



WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

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1 Corinthians 15:1-19

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The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is absolutely central to Christianity. It was the resurrection that transformed the disciples of Jesus, who were cowering behind locked doors following the crucifixion, into a band of champions for their crucified Lord.

Earl Palmer tells a story about an experience he had while he was in seminary, at Princeton, in New Jersey. One summer after finals, he and three friends were returning home to the West coast. They drove straight through, each taking turns driving for a number of hours. At 3 o'clock in the morning, one of his friends was behind the wheel as they drove through a town in Iowa. He passed a gas station, and then realized he probably should fill up, so he made a U-turn and went back to get gas. He woke Earl, as it was his turn to drive, and then he got into the back seat to sleep, forgetting to tell Earl that he had made a U-turn. Earl started the car and began driving back East. He drove for three hours before he realized he was going in the wrong direction. He said there were plenty of signs, mileage signs, road signs and advertisements, that should have alerted him to the fact that he was going the wrong way, but he went right on driving. When a Greyhound bus went by with "Las Vegas" on the destination sign, he thought to himself, "they really should change those more often." But he ignored all the signs—until he saw the sun rise in front of him. He said, "When I saw the sun come up, that was too big a sign to ignore."

What was true for Earl Palmer was true for the disciples of Jesus, and it is true for us, too: the rising from the dead of the Son of God is much too big a sign to be ignored.

Jesus said of himself: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he dies will live again. And he who lives and believes in me shall never really die."

Do you believe that? And if you do, what is the basis for your belief? That is what I want to talk about on this Easter morning. We will look at the classic text for a message on the resurrection, the apostle Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

In the first eleven verses of chapter 15 of this letter, Paul declares that the resurrection is a vital part of the apostolic teaching. He and all the other apostles, of course, preached a resurrection of the body. Here is what Paul had to say about the resurrection of Jesus:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. 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. (1 Cor 15:1-4, NASB)

The Scripture which Paul refers to here is the Old Testament; that is the only Bible he had. The apostle says the Old Testament taught that the Messiah would die. It says so in a number of places, such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. And Paul says that Jesus died. He underscores not only the reality of Jesus' death, but the reality of the incarnation. Jesus took a real body, not a make-believe body, not a body that appeared to be human but one that was susceptible to death, as our bodies are, and he died. He had no pulse and no respiration; his brain waves had ceased. The body that was left hanging on that cross was a dead body.

Paul says that is a part of the gospel: Jesus died. And second, Jesus was buried. That is what is done with dead bodies: they are buried. They begin to decay, so they are placed into the ground. And, third, Jesus was raised, as the Old Testament predicted would happen.

So these are the three elements which Paul says were predicted in the Old Testament and which the apostles preached. These are the matters "as of first importance."

The apostle goes on to elaborate. Notice how he argues. Jesus' resurrection can be predicted in Scripture (verses 1-4), and it can be defended by history. Verse 5 and following:

and that He appeared to Cephas [the Aramaic word for Peter], then to the twelve. After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; (15:5-6)

Jesus did not rise in some remote corner of the ancient world where no one saw him. Hundreds of people saw the risen Lord, and they could confirm that he was resurrected. The weightiest evidence that can be adduced for anything in history is the evidence of a relia-

ble eyewitness. History cannot be re-run. We cannot repeat the signing of the Declaration of Independence; we have to take the word of the people who were there. That is the sort of evidence that historians rely upon.

The best evidence is the reliable witness of someone who was there at the scene. Paul says there were more than five hundred people who saw the risen Jesus—and most of them were still alive at the time he wrote this letter. He had their telephone numbers, and they could be called upon to corroborate his testimony. These people didn't just hear the apostle's testimony, they saw the risen Lord.

These words were written twenty years after Jesus rose from the dead. Stop and think for a moment of the weight of that evidence.

The best possible way to refute these witnesses would be to produce the body of Jesus. That would have stopped the preaching. But Paul says that five hundred people saw Jesus, and most of them were still alive. They spoke with Jesus. They ate with him. They fished with him. They walked with him along the shores of the Sea of Galilee.

The evidence for the fact of the resurrection is as strong or stronger than the evidence for any other fact in history which historians accept.

But the reason many people don't accept the resurrection is not because the evidence is weak, but because they have an anti-supernatural bias. Their world view won't permit them to believe in a resurrection. It is a moral issue. It has nothing to do with historical evidence or the amount of intelligence a person has. Paul says the evidence is good.

The apostle goes on (verse 7):

then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles;

James was Jesus' half-brother. This man was a hostile witness. He did not believe in Jesus until after the resurrection.

and last of all, as it were to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (15:8-9)

Do you know what Paul was doing when he saw the risen Lord? He was on his way to Damascus with a letter from the High Priest in Jerusalem giving him permission to imprison Christians. The writer of this very letter was trying to stamp out the Christian Church! He was trying to stop Christians from proclaiming the resurrection. Paul was not a positive witness. He wasn't expecting to see Christ, and he wasn't looking for him. But the Lord appeared to him and changed the whole course of his life.

Paul continues (verse 10):

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed. (15:10-11)

If you read the Book of Acts, you will see that that was precisely the case. The apostles preached the resurrection in the city where Jesus rose, where his dead body could have been produced, where witnesses to the resurrection were still living.

Paul goes on in verses 12-19 to raise a number of hypothetical questions. What if Jesus did not rise from the dead? Would there be anything of Christianity left? In our day, some say that the resurrection is not really necessary to the proclamation of the gospel. They say that what matters is the ethical and moral content of the gospel: the Sermon on the Mount, the Upper Room Discourse, etc. What we must do is demythologize the gospels, they say, and remove all the supernatural elements, because those were added by the early church.

That is what Paul does next: he takes out the resurrection, the grand miracle, and looks at what is left. Verses 12-15:

Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. (15:12-15)

If there is no resurrection from the dead, declares Paul, then the apostles are liars. If that were the case, since all that we know about Jesus' teaching is based on what the apostles wrote, then we would have to discount everything he taught. We could not accept the Sermon on the Mount, because we wouldn't know what Jesus said. All we would have is what the apostles recorded, so the gospels would be invalid. If we were to believe this we would have no understanding of the ethical content of the gospels because the apostles would be liars. They did not say they heard that Jesus rose from the dead. They said, "We saw him, we touched him, we talked with, we ate with him, we lived with him for forty days."

Furthermore, Paul says (verse 16):

For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.

There would be no answer for the guilt of the past, no power, no resources for living the Christian life in the present.

Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. [Our loved ones would be obliterated; there would be no hope of seeing them again.] **If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.** (15:18-19)

If that were the case, there would be nothing to live for. The Christian life would be a great hoax, and we ought to give our lives to unmasking it. Let's just live for the moment, because there is no tomorrow. Let's stop playing church. Let's dismiss the preachers and the choirs. Let's turn the buildings into supermarkets or museums. Let's put our New Testament in the history of religion section of the library, because it has no relevance for today.

If there is no resurrection there is no gospel—and we have no faith.

But, Paul says, to the contrary (verse 20):

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.

That is the answer to all the hypothetical questions that the apostle raises in verses 12-19. It is a fact that Christ has been raised from the dead, based upon the Old Testament Scriptures, based upon the apostles' teaching, and based upon the evidence of history. The resurrection is real. It really happened! Jesus burst forth from that tomb. And Paul says the fact that Jesus rose from the dead is the guarantee that we will too. Death, the great enemy, has been defeated.

Everyone knows that one day we must all face extinction. Death is coming for all of us. That is what pressures us to achieve in this life. We don't have long—just a few years to make ourselves count. That is why we wear watches, and why we put calendars on the wall. That is why we spend so much money and energy trying to delay the effects of death, trying to look better longer.

But nothing works. We are degrading, we are running down. The death rate is constant. Death stands at the end of our lives as a great enemy. Death frustrates us. We know it is not natural. It is not right. We were made for more than this. The writer of Ecclesiastes put it this way, "God has put eternity in the heart of men." We have a desire for eternity but we are frustrated, because we are creatures of time and space, limited and thwarted. We have been kept from realizing our potential. But Paul says that enemy has been defeated. Christ has overcome death. He beat it!

Yes, the rising of the Son is a sign that is too big to be ignored. Historians accept as fact past occurrences for which they can produce only shreds of evidence. But the resurrection was attested to by hundreds of witnesses who saw Jesus Christ. They ate with him, talked with him, walked with him and knelt before him. If the statements of those who testified cannot be accepted as conclusive evidence, then no testimony and no evidence whatever can establish any truth in any age of history.

What was it that took that first group of disciples and transformed them into a band of champions for their crucified Lord? It could never have been a dead leader. It had to be a living, conquering Christ! What power and influence changed the cross from an instrument of blood torture into the most glorious and beloved of all symbols? The Romans crucified thousands of people before and after Calvary. If Jesus had not risen from the dead, no right minded person would have glorified anything so hideous and repulsive as a cross.

It is that open grave that gives hope to you and me this morning. It is our pledge that if we believe in Christ, we too will be raised.

The great problem of the human soul finds a solution at the empty tomb. In the resurrection of Christ we are assured that the short, perplexing life that is ours does not complete our destiny. The grave is not the end; we are not consigned to decay.

With the great stone rolled away from the entrance of Jesus' grave, every doubt and every obstacle concerning our own eternity is removed. It was in a garden ages ago that paradise was lost, and it was in a garden in Jerusalem that it was regained.

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