

Bethany Presbyterian Church

1 April 2018 – Easter Sunday

I Corinthians 15:1-20

God of the prophets, God of consuming fire, Father of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ; in your covenant faithfulness send forth the fire of your Holy Spirit to accompany the reading and hearing of your Holy Word; that your truth and righteousness may be emblazoned upon our hearts. Set our souls on fire with a holy passion, that we may offer ourselves as living sacrifices of obedience and praise to you, the one and only True and Living God; through Jesus Christ who is our eternal prophet, priest, and King.
Amen.

THE GOSPEL OF THE RESURRECTION

Introduction:

In John Masefield's drama *The Trial of Jesus*, there is a striking passage in which the Roman centurion in command of the soldiers at the cross comes back to Pilate to hand in his report of the day's work. After the report is given, Pilate's wife beckons to the centurion and begs him to tell how the prisoner died. When the story has been told, she suddenly asks, "Do you think he is dead?" "No, lady," answers the centurion, "I do not." "Then where is he?" To which the centurion replies, "Let loose in the world, lady, where ... no one can stop the truth."

And so it proved, for as soon as Jesus was risen and ascended, he empowered his disciples to make known the gospel of the resurrection throughout the whole of the then-known world.

The gospel of the resurrection is an indisputable fact, an indispensable faith, and an irresistible force. Perhaps nobody sets this out as clearly as the apostle Paul in the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians. To him, the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ was:

I. An Indisputable Fact

"Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, ... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (15:1, 3-

4, NASB). With the perception of a theologian and the brilliance of a logician, Paul declares that the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ was, first of all:

A. A Fact of Prophecy

Christ “was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:4, NASB). What an arresting phrase this is – “according to the Scriptures!” What did Paul mean? Quite obviously, since there was no New Testament in those days, he was referring to what we call our Old Testament. Paul was an excellent student of the Hebrew Scriptures, and from his familiarity he could declare with categorical impressiveness that Christ “was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:4, NASB). In other words, the law, the psalms, and the prophets all predicted the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ; see the law: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall crush you on the head and you shall bruise him on the heel.” (Genesis 3:15), the psalms: “For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. Thou wilt make known to me the path of life; In Thy presence is fullness of joy; In Thy right hand there are pleasures forever.” (Psalm 16:10-11; see also Acts 2:25-31), and the prophets: “But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting *Him* to grief; If He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see *His* offspring, He will prolong *His* days, And the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand. As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see *it* and be satisfied; by His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities.” (Isaiah 53:10-11). Against the background of such Old Testament predictions Paul announces, “Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which you also stand, ... For I delivered to you as of first importance what I

also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:1, 3-4, NASB). The resurrection of the Savior is a fact of prophetic history.

B. A Fact of History

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:3-4, NASB). Dr. F.F. Bruce points out that these words of the apostle Paul constitutes one of the earliest pieces of documentary evidence concerning the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. This statement of fact is dated less than twenty-five years after the Easter event. So impressive was this supporting evidence that it affected every one who heard it. Among the tens of thousands who were transformed by the gospel of the resurrection, Paul names three such witnesses in this very chapter – Peter (v. 5), James (v. 7), and Paul (v. 8) himself.

II. An Indispensable Faith

Proclaims the apostle: “and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. ... and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. ... If we have hope in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied” (15:14, 17, 19, NASB). In these words we have the apostle’s estimate of the significance and value of the pivotal event we commemorate on Easter Sunday. Everything depends upon this central fact – a risen Christ. If Christ was not raised, then our preaching is empty, our faith is false, and we are in a state of abject misery.

A. Faith in the Preaching of the Christ

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain” (15:14, NASB). In the last analysis, preaching represents the word of Christ. Everything that Jesus ever said during his earthly ministry must be judged in the light of the resurrection, for if he did not rise from the dead, how can we trust the words he spoke? How can we believe the claims he made? How can we aspire to the standards he set? In other words, if Christ was not raised, then both our preaching and our faith are vain. But Christ *is* risen, and as a result, every single word Jesus spoke rings with authority and vibrates with life; we can trust him implicitly.

B. Faith in the Power of the Cross

“And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless, you are still in your sins” (15:17, NASB). If Jesus Christ never rose from the dead, then Calvary means nothing at all; other men have been crucified, and Jesus must be numbered among them. On the other hand, if he truly rose from the dead, then Calvary represents the unique redemptive act of God, providing forgiveness and salvation for men and women like you and me. Because he rose we can say, along with Paul, that Christ “was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification” (Romans 4:25, NASB). There is forgiveness and pardon through the blood of the cross because the resurrection of Jesus Christ invests that death with a saving significance. Peter knew this from personal experience. That is why he could write that we are “... born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (I Peter 1:3, NASB).

C. Faith in the Prospect of the Church

“If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied” (15:19, NASB). When Jesus Christ was here upon earth, he said to his disciples, “... I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it” (Matthew 16:18, NASB). This prediction was fulfilled on the day of Pentecost, when the nucleus of that Christian church was brought into being. Indeed, it is a fact of history, belief in the resurrection brought the church to birth. And when the church dispersed from Jerusalem to conquer the earth, it was the resurrection message that was the driving power behind it. If Christ had not physically and factually risen, the church, which bears his name, would have perished long ago, for numbers of fierce attacks – social, political, and intellectual – have been launched against her down through the centuries. Often, indeed, she has seemed doomed and dead, and the gravediggers, like Hume, Voltaire, and others, have been busy; but always, like her Savior, she has risen from the grave and rolled away the stone. Only the fact of the resurrection of Jesus can explain the existence of the church of the living God.

What is more, the church has a glorious destiny, for beyond this life she has an eternal future. Christ, who gave himself for the church, is coming back for his church, “that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she should be holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27, NASB) before the glory of the Father.

III. An Irresistible Force

“But thanks be to God; who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Corinthians 15:57, NASB). If the opening of this amazing chapter deals with the fact of

the resurrection, and the heart of the chapter presents the faith of the resurrection, then the concluding verses speak of the force of the resurrection. As I Corinthians 15:54-57 states, “But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

A. A Revealed Force

Paul states this succinctly when he says Jesus Christ was “declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 1:4, NASB). Christ made some extraordinary claims before he went to the cross. Likening his body to the earthly temple, he announced, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19, NASB). Likewise, in John 10:17-18 Jesus states, “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father.” Such statements as these were vindicated when the stone was rolled away and the grave was revealed to be empty. In the triumph of the resurrection the Son of God exemplified every other manifestation of divine power, including the creation of the world.

B. A Released Force

He said to his disciples, “but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and

Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth” (Acts 1:8, NASB). It is well to remember the teaching of Jesus was complete before he ever went to the cross. But the disciples were unable to preach his truth. They had the theory but they lacked the power. But on the basis of the cross, the resurrection, and the ascension, Jesus poured out his Spirit, in liberated resurrection life, and those weak disciples, filled with his life, boldly went everywhere making the Savior known. They could now preach with fearlessness and suffer even unto death.

Conclusion

Face up to this gospel of the resurrection as a fact, a faith, and a force in Christ – to believe and receive. And having believed and received, go out into a lost world and tell men and women that Jesus Christ died and rose again to be the Savior for sinners.

A father and mother lost three children in one week by diphtheria. Only the little three-year-old girl escaped. On Easter morning, the father, mother, and child were in Sunday school. The father was the superintendent. He led the school in worship and read the Easter message from the Bible without a break in his voice. Many in the school were weeping, but the faces of the father and mother remained serene and calm. “How can they do it?” men and women asked each other as they left the church. A fifteen-year-old boy, walking home with his father said, “Father, I guess the superintendent and his wife really believe all of it – Easter, you know!” “Of course,” answered the father, “all Christians believe it!” “Not as they believe,” said the boy.

Do you really believe in Easter? Is the resurrected Christ your hope? Can you say with the apostle Paul, “Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting? ... but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (I Corinthians 15:54-57, NASB)

LET US PRAY

Almighty God, eternal Spirit, who raised from the dead our Lord Jesus Christ and pledged through his resurrection that they who died with him for your sake would live with him by your power, we praise you for this holy day, and we thank you for its witness to your care for your people. That we have sinned you know, our Father. That we have been blind to your glory and deaf to your pleading you know, our Father. That we have been weak when we could have been strong, cruel when we should have been kind, stingy when we had the means to be generous, and cowardly when we had cause to be brave you know, our Father. For the evil done and the good not done we ask your forgiveness, and again we praise you for this holy day and thank you for its witness to your care for your people. Hear us as we pray for all sorts and conditions of your human creatures: the proud who have no reason for pride and the shamed who are more victims of wrong than its doers; men and women with power; children of privilege; adults afraid and trembling; children starving and naked; Jews and Arabs; Protestants and Roman Catholics; Buddhists and Moslems; the lonely and the bitter; the insane and the imprisoned; the sick and the wounded and the dying; those who have lost their fortunes and those who have lost their loved ones and those who have lost their hope. You removed from wicked men their victory at Calvary and denied the tomb its prisoner in Joseph's garden; come again as you have promised, and have mercy on the humankind of your creation. Invade, we pray, the lands that we have walled up against you. Breach the fortresses that we have built to exclude you. Whether by raising or by lowering, whether by empowering or by enfeebling, whether by giving or by refraining from giving – extend to all of us the ministries we need. Wanting peace, we have made war. Seeking friends, we have raised up foes. Coveting goodness, we have grown spiteful and prejudiced and wretched. You can do all things,

and we pray that you will do for us what we have not been able to do for ourselves. Save us, our Father. Save us from friends. Save us from enemies. Save us from ourselves. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray: "Our Father ... Amen."