jesus is core to a Christian’s beliefs and inseparable from genuine faith and authentic Christian life. We need to expand on this third point:

No one in the ancient past expected to see the dead living again. It was not in their world-view any more than it is part of ours today. Religions and cultures have taught many different things about what happens after people die, and these beliefs have been essentially unchanged since ancient times. Some people joining the church in Corinth believed that Jesus was an important teacher, but rejected the notion that the dead were raised. Greek philosophers and pagan Greek religion taught that after the body died, the soul was separated and existed like a shadow, in either grief and despair or in quiet rest. Some believed that the soul was reborn in new lives. One who lived wickedly might be reincarnated as a snake or a bug, and one who lived well might come back as a wealthy person. Others believed that the ghosts of the dead were mysteriously present to influence events among the living. Biblical faith, which comes to the world through Israel, is that there is one life to live, we will rise from the dead at the end of history, and God will judge the righteous and the wicked.

Belief that Jesus rose from the dead brings you into the faith of the Bible, for Jesus came to show the world the will of the God of Israel. The Bible informs us that sin and evil poisoned the Earth that God created, and that God set apart the people of Israel to bear witness to God's justice, mercy, and law, and that God anointed kings to reign over Israel. This is a long, deep story, told by the prophets and poets who are the authors of the Bible. Still, no one in Israel expected God to raise any one from the dead before the end of time, for no one in Israel expected that any person would live in the world without sinning. No one expected that the Christ would appear as very God, righteous and sinless, yet wrapped in human nature. By rising from the dead, Jesus confirms that all the things he said about himself, the God of Israel and the hope of humankind are true.

The follower of Jesus cannot pretend that all the religions of the world teach the same thing. They do not. Other religions teach infinite reincarnations, or ghosts roaming the world for good or mischief, or detached souls floating in their own seas of regret or peace, or, the evaporation of one's own consciousness into the pure contemplation of nothing. Each of these speculations of an afterlife are different in nature and in kind from the promise of God for eternal life, in a body, in God's presence forever. So Paul writes that if there is no resurrection, the death of Jesus Christ is robbed of meaning, and Christianity becomes the most foolish and pointless of all religions.

2. Free Forever

In verse 22 Paul writes, "For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." Then in verse 25, "For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death." There is a conscious, willful enemy of God, called the Devil, who promotes death and suffering and alienation as much as possible. When Death is described in this

way, we can understand that the personal agent being referred to is the Devil. As death has been defeated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, so also has the Devil been defeated. But a defeated enemy can fight on. A master at chess knows a game is won or lost several moves ahead of time. In war a defeated opponent might fight on to secure better terms of peace. Some fight on out of pure spite, as does the Devil, who hopes to drag as many as possible into his own doom. The Devil will never surrender, so the Devil must be destroyed, and then the final enemy, Death itself, will cease to plague humankind. We will be free forever from sin, death, and the Devil.

Death as such is an impersonal function. Death is caused by sin, which is a birth defect in human beings with a 100 percent fatality rate. Of all the billions of people who have been born, only one person has been free of this birth defect: Jesus Christ. Here is how Jesus breaks the power of death. God, who is perfect with justice, could not allow a sinless person to remain dead.

If you would be free forever from the fear of death, if you would be free forever from guilt over sins you cannot be undo, if you would be free from sin's control of your passions, bad habits and addictions that drive you to despair, put your faith in Jesus Christ. The issue in opening your heart to Jesus is not whether someone rising from the dead is easy to believe. The issue is whether, for your own pride and convenience, you choose to believe something even more far-fetched, which is, that Jesus remained dead. His eye-witnesses, hundreds of them, suffered willingly for their conviction that he was alive again. Many of their trials and tortures are recorded in history even by unbelievers and enemies.

Some might say, *but it is impossible that a man rose from the dead*. To which I say, the rest of the story shows the effects of this resurrection on its eye-witnesses, and it is impossible that these effects occurred without the cause that motivates these eye-witnesses. Of course it is impossible that someone rose from the dead. That is what makes it a miracle, and that miracle is

an act of God, specifically, Israel's God, the God of the Bible, the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

3. First Fruits

One old objection to belief in the resurrection is that no one else has risen from the dead. This is true, as Paul writes: Jesus is the first fruits, the only one to have risen from the dead into eternal life: his resurrection cannot be reproduced and will not be repeated in all of history, not until history's end. If his resurrection were reproducible, it would not be a testimony to the power of God. If it were repeatable, Jesus would not have been unique in his triumph over sin, his sinless life would not have mattered, and thus faith in Jesus would not matter. But faith in Jesus matters absolutely, for he alone is risen, by an act of God.

No miracle is easy to believe. It is hard to believe Aaron Rodgers' Hail Mary touchdown pass against the Detroit Lions last season, and I've watched it myself, many times. I still can't believe mine and Amy's first kiss; we've been married almost 23 years. The women, the first to see Jesus alive again, could not believe it. Then, they went and told the men, who could not believe it. Then, Jesus appeared to them, but Thomas was absent and HE could not believe it. The gospel stories are filled with unbelief about the resurrection of Jesus. Why? Because such a thing had never happened before.

As they spread the word, many who heard it rejected it out-of-hand, Jews and Greeks alike, including, at first, the Apostle Paul himself. As a Jewish scholar, he was so stuck on the impossibility of Jesus either being Christ or being raised, that heaven itself had to open. From heaven Jesus struck Paul blind with the light of God, so that he repented and believed in Jesus. Paul then became one of the most effective church-planters and evangelists in all of history.

Whether an event is hard or easy to believe is a different issue from it having happened, and events have effects. The Packers won the game. Amy and I are married. I cannot explain the

effects on Paul's life or Peter's, or on the rest of the five hundred followers of Jesus, and all the things they did and their boldness in proclaiming Jesus, aside from them having seen Jesus living again in front of their eyes. And these witnesses are joined by millions more since then. Though we have not seen Jesus in the particular way that Thomas and the apostles did, who were invited to touch the wounds in his body, we have believed even so. Some here have seen Jesus revealed to them in a manner similar to the way he showed himself to Paul, yes, with heaven opening. Muslims in Arab countries are coming to faith in Jesus because he has appeared to them in visions. Hard to believe? Sure it is. *But it's happening.*

Many here have known the power of God in their bodies, bringing healing to flesh and spirit together, including me. Many here have seen the hand of God in the events of their lives, including me, bringing together circumstances that some of you might call random but which people of faith call divine appointments. Today, here and now, is your divine appointment.

Conclusion

Paul writes that the Christian faith has, at its core, the belief that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, and that those who share in this faith will share in his resurrection. Friend, confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart God raised him from the dead, and you will be saved from the fate that awaits death and the Devil. There is a prayer that you can make today to set that confession on your lips and seal it in your heart. It is printed on the yellow card you find in front of you. I will pray this prayer aloud. You may join me, or follow along quietly. As you open your heart, this prayer is your acceptance of new life in Jesus Christ, and your assurance of eternal life. Let us pray:

Dear God, I come to you now with faith that Jesus paid for my sin by dying on the cross and that you raised Him from the dead. I repent of my sin and I claim your promise of forgiveness and eternal life. I ask that Jesus become my Lord. Please fill me with your Holy Spirit so that I may live according to your will. Amen.