

March 31, 2024

“Things of First Importance”
1 Corinthians 15:1-11

FCF: Confusion as to the point of Easter

PROPOSITION: (anchor) The things tied to the resurrection are of first importance.
(magnet) We need to let them settle in.

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

As with any holiday, Easter comes with traditions. We have the Easter Bunny. Australia has the Easter Bibby and France the Easter Bell. Italy has the explosion of the cart and Poland the blessing basket. Brazil has the burning of Judas and Spain the Dance of Death. The U. K. has the Morris Dance and Greece pot throwing. Each has its symbolism and involves a coming together of family and friends which allows for regular times of gathering and bonding.

But anyone in any of these cultures (including ours) would have the right to ask, “What’s the point of it?” And the answer is this. The resurrection is true. And it has power to change.

SCRIPTURE READING: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

SERMON INTRODUCTION

Some background to the text would be helpful. Paul was an apostle of Jesus, chosen by Him as an authorized agent. He was writing to the church in Corinth. Corinth was a Roman colony, a wealthy port city known for philosophy, pagan idolatry, and its immorality. The church had been planted around 51 A.D. Paul is writing this letter just a few years after that, addressing their concerns and answering particular questions. One of those had to do with the resurrection.

On that, Paul says something worth noting (**READ 1 Corinthians 15:3a**). There are a lot of things of importance in life - meaning, purpose, identity, ethics. But the resurrection of Jesus is something of first importance. It is vital. Meaning that it is not just a matter of interest or something peripheral. It is central and essential to the Christian faith. And to life itself.

The resurrection is central and essential to the Christian faith. And to life itself. Easter Sunday is referred to as Resurrection Sunday, followers of Jesus as Resurrection People. And that is absolutely appropriate. Why? Because of what Paul says in our text. That is, that the things tied to the resurrection are of first importance. And we need to let them settle in.

These facts surrounding the resurrection burst forth here in two ways - first, its historicity and then second, flowing from that, its significance. Which gives us a message to consider and to embrace, something for both the mind and the heart. Let’s look at each of these in turn.

I. THE HISTORICITY OF THE RESURRECTION

First, the historicity of the resurrection. It is believable. Paul means for us to see that these are real events in space and time. That is, this was as verifiable as anything else in history.

A) As Prophesied

For starters, Paul looks back and says this was prophesied (**READ 1 Corinthians 15:3-4**).

1. Meaning

Twice, Paul tells us this came about “in accordance with the Scriptures” - meaning as recorded in the OT centuries before. Not just generally but also specifically with certain texts predicting the substitutionary death of the Christ and His rising again three days later. A stunning thing.

2. Implications

Think of the implications. This was no afterthought, something haphazardly thrown together. These events that had taken place in recent times were planned before the beginning of time.

Illustration:

A quick aside. Where did everything go wrong and start to unravel? With a man and woman in a garden. Where do we see it all coming back together? Where does the renewal begin? The Apostle John’s account tells us of Jesus and Mary Magdalene, a man and a woman, standing in a garden that first Easter morning. Do you think it just happened that way?

B) As Testified

This was prophesied. Now to the present. It was testified ([READ 1 Corinthians 15:5-8](#)).

1. Multiple witnesses

There were multiple witnesses. Four times, Paul says “He appeared” - to Peter and the twelve, to 500 at once, to James (Jesus’ brother) and the apostles, and then to Paul. The 500 is especially worth noting. What is Paul doing? He’s throwing down the gauntlet, challenging and inviting his readers to check the facts. This was not a hallucination. There were hundreds still alive at that time who could verify what he was saying. “Check it out for yourself. Go talk to them!”

2. Problematic witnesses

So there were multiple witnesses. And problematic ones too. By that, I mean Peter - who had turned from Jesus in His hour of need. Or James - this pillar of the church who had grown up with Jesus but not understood until the end. If you’re making this up, you don’t do it like this. In listing these men, Paul is showing he has no desire to clean things up but to just pass them on.

There’s a historicity of the resurrection. And therein a foundation on which to build.

Illustration:

Perhaps you’ve heard reports of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, built in Jerusalem on the site where the crucifixion and resurrection likely occurred. Major parts sit on an unstable foundation of tunnels and earlier structures. Major work is being planned to prevent a collapse.

You see the irony. The events which that site marks are the most solid of any foundation. It will never give way. And the evidence is sure. You can press on it all you like and it will hold.

Application:

So we ask, “Is this real?” And the answer is, “Yes, as real as it gets.” This is no ancient myth or fanciful tale. So we have a solid foundation on which we can and must base our lives.

And these facts have held for centuries against the winds and tides of skepticism. Which is why we are celebrating today. But why the skepticism? There are some very smart people

who are unwilling to believe. I can't speak for every case. But I can say that it's often just that - they are unwilling to believe. Even in the face of the evidence, there can be a resistance to what might have to be given up or set aside - our self rule, our self dependence, our self righteousness.

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II. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

Which then takes us to the significance of the resurrection, its meaning and implications. It happened. Easter is real and historical. It is truly believable. But it is also truly beautiful.

A) *Transformation of Death*

Part of that is the transformation of death ([READ 1 Corinthians 15:6](#)). Think of this.

1. The terror of death

What is death? A cessation of life, alienation and separation, the terror of nothing lasting forever. How do most of us face it? Denial and a stubborn determination to seek out every distraction.

2. The death of death

Paul is not denying the reality of death. He is denying the finality of death. With Easter we have the death of death. It is like sleep. Its permanence is gone. The goodbye is no longer forever.

Illustration:

The goodbye is no longer forever. It is real but it is utterly changed. I am reminded of a letter Francis Schaeffer wrote in 1971 to a woman whose husband was dying of cancer ([READ](#)):

It is a tremendous thing to know that even while the person's body is with us, yet they are already with Christ. Yet it would be totally false to the realities of life not to know also of the sorrow of separation. Even if a person we love was going to be away on a long, long voyage, and we would not see him for a long period of time, we would be lonely. And thus it is not surprising that we are lonely when all communication is cut as it is with the abnormality of death. Do not be afraid to cry - as though this denied your Christian faith. Jesus's tears at Lazarus's tomb indicated the rightness of our crying.

Hear the balance. The tears are that of separation. But it is temporary. Easter transforms death.

B) *Transformation of Life*

Astonishing. But it doesn't stop there. It transforms life ([READ 1 Corinthians 15:8-10](#)).

1. Saul the Pharisee

Paul is so beautifully transparent here. Once Saul the Pharisee, the persecutor of the church. Paul had been a rising star in 1st century Judaism. Devoted, much admired. Proud and arrogant.

2. Paul the Apostle

But Jesus had interrupted and redirected all that. He was now Paul the Apostle. Such was the grace of God at work in his life, a grace that had deeply changed him. Look at how he describes himself in this public letter. Such candor and honesty. And humility in how he thinks of himself. He fully owns that much had been done through him. But only by the power of Jesus in him.

All of which points to the significance of the resurrection and its transformative power.

Illustration:

This power is at work now. Tim Keller told this story in a sermon years ago ([READ](#)):

A minister was in Italy, and there he saw the grave of a man who had died centuries before who was an unbeliever and completely against Christianity, but a little afraid of it too. So the man had a huge stone slab put over his grave so he would not have to be raised from the dead in case there is a resurrection from the dead. He had inscriptions put all over the slab saying, "I do not want to be raised from the dead. I don't believe in it." Evidently, when he was buried, an acorn must have fallen into the grave. So a hundred years later the acorn had grown up through the grave and split that slab. It was now a tall towering oak tree. The minister looked at it and asked, "If an acorn, which has power of biological life in it, can split a slab of that magnitude, what can the acorn of God's resurrection power do in a person's life?"

Think of the things you see as immovable slabs in your life—your bitterness, your insecurity, your fears, your self-doubts. Those things can be split and rolled off. The more you know him, the more you grow into the power of the resurrection. The more time you spend with him, seek him, read his Word, the more you pray—the more it stirs up the resurrection power that is within you through the Holy Spirit.

Application:

I've experienced this in my own life. I became a follower of Jesus in the summer of 1984. It was between my junior and senior year of high school. I was so unsure and insecure - floundering and searching for something to fill the hole inside. Jesus took that hole and filled it. He changed me. He gave me footing, an identity. And it was obvious to anyone who knew me. The reality of what Paul is saying here was breaking open within me. And began changing me.

So, is it real? Yes. Is there hope? Yes. The resurrection opens the door to a new start in life. Does that sound like good news to you? We have a living Savior who is with us and for us. So for anyone whose life is littered with failure, scarred by abuse, broken by suffering, darkened by depression, or ruined by addiction there is the possibility of being made a new creation. Now.

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CONCLUSION:

How could it be otherwise? Think of what the Easter message is. Into this world of disease, emptiness, broken relationships, poverty, injustice, and racism - all these things we are so used to and assume are permanent - into that very world comes this message "Christ is risen!" That message punches into this world and sends such a shockwave that nothing can be the same.

Some of you have heard me use this analogy before. There are several fault lines in North America - California's San Andreas, the Cascadia in the Pacific Northwest. We have one near here. You may know of the New Madrid Earthquakes. In the central MS Valley, from December 1811 through March 1812, there were a series of tremors felt as far away as New York City, Boston, Montreal, and Washington, D.C. Thousands of forest acres were devastated. Five mile long fissures were opened. Boatmen reported waterfalls on the Mississippi River and that there were waves running backwards for several hours. Cartographers had to change the maps.

My friends, the resurrection of Jesus has changed the maps. The message "Christ is risen" has punched into this world and sent just such a shockwave. The realities surrounding this - its historicity and its significance - are of first importance. We need to let them settle in.

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