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1 Corinthians 15

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RESURRECTION HOPE

This is the day we proclaim the resurrection of Jesus Christ; the day we rejoice in God's finished work of salvation; the day we reflect on the empty tomb and celebrate victory over death itself. This is the day the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.

On this Easter morning I want to reflect on the hope that we as Christians have in light of the resurrection. Hope is an expectation, a longing or desire to get something, do something, or have something happen, especially something that seems possible or likely. We hope we will make the baseball team; we hope we get into a certain university; we hope to get the job for which we interviewed. Hope is essential to motivate us every day of our lives. We hope to accomplish the tasks we need to do today; we hope our friends will come for dinner; we hope the plumber gets the bathroom working soon; we hope the kids will be good tonight, or that our wife will kiss us when we come home from work.

The opposite of hope is despair, despondency or discouragement. When hope is lost, we lose desire and motivation. Life seems futile and useless. What's the point? we ask. We grow pessimistic, lethargic and unproductive. We doubt that anything good will ever happen to us again. Hopelessness intensifies into deep bitterness when we are unwilling to give up unfulfilled desires and expectations. Without hope we do not function well either physically, emotionally or spiritually. What is the object of your hope this morning?

The Scriptures say that what we hope for and the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead are tightly bound together. I believe that the resurrection of Jesus gives us a sure and certain hope, what Peter calls a "living hope." I believe that resurrection Sunday helps us to refocus and reshape the hope that burns deep within each of us – the hope for immortality, for eternal life, for heaven itself. As Tennyson wrote, "Thou maddest man, he knows not why. He thinks he was not meant to die."

The verse from Scripture that has caught my attention over the past few weeks is 1 Corinthians 15:19: "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied." In other words, if our life in Christ affects only this life, we are in deep trouble.

The Corinthian church faced many difficulties, one of which was centered on the reality of the resurrection – both Christ's bodily resurrection and theirs as believers in Christ. We find the crux of the issue in 15:12: "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?"

There were "some among" the Corinthians who denied the resurrection of the dead, the future bodily resurrection of believers. This is the issue at stake. The problem seems to center on what it means to be spiritual. The Corinthians had received many gifts through the Holy Spirit, including the gift of tongues. In their view they had already entered the true spirituality that is to be (4:8); already they had begun a form of angelic existence (13:1) in which the body was unnecessary and unwanted and would finally be destroyed. They wanted to be rid of the body, not because it was evil, but because it was inferior and beneath them. To those steeped in Greek thought, the resurrection of the body was a step back, not a step forward. Paul wants to set the Corinthians straight.

1 Corinthians 15 is the apostle's response to this misguided Corinthian thinking. We will briefly survey the three steps in the apostle's argument. First, Paul wants to remind the Corinthians that they had believed in 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, and that He appeared to Cephas, 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; then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. (1 Corinthians 15:1-8 NAS95S)

Paul treats the resurrection of Jesus as objective truth. Jesus' resurrection was not some form of spiritual existence. He died, he was buried, he was raised bodily from the dead and was seen by a number of witnesses. The appearances of Jesus to many people verify the bodily resurrection of the Lord. Belief in the resurrection of the dead is predicated first of all on the reality of the resurrection of Jesus.

Many people today are ambivalent about that and live as if it never happened. They don't think about it or ponder its implications. They attend church on Easter and Christmas only because they are with relatives or it just seems like the thing

to do. Others spiritualize the resurrection. They contend that the resurrection of Jesus is just a story that can help us to grasp deeper truth. Still others deny the resurrection altogether. They are unthinkingly sucked into speculations. The most recent of these came in the book *The Jesus Family Tomb*, and the accompanying film *The Lost Tomb of Jesus*, which claimed that some boxes discovered in 1980 outside Jerusalem contained the bones of Jesus and his family, possibly even the bones of his “son” by Mary Magdalene. This recent story, like other stories in previous generations, denies the resurrection of Jesus. If the bones of Jesus exist and are still in a box, the implication is that he was not raised from the dead in bodily form.

The world does not quite know what to do with Easter Sunday when the church gathers to celebrate the bodily resurrection of Jesus. So people go to brunch, hunt for Easter eggs, and give their children an Easter bunny. They simply try to get through the day as best they can. The apostle’s point is simple: there is no gospel without the resurrection of Jesus, and without the resurrection of Jesus there is no salvation from our sins.

The Corinthian church came into existence because they believed in the resurrection of Jesus. But some members denied the resurrection. Paul’s second step is to explore what it would mean if there were no resurrection of believers.

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 testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. 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. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. (15:13-19)

If there is no resurrection of the dead, as some were claiming in Corinth, then, Paul argues, Christ has not been raised. Christ was a human being, a man. If he was not resurrected, then no one could be raised from the dead. And if Christ has not been raised, then there are drastic, horrible implications. For example, preaching and believing the gospel is in vain; it is empty, worthless. If Christ has not been raised, we are telling lies about God, claiming that God did something he did not do. Using a different word, Paul states that if Christ is not raised, then our belief in Jesus is worthless. Those who call themselves Christians are still in their sins; sin still defines their lives. If Christ is not raised, those who have died have perished, never to live again.

Paul’s argument could not be clearer. If Christ has not been raised there is no future. Death has the final word. We will live out our days, paying our taxes, taking care of endless chores, and that will be the end of it. If we have faced many struggles and disappointments we will think that we missed the good

life that others had. As Paul says in verse 32, if the dead are not raised, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

If Christ has not been raised, then sin is still in control both in the present and for the future. We are powerless to alter its effects in our lives, and when we stand before our holy God there is no provision for us to escape judgment.

If Christ has not been raised, then we have no hope of ever seeing our loved ones in Christ again. If Christ has not been raised and there is no resurrection of the dead, then we are living temporary, hopeless, meaningless lives. If we believe in Christ only for this life, then we are to be pitied. In other words, we should receive mercy and compassion. Believers in Jesus should receive more compassion than someone who is the victim of the worst tragedy imaginable. The world should line up to pour out their compassion on us, believers in Jesus Christ: “You poor, deceived souls. You have done it all wrong. You have wasted all your time and money and resources. You had it wrong all the time.” The thought that there is no resurrection of the dead is a punch that would rock us, stagger us, and send us unconscious to the mat for the 10 count.

But Christ has been raised from the dead. This is the third point of Paul’s argument:

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. (15:20-22)

Paul is saying that because Christ has been raised from the dead, those who are “in Christ” will be raised as well. He goes on to say that in the resurrection we will not be raised with our natural, earthly, perishable body but with a spiritual, heavenly, imperishable body.

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. (15:54-57)

What we celebrate today is the victory of God through Jesus over death and sin. The resurrection of Jesus helps us to realign and focus on our ultimate hope – our hope for heaven. Our hope is to live in the presence of God and share his glory for all eternity. We do have a future. Death does not have the final word. We have not believed in vain. We are no longer in our sin. Its power over us has been broken and its debt paid in full. We will see those who have fallen asleep in the Lord. Our life has a grand purpose. It means so much more than eating and drinking and being merry. We do not depend on the hopes of this world, but on the hope of the next. Without the hope of resurrection and heaven, Christianity makes no sense at all.

Listen to what Ben Patterson has to say about this: “Either this life we live is an absurdity of incomprehensible proportions, or it is in the care of a loving God who pledged himself to us in the resurrection of Jesus and promises us the hope of heaven. I believe this hope is the deepest longing of every human heart. It is the desire for our true home, the home that cannot fade, ‘the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God (Hebrews 11:10).’”¹

Living with the hope of resurrection shapes our lives. We are living in light of the end. Our troubles may not be over, but Easter assures of our final destination. We may even grieve for our losses and heartache, but we do “not grieve as do the rest who have no hope” (1 Thess 4:13). Again, quoting Ben Patterson: “If we know why we are alive and where we are headed, we can cope with whatever comes along. Pain, loss, disappointment and any number of other joy busters take on a different hue when seen from the perspective of the end of the journey. Though the joys of heaven are inexpressible and glorious, they may fill our hearts and set our feet moving to the tunes of the future even now.”²

Our future hope in heaven does not mean that we are seeking to escape this world or leave it the way it is. As C. S. Lewis reminds us: “If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. ... It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. Aim at Heaven and you will get Earth ‘thrown in:’ aim at Earth and you will get neither.”³

If Christ has not been raised, we have no hope and are most to be pitied. But Christ has been raised from the dead and our hope is to one day follow him into glory and become fully what God intended when he created mankind. We live today in the light of the resurrection with this sure, certain and living hope.

There is a beautiful chapter in Kenneth Grahame’s classic book *The Wind in the Willows*, entitled “The Piper at the Gates of Dawn.” The story is about Rat, Mole, Mr. Toad, Otter and others which depict classes and personalities of people. In this chapter Mole and Rat set out in a boat to search for Otter’s lost son, Portly. Everyone is deeply concerned because Portly isn’t yet water safe. Mole and Rat leave at night to search high and low along the river.

As dawn breaks they hear wonderful music. Rat describes the sound: “So beautiful and strange and new! For it has roused a longing in me that is pain, and nothing seems worth while but just to hear that sound once more and go on listening to it for ever. ... Oh, Mole! The beauty of it! The merry bubble and joy, the thin, clear happy call of the distant piping! Such music I never dreamed of, and the call in it is stronger even than the music is sweet!”

Mole has difficulty hearing the music, but when at last he hears it too he “stopped rowing as the liquid run of that glad piping broke on him like a wave, caught him up, and possessed him utterly. He saw the tears on his comrade’s cheeks, and bowed his head and understood.”

Rat and Mole follow the sound of this music and come to a small island where they moor their boat. Making their way through the branches and undergrowth on the shore, they come into the presence of a heavenly vision, a being with horns, a hooked nose, kindly eyes, bearded mouth and rippling muscles, holding the pan-pipes in his hands. At the feet of this strange and wonderful being was Portly, lying fast asleep.

“Rat! He found breath to whisper, shaking. ‘Are you afraid?’

‘Afraid?’ murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. ‘Afraid! Of Him? O, never, never! And yet – and yet – O, Mole, I am afraid!’

Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and worship.”

The resurrection of Jesus that we proclaim and celebrate today is the music of our future. We hear the sounds of heavenly music and are transported to the Holy Place where we find Him, the one who died for our sins and set us free from the bondage of sin and death. We are transformed by the hope of sharing his glory, our own resurrection to a heavenly body. And as we hear the music and find ourselves in his presence, we too bow our heads and do worship. The resurrected Lord is so incomprehensible and transcendent that we are afraid and not afraid. “Hope is hearing the music of the future. Faith is to dance to it” (Rubem Alvez).

*“The Lord bless you, and keep you;
The Lord make His face shine on you,
And be gracious to you;
The Lord lift up His countenance on you,
And give you peace.”* (Num 6:24-26)

1 Ben Patterson, *He Has Made Me Glad* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 156.

2 Patterson, *He Has Made Me Glad*, 156.

3 C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977, by Macmillan Publishing Company), 138.

4 Kenneth Grahame, *The Wind in the Willows* (Puffin Books, published by the Penguin Group, 1908), 121.

