

The Resurrection: Folly or Faith?

I Corinthians 15:12-19

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ April 1, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴ and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷ If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (I Corinthians 15:12-19, NRSV)

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April Fool's Day and Easter fall on the same day this year. The two holidays haven't collided like this for 62 years! It's a rare occasion that many parents aren't about to miss. The prank opportunities are too tempting to resist. Imagine the fun of sending your kids out on an Easter egg hunt when you haven't actually hidden any eggs. Dying raw eggs is another winner, the payoff being watching people crack them open expecting a hardboiled egg inside. An Easter basket full of raw veggies instead of candy treats is not what any kid is expecting. Raw broccoli, radishes, and sticks of celery are especially good choices. Supergluing plastic eggs together after you've put the candy inside – always a hit. And my personal favorite? The jelly beans in the toilet with a handwritten apology from the Easter bunny.

It wasn't Easter, but years ago my kids, with a well-played assist from my wife, nailed me on a classic April Fool's prank. I received a very official letter in the mail that day from the IRS informing me that Congress had recently passed legislation that stated: "All U.S. citizens who pay their children an allowance of no less than \$100 per week will be exempt from all income taxes." It was incredible that I had missed such landmark tax legislation in the news. It was also incredible that my two young children, four and six at the time, took such curious interest in what a letter from the IRS had to say. They couldn't wait for me to read it and insisted that I read it aloud.

When you are the victim of such a good-natured prank all you can do in response is laugh. But what about a prank which isn't so good natured? Anybody here ever been fooled in a way that left you feeling like a fool?

When I was just out of seminary in my first position as a pastor I got a call one day in the office from a young man who was clearly distraught. As I listened intently, he went through a detailed story of how his wife had left him and taken the kids, and how he now struggled to find any reason to live. In fact, he talked as if he was seriously considering taking his own life. He'd been to our church one time recently he said, and was turning to me as his last resort. He was desperate and wanted to know what could I offer him that would give him hope?

What do you say in a situation like that? Seminary doesn't really prepare you for these sorts of phone calls. So I did my best to speak words of empathy and encouragement. I offered to meet with him and to pray with him. I told him that I shared in his pain. And it was then, about 15 minutes into the phone call as I tried to set up a time to meet with him face to face, when the voice on the phone revealed that it was all a joke. Turns out it was a guy I knew in seminary, a fellow classmate now turned pastor, who was calling to catch up and thought it'd be a funny to see if I'd buy his act.

I wasn't laughing. In fact, I felt like a fool. I'd been vulnerable on the phone with what I thought was a man truly in need. When I realized it was all a joke, that my investment of time and emotion had been for nothing, I felt foolish, and angry. Maybe you can imagine. It's how anybody feels if they have invested something significant of themselves in something or someone that turns out to be counterfeit.

Here's my point in all this. What are we doing here this morning on April Fool's day? Really, what are we doing, not just this morning with our lives? The whole point of Easter, along with the whole point of Christianity, is the celebration of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God's Son. But what if it's not true, as many, many people in our world would claim that it's not true? What if Jesus didn't actually rise from the dead? I mean, if you think about it, the whole thing really is quite unbelievable.

By Friday afternoon Jesus was dead. Any serious historian even today has to agree that there really was a figure named Jesus from Nazareth who lived in the first century and that he really was executed on a Roman cross. That part definitely happened. And this wasn't a coma. His heart stopped beating. There was zero brain activity. No breath in his body. By Saturday morning rigor mortis had begun to set in, the corpse beginning its slow but steady process of decomposition. But then by Sunday morning he was alive again? Not just restored or resuscitated, but resurrected in glory to never die again! You can understand why some people have struggled to believe it all.

Now, the way some people reconcile all this is by making the resurrection symbolic. Think about it this way. When Martin Luther King Jr. was shot to death on April 4, 1968, he really did die. And he stayed dead. Even so, you might say that Dr. King lives on to this day, his words and his example and his vision kept alive in spirit by so many who admired him and looked to his leadership. There are some today who suggest the same thing happened with Jesus' disciples. He never literally came back alive and met them, but his teachings and his example lived on among his follower, and do so right up to today. So even if the actual Christ is no longer alive today, the *cause* of Christ lives on after his death, and that is enough. That's what some people believe.

The Apostle Paul was not one of these people. In I Corinthians 15:17-19 he declares this: **"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."** If Jesus didn't literally rise from the dead than we are to pitied like a fool is pitied after he or she has invested such an important part of themselves, even all of themselves, in something which turns out to be a fraud. If Jesus didn't actually, historically, physically rise from the tomb after being actually, historically, physically dead three days, then there is nothing about him which is worth our time. If the resurrection is not a historic reality, there is no point to Christianity. It's a joke.

People who don't believe in the resurrection will tell you exactly the same thing. Outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins once wrote, "The Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the raising of Lazarus, even the Old Testament miracles, all are freely used for religious propaganda, and they are very effective with an audience of unsophisticates and children." He means fools, though I strongly disagree with his assessment of children as fools. If you believe in the resurrection and

it turns out to be merely propaganda, you are a fool. That's what he's saying. It makes me certain that Dawkins and others like him find it ironically hilarious that Easter and April Fool's Day share the same date on the calendar this year. To them the resurrection was probably the greatest April Fool's Day prank in the history of the world.

For those of you who believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who believe he actually did rise from the dead that Sunday morning, I want to encourage you in your belief this morning, as foolish as it may seem to others in this world. And for those of you who don't believe in the resurrection of Christ, or who are struggling to swallow such an outrageous claim, I want to gently prod you to reexamine your unbelief. For the truth is, the more you logically and honestly examine this outrageous claim which has been handed down to us, the less foolish faith in Christ actually becomes.

To begin with, it is indisputable history that in the decades before and after Jesus' life there were dozens and dozens of other messianic claims and movements in ancient Palestine. The leaders of these movements, in almost every case, were killed. When that happened, the movement shut down and everybody went home. In fact, only one such movement survived, the movement begun by Jesus of Nazareth, which didn't only survive but exploded after his death. In less than 300 years it had overtaken the entire Roman Empire. Clearly something beyond an April Fool's Day prank happened to ignite a movement that eventually changed the world.

It's important to understand that in those days literally nobody had even conceived of the idea of this sort of resurrection. In Greco-Roman thinking, the soul or spirit was good but the body, like all things material, was weak and corrupt. The body, therefore, was a prison in which the soul had been incarcerated and it was only in death that the soul was finally set free. The idea that the body would follow you after your death was therefore offensive. Who wants their jail cell coming with them after they are set free?

The report of Jesus' resurrection would also have been unthinkable to the Jews. While Jews believed in a resurrection, it was always a future resurrection at the time when God would renew the entire world. The idea of an individual resurrection, in the middle of history, while the rest of the world continued on burdened by sickness, decay and death was inconceivable. Not a

single Jew in that day would have even considered this possibility.¹

How is it possible, therefore, that the Christian view of the resurrection, a view that had literally zero precedence in human history before that time, spring up full-blown after the death of Christ? The most logical explanation, of course, is that it actually happened!

Add to this the fact that the Gospels record that it was women who were the first witnesses to the resurrection of Christ. Celsus, a Greek philosopher in the 2nd Century articulated the skepticism of many of his era when he wrote, “Christianity can’t be true because the written accounts of the resurrection are based on the testimony of women – and we all know women are hysterical.” He didn’t mean that women are funny, by the way. In the ancient world, as you may know, women were marginalized and their testimony was never given much credence. In ancient Israel the testimony of women wasn’t even allowed in court. So if the Gospel writers were fabricating these stories to get their movement off the ground they never would have had women play the part of the first eyewitnesses. The most logical reason they did so, is that women actually were the first witnesses to an actual resurrection.²

Consider also the fact that when the Christian movement was exploding across Palestine there were still lots and lots of people who had been alive during the time of Christ and were therefore witnesses to the public events of his life, death and resurrection. Now, it’s possible to rewrite history after everybody who was around during that part of history had died off. Who’s left to contradict you? It’s nearly impossible to fabricate public events, however, when lots of those eyewitnesses are still walking around. It’s why Paul writes earlier in I Corinthians 15, “**Then Jesus appeared [after his resurrection] to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive.**”³ That’s a tough prank to pull off.

Finally, of course, almost every one of the first apostles and early Christian leaders were eventually martyred for their commitment to the Christian Gospel. Now, it’s true that lots of people in history have died for a lie. Hardly anybody in history, however, has been willing to die for a lie *that they knew was a lie*. You see, something must account for the transformation that occurred which led a group of cowardly disciples to

willingly give their lives for one they once denied to save their own skin. As Pascal once put it, “I believe those witnesses that get their throats cut.”

As skeptics, we have to reckon with these things if we are willing to look at the evidence before us with open minds. As believers we can be encouraged by these things. They don’t prove the resurrection, of course. That’s not the point anyway. Faith is still required either way because you can’t prove the resurrection any more than you can disprove it. But logically, the evidence leads us to place our faith in the truth that Jesus really was dead and that he really did rise from the dead three days later and, in doing so, lit a fuse that will ultimately lead to the restoration of everything that is.

Add to this the fact that Christianity itself makes absolutely no sense apart from the historical reality of the resurrection. For some reason, we talk a lot in the church about the cross but tend to focus on the resurrection only at Easter. That’s a mistake. Read through the book of Acts, the story of the early church. They talked very little about the cross but talked all the time about the resurrection. It makes sense. The cross, as crucial as it is, was a onetime event. Over and done with. The resurrection, however, is an eternal ongoing reality! Jesus is not for us a departed hero, but a living Lord! The debt of our sins was satisfied on the cross, but the righteousness of Christ, the very life of Christ, is credited to us through the resurrection. By the power of grace, through faith, we are raised to the resurrected life with Christ to share in his place of favor before our Father in Heaven.

You see, if Christ had not been raised from the dead there would be no reason to have anything to do with him. What would be the point? Following Christ in this life is hard enough. Why follow him to the cross and give up your life in this world if there is no promise to gain it back in the next? Only a fool would make such an investment and would be shown to be a fool when the investment was shown to be bankrupt. But there is such a promise! Even as we suffer for following Christ the promise is that a day is coming when, with renewed bodies ourselves, we will all meet again and see Jesus face to face. And that on that day there will be no more sin, no more pain, no more sorrow, and no more death.

I love this verse in I Corinthians 1:18. Paul writes, “**For the message of the cross [and I’d add, the resurrection as well!] is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the**

¹ Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (Dutton, 2008), 206-209.

² <https://relevantmagazine.com/god/deeper-walk/features/25243-a-case-for-resurrection>

³ I Corinthians 15:6 (NRSV)

power of God.”⁴ Even if you don’t believe in the resurrection you should want it to be true. If you care even a little bit about the poor of this world, about those who suffer in hunger, or disease, or injustice of some kind or another, you should want the resurrection to be true. If you care about this planet, and about the terrible ways our environment has been corrupted, you should want the resurrection to be true. If you grieve the loss, or the impending loss, of loved ones who are gone forever, you should want the resurrection to be true.

Kenneth Chafin, who was a preaching professor in Louisville, Kentucky, tells of the time he heard a popular philosopher and writer give a lecture on the subject of death. The audience applauded when the speaker scolded those in our world who still considered death the enemy. In his view, we all should think of ourselves like “leaves on a tree which must turn loose and fall to the ground and become mulch to make room for new leaves.” It was, as Chafin put it, a very stimulating and sophisticated idea to try on a formally-dressed, well-educated group who had just had a large meal and, in the moment, felt good about nearly everything.⁵

Talk about playing the fool. Hardly anybody embraces such an idea when they are standing at the graveside of a loved one. My vocation as a pastor who has stood at a lot of gravesides has taught me that much.

Call me a fool if you like, but all things considered I will hold on to the hope that a day is coming when the resurrected Christ will return and set everything right. On that day, as Gandalf confirmed for Sam Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings*, everything sad will come untrue. The worst things of this life will take on the flavor of delight. Pain and sadness will be turned inside out and in their place we will know joy and peace beyond any joy or peace we thought imaginable. As the cross made clear that sin does not have the last word, the empty tomb made clear that death also does not have the last word.

Therefore, we can live today, and tomorrow, and the next day after that, no matter what any of these days bring, in the certain knowledge that as surely as God raised Jesus from the dead, there will come a day when death itself will die. On that day, nobody who has placed his or her faith in the risen Christ will be shown to be a fool.

The Lord is risen. He is risen indeed!

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read I Corinthians 15:12-19 again. If you’re able, read the entire chapter 15 for context. What stands out to you here?
2. What do you think Paul means in verse 19 when he says that if our hope in Christ is only for this life (i.e. that resurrection is not a reality), that we as Christians are to be pitied more than all other people? What is the pitifulness in believing in Christ without believing in the resurrection?
3. Do you believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ actually (literally, historically) took place? If not, what keeps you from believing? If so, what has convinced you to have faith?
4. Billy Graham once said, “Without the resurrection, the cross is meaningless.” Is he right? Why or why not?
5. Why do you think that even in the church we focus so much on the cross and so little (except at Easter) on the resurrection?
6. Should people who don’t believe in the resurrection still wish that it were true? Why or why not?
7. N.T. Wright declares, “The message of the resurrection is that this world matters.” What does he mean? Why does the resurrection make this world significant?
8. If you come across somebody who truly believes in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, how will that person live differently than the person who does not believe?

Table to Table Question
A question for kids and adults to answer together

What changed in our world when Jesus rose from the dead? How were things made forever different?

⁴ NRSV

⁵ Kenneth L. Chafin, *The Communicator’s Commentary: 1st & 2nd Corinthians* (Word Books, 1985), 185.