

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,  
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, April 21, 2019  
Easter Sunday**

**IF THIS IS TRUE**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-20**

One Easter morning, a pastor asked a group of children if they knew what Jesus' first words were after He was raised from the dead. One of the children raised her hand and said, excitedly: "Ta da!"

It doesn't say that in the Greek text of the Bible 😊! But even if it is not an exact quote of what Jesus said, it gives us an idea of how the news of His resurrection impacted the women who had followed Jesus so faithfully and the band of His disciples who were cowering in fear behind closed doors after His death on Good Friday. "Ta da!" is an expression that indicates something dramatic, something impressive or surprising, something unexpected or pleasing. For the 11 disciples and the women, the resurrection of Jesus was all of these. It was unexpected, even though Jesus had told them it would happen. It was a dramatic event. No one actually saw the resurrection take place. There were no eyewitnesses – no *human* eyewitnesses – to the resurrection itself. But the followers and friends and family of Jesus saw the results of the resurrection. They saw the reality of the resurrection in the reality of His resurrected life. And it was pleasing to them. Was it ever! Their grief was transformed into gladness. Their mourning, sorrow and sadness turned into joy. Their confusion was replaced by peace. The defeat and despair in their hearts were transformed into a victorious hope.

None of this makes sense, of course, if the resurrection did not really happen. On the other hand, if the resurrection is true, if it really did happen, it makes all the difference in the world.

You have probably never heard of Sir Lionel Luckhoo. Sir Lionel, who died in 1997, was a lawyer in Guyana, a former British colony on the northern coast of South America. He is listed in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as "the most successful attorney in the world." As a defense attorney, he succeeded in getting 245 consecutive clients acquitted of murder charges between 1940 and 1985. A few of his clients were found guilty in jury trials, but they were all subsequently acquitted on appeal. Queen Elizabeth was so impressed that she made him a knight.

Think of the most impressive and renowned lawyers in real life, or from TV, movies, and literature. On TV, you've got Perry Mason, Ben Matlock, and Jack McCoy (*Law & Order*). In *To Kill a Mockingbird*, you've got Atticus Finch (played by Gregory Peck). There is Jake Brigrance (played by Matthew McConaughey) in John Grisham's *A Time to Kill*. You've got Joe Pesci as *My Cousin Vinny* 😊. In real life, you have Johnnie Cochran, Clarence Darrow, and Alan Dershowitz. No one, not in real life anyway, has a record like Sir Lionel Luckhoo.

Wouldn't it be interesting to know what such a brilliant legal mind as Sir Lionel thought about the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus? In his own investigation of the claims of Christianity, Sir Lionel used his expertise in the law to determine if the resurrection of Jesus meets the test of legal evidence. His conclusion? "I say unequivocally that the evidence for the resurrection of Jesus Christ is so overwhelming that it compels acceptance by proof which leaves absolutely no room for doubt." (Quoted by Lee Strobel in the sermon, "The Truth about the Resurrection," [www.preachingtoday.com](http://www.preachingtoday.com)). Having examined the evidence, Sir Lionel did the most logical thing in the world: He put his trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord of his life.

Another famous lawyer, John Adams, famously said: "Facts are stubborn things." Adams, of course, went on to become the second President of the United States. In 1770, before the War for Independence, Adams was a respected lawyer in Boston. Following what became known as the Boston Massacre, in which five American colonists were shot and killed by British soldiers during a confrontation that turned violent, Adams reluctantly agreed to defend the British soldiers, even though public sentiment against the British was growing stronger by the day. Adams took the case, believing that everyone was entitled to a fair trial. But the cost to him was high: The public turned against him. And he lost more than half of his clients.

Adams, however, did not give up or give in to the pressure of public opinion. He argued that the soldiers were innocent, and in the course of the trial made this famous statement: "Facts are stubborn things. And whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictums of our passions, they cannot alter the state of the facts and evidence."

Some people today, as in every generation in the last 2,000 years, may not like the idea that Jesus rose from the dead. They may want to reject the historic Christian belief in the literal, bodily resurrection of Jesus, perhaps because they want to discredit Christianity. They may want to believe some other story to account for the fact of the empty tomb. But, as one scholar has written: "The historical bedrock remains the same. (The resurrection of Jesus) is the best historical explanation of the relevant historical (evidence there is)" (Michael Licona, *The Resurrection of Jesus*, 609-610).

Facts *are* stubborn things. The apostle Paul is concerned with the facts. In the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 15, he lays out the central facts of the gospel, the matters "*of first importance*," as he calls them in verse 3. What are these matters *of first importance*?

1. That Jesus died for our sins according to the Scriptures (15:3);
2. That He was buried (15:4a);
3. That He was raised from the dead on the third day (15:4b); and
4. That He appeared to His closest followers and to as many as 500 people at one time in His resurrected body (15:5-8).

Paul could easily have also included the incarnation itself as a matter *of first importance*, since without the incarnation – in which the eternal Son of God took on our flesh and blood and became a human being – His suffering and death on our behalf would lose its meaning and power. He could also have included the earthly life and ministry of Jesus – teaching, preaching, healing, feeding the hungry, caring for the least and the last and the lost – in his list

of matters *of first importance*. He could have included the suffering Jesus endured in carrying out His mission to offer up His life as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. All of these are facts – stubborn facts, if you will – that are central to our understanding of the gospel, of who Jesus is and what He did for us.

Paul begins, though, with the death of Jesus. It is not just the fact of Jesus's death that demands our attention, but that Jesus *died for us. For our sins. In our place*. His death was vicarious. Which is to say, He died as a substitutionary sacrifice in order to make atonement for our sins. The cross – the place where Jesus died, the means by which He was put to death – is at the heart of the gospel. Without it – without the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross, where He took on Himself the weight of all your sin and guilt and shame, and mine – there is no salvation for any of us. That Jesus died for our sins is indisputably a matter *of first importance*.

What Paul says next, “That He was buried” (15:4a), may not seem like such a big deal to us. But it *is* a big deal. Why? Because it shows that Jesus really was dead. He really did die. There was no mistake. His death was no fake. There was no trickery going on. That He was buried means that He really was dead. The Roman soldiers knew it. The Jewish leaders knew it. The followers and family of Jesus knew it. *And ...* they knew where He was buried. His body was not whisked away to some secret, undisclosed location. No. They all knew where the lifeless body of Jesus was placed: In a tomb that belonged to Joseph of Arimathea, one of the members of the Jewish ruling council that had persuaded Pontius Pilate to put Jesus to death.

That Jesus was buried and that everybody who cared to know knew where He was buried are “stubborn facts” that can't be denied.

So is the fact that on Easter morning, the stone covering the entrance to the tomb was rolled away and the tomb was empty – except for the burial cloths used to cover the body of Jesus. The burial cloths were still there. But there was no body. Nobody was in the tomb. Jesus was not there. If the body of Jesus had been moved, or if someone knew where the body of Jesus was, all they had to do was to produce the body, and all the talk of resurrection would come to an end. All it would take to disprove the Christian faith and cause the house of Christianity to come crashing down would be to find the bones of Jesus.

The tomb was empty on Easter morning because Jesus was up and out. He had risen from the dead. We know this because we have the witness of the Gospel writers – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – each of whom gives testimony to the resurrection of Jesus. We know this because of the multiple occasions in which Jesus appeared to His followers, not as a ghost or an apparition, not as an image in a cloud or some other phenomenon in nature. No. Jesus showed up in person. He showed up in His resurrected physical body. People who saw Him spoke to Him. They touched Him. They ate with Him. They embraced Him. They saw His wounds.

Paul does not give us a complete list of the people to whom Jesus appeared after His resurrection. Mary Magdalene, one of the women who followed Jesus, is cited in three of the

Gospels as the first person to see Jesus after His resurrection (Matthew 28 [along with another Mary]; Mark 16:9; and John 20:14). The first to be mentioned in the Gospel of Luke are two disciples, Cleopas and another whose name is not given, who encountered the risen Savior on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter day (Luke 24:13ff). Paul does not mention any of the women to whom Jesus appeared. Why? I don't know for sure, but it may be because, in the culture of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, women were generally not considered to be reliable witnesses. I don't believe Paul questioned the reliability of their testimony, but in attempting to make his case for the resurrection as persuasive as possible, he chose not to include any of Jesus' resurrection appearances to women.

The larger point Paul is making is that the news of Jesus' resurrection was not and is not a secret. At a minimum, more than 500 people saw Jesus alive *after* He was crucified. *After* He died. *After* He was buried. *After* His followers discovered the tomb was empty on Easter morning. There were plenty of people still living at the time Paul wrote to the Corinthians (about 25 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus) who saw Jesus with their own eyes after His resurrection.

Facts are stubborn things. And these facts are incontrovertible.

Paul is troubled that some of the Corinthian Christians, steeped in the pagan Greek culture of the day, doubted or even denied the New Testament doctrine of the resurrection of the dead. The Greeks believed in the immortality of the soul, the idea that the soul lives on after death. But the concept of a physical, bodily resurrection was alien to their way of thinking.

The Corinthians thought they could be followers of Jesus without believing in the resurrection of Jesus and the subsequent resurrection of believers to eternal life. The problem is that the gospel proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus and its implications for us is not a non-essential about which sincere Christians are free to disagree. No way!

It is like this, as Stephen Um has written: "If the resurrection is true, then everything would change for those who do not embrace the [Christian] faith. If the resurrection is true, then unbelief is implausible. If Jesus has been raised from the dead, (it) validates Paul's preaching of the gospel. And if the resurrection is *not* true, then everything would change for those [of us] who do embrace the faith. If the resurrection is false, belief is implausible. If Jesus has not been raised from the dead, then the gospel is invalidated." (Um, *1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross*, 265.)

Tim Keller puts it like this: "If Jesus rose from the dead, then you have to accept all that He said. If He didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about any of what He said?" (Keller, *The Reason for God*, 203). Think about it: If Jesus really defeated death, doesn't that give credibility and authority to everything He said? If He did not defeat death, if He is still dead, what authority or credibility does he have?

In the words of historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan: "If Christ is risen, then nothing else matters. And if Christ is not risen, then nothing else matters." (Quoted in Stephen Um, *1 Corinthians*, 235.)

The resurrection, to quote Keller again, is “the hinge upon which the story of the world pivots” (Keller, *King’s Cross*, 221).

As another biblical scholar, Craig Blomberg, says: “Christianity lives or dies with the claim of Christ’s resurrection” (Blomberg, *1 Corinthians: The NIV Application Commentary*, 294).

Paul understands what is at stake. If, as some of the Corinthians were saying, there is no resurrection of the dead, the consequences are staggering. It means Jesus is still dead – because if the dead do not rise, Jesus could not have risen. Without the resurrection:

- Christian ministry is pointless;
- Personal faith in Jesus is worthless;
- We are all liars, if we say that God did something that He in fact did not do;
- Death is not conquered;
- There is no hope for the dead who trusted in Christ; and
- There is no forgiveness of sins for us or anyone else; we are still stuck in our sins – guilty, unjustified, condemned, and powerless, with no way out.

The bottom line, says Paul, is that if the resurrection of Jesus is not true, we who believe in Him are miserable objects of pity who have staked our lives on a gospel that is not true and a Savior who cannot save.

A little later in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul points out the obvious, which is that he would have to be crazy to endure all the dangers and hardships he had to experience as a missionary, if Jesus did not rise from the dead and there is, therefore, no hope of resurrection for us who trust in Him (15:30-31). In his second letter to the Corinthians, written within two years or so of 1 Corinthians, Paul elaborates on what he means. He says, comparing himself to others who challenged his ministry credentials: “Are they servants of Christ? I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers ... from bandits ... from my own countrymen ... from Gentiles; in danger in the city ... in the country ... and from false brothers. I have ... often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked” (2 Corinthians 11:23-27).

The point, which I think is intuitively obvious to the most casual observer, is that if the resurrection of Jesus is a lie or a myth, if Jesus is still dead, then missionaries and ordinary Christian witnesses who put themselves in danger for the sake of the gospel – in some parts of the world, just by professing faith in Christ – and face savage opposition from people and governments who want to wipe out the Christian faith and all who believe it, are fools. It makes no sense to put your life on the line for a gospel that isn’t true. It makes no sense to serve a Savior who is powerless to save, because He is powerless over death. If this is the case, Paul says, and there is no resurrection from the dead – for Jesus or for any of us – we may as well just “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Corinthians 15:32; cf. Isaiah 22:13). If the resurrection is not true, if this life is the only life there is and death is the end of

everything, we may as well just live for the moment and grab whatever pleasure or comfort we can in this life. Which is the way a lot of people choose to live.

“But,” says Paul in verse 20, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead,” I love the word *But*. I talked about it last Sunday when we looked at what Paul says in Ephesians 2 about God’s provision for our predicament as natural-born sinners who are helpless to save ourselves. We were dead in our sins, spiritually lifeless. *But God*. We were like the walking dead – alive physically, but zombies spiritually. *But God*. We were by nature objects of God’s wrath, justly deserving His judgment for our sins. “*But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love for us, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in our transgressions and sins – it is by grace (God’s grace) you have been saved:* (Ephesians 2:4-5).

In Ephesians 2, Paul says: “*But God.*”

In 1 Corinthians 15, he says: “*But Christ.*” “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead” (15:20).

If this is true – and with all my heart I believe it is – it changes everything. Instead of being stuck in our sins, we can have the freedom and joy of having all of our sins forgiven, past, present, and future. The fact of Jesus’ resurrection proves that His sacrifice on our behalf – the offering up of Himself in payment for our sins – was acceptable to the Father and totally effective. Not only can we experience the freedom and joy of forgiveness ourselves, regardless of the sins we have committed. We can also know the freedom and joy of forgiving others. We can let go of bitterness, resentment, grudges, envy, pride, and hostility. We can forgive one another. We can forgive the people who are hardest for us to forgive. Why? *Because Jesus died for our sins. For your sins and mine.* Because we are *forgiven*. And *forgiven people forgive people*. It is what Jesus calls us to do. And He gives us the power to do it.

Instead of facing a hopeless end, we can have an endless hope (David Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 721) through Jesus, who has conquered death for us and made us “more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (Romans 8:37). The hope we have in Jesus is not just some kind of wishful thinking. It is way more than that. It is “the sure and confident expectation that our future is in His hands” (Jack Graham, “Resurrection Promise and Power,” *Decision Magazine*, April 2014).

If the resurrection is true, it means that Jesus has the power to make us what someone has called “resurrected personalities.” He really does have the power to change us, to make us new on the inside, to give us a new sense of who we are as the sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father. He really does have the power to make you a new person whose life is found in Him.

If the resurrection is true, you and I can face death with confidence, because we know this life is not the end. We know that Jesus is more powerful than death. And we know that Jesus has promised a place in heaven after death to everyone who trusts Him for salvation in this life.

You can be assured of a place in heaven when you die. You can be assured that you will meet Jesus face to face in heaven. But you know what? If you want to see Jesus in heaven, if you want to go to heaven when you die, you have to meet Jesus here. In this life. You have to come to Him by faith while you're here on earth. You have to believe in Him and receive Him as your Savior and Lord before you die, or you will never benefit from His life, death, and resurrection. You have to meet Him and trust Him for salvation in this life, or you will miss out on heaven forever. Jesus has already paved the way and paid the way for you to go to heaven. Don't miss out on it. Open your heart to Him and trust Him today. It is what Sir Lionel and millions, even billions of others, have done.

If all of this is true, as I believe it to be, let the truth and beauty of the Easter gospel, and the promise of the resurrection to eternal life for everyone who truly trusts in Jesus, transform your life. Let it give you strength for today and hope for tomorrow.

Lord, let it be so. Amen.

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