

RISEN INDEED

1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

February 20, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 15, verses 1 through 20. It is on page 815 of the pew Bible. In this Scripture, Paul reminds us of the certainty of Jesus' resurrection, and he informs us of what's at stake. Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 15, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, ² and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

³ For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about 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, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

How do we know Christianity is true? There are many different religions in the world; how do we know that ours is actually true? Maybe some other religion is true. Maybe none of them

are true. Maybe all of them have different amounts of truth. And by “truth,” I don’t mean the postmodern idea of relative truth, that something might be true for one person, and something completely contradictory might be true for another person. I’m talking about real, objective truth. There are things that are either true or false, but they cannot be true while the opposite is also true.

For example, as Christians we believe that Jesus is true God and true man. So when someone says to you, “Well, we all worship the same god, don’t we?” All you have to do is ask them, “Is Jesus God?” And if the answer is “no,” then we don’t worship the same God. Jesus cannot be God and not God at the same time. He can be God and man at the same time, but he cannot be God and not God at the same time. As Christians we believe that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and that there is no other. No other religion confesses the Trinity like we do, so it cannot be true that we worship the same God. It’s considered tolerant these days to say that we all worship the same god, but it’s not. In fact, it’s really quite insulting, not only to Christians, but also to every other religion in the world that takes itself seriously. To say that all religions are the same, or to say that we worship the same god, is really to dismiss every religion as irrelevant and replace it, either with atheism, or some kind of practical atheism. This is not the tolerance it claims to be.

The fact of the matter is that religions are different. We all have different truth claims, and these truth claims contradict each other. So how do we make sense of it? How do we know that our doctrine is actually true? How do we know that our God is the true God? As Christians, there are a great many things we believe. Some of them have to do with history, some have to do with the Law, some have to do with the Gospel, and some of them overlap. What makes us so certain these things are true?

How do we know that God created the world in six days? How do we know that God created male and female distinct from each other, yet both in the image of God? How do we know Adam and Eve were real people? How do we know it was really their sin that brought death into the world? How do we know there was a massive flood that covered the whole earth and killed every human being save eight persons? How do we know God gave Moses the Ten Commandments? How do we know it is a sin to worship other gods, disobey parents, murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, or covet? How do we know that all people are born sinful and rightly fall under the condemnation of God? How do we know that God really took on human flesh in the womb of a virgin? How do we know his death atones for our sins? How do we know that Baptism saves us? How do we know that bread and wine are truly Christ’s body and blood? And how do we know he is returning again to raise the dead and grant everlasting life? In short, how do we know that all the various things the Bible teaches are true?

It all comes down to one historical event that either did or did not happen: the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Either Jesus did rise from the dead, which would prove that he is who he says he is—the Son of God in human flesh—and that he does have the authority to confirm the truthfulness both of the Old Testament, which was already written at that time, as well as the New Testament, which he would send the Holy Spirit to inspire his apostles to write (John 14:26; 16:13). Either Jesus did rise from the dead, and he is the Son of God, and we can have certainty concerning the things we have been taught, or he didn’t, and our entire faith is in vain.

In this text, Paul presents the resurrection of Jesus Christ as the historical linchpin of Christianity. Either it's true, and it validates the entire Christian faith, or it is false, and everything we believe is in vain.

Paul's primary concern in this text is the general resurrection of the dead, that is, the doctrine that on some day in the future, God will call the dead out of their graves, and we will come to life and obey his voice. He uses the resurrection of Jesus as the proof of this doctrine, but, while he's at it, he makes it the proof for everything in the Christian faith (15:14).

He starts by reminding the Corinthians of the Gospel he had preached to them. He lists four events: that Christ died for our sins, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, and that he appeared to many. Four events, but two of these are the primary events, and two of them are the corroborating evidence of those events. It's kind of like he's building a legal case.

The first event is that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. This is the first of the two primary events. This is what Jesus did to atone for our sins. And this is what the Old Testament Scriptures prophesied concerning him. That's what the phrase "in accordance with the Scriptures" means. The New Testament was just now being written. So Paul doesn't mean, "According to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Christ died for our sins." He means that Christ's death for our sins fulfills the word of Moses, Isaiah, and all the rest of the prophets. In accordance with everything spoken of him in the Old Testament, Christ died for our sins.

Then the second event, "that he was buried," is the corroborating evidence of the first. The Roman centurion confirmed to Pontius Pilate that Jesus was dead, so Pilate granted the corpse to Joseph of Arimathea, and, along with Nicodemus, he wrapped Jesus' body and buried him in a tomb while some of the women watched (Mark 15:42-47; John 19:38-42). Theologically, the actual event of Jesus' burial is not nearly as important as his crucifixion, but it matters historically, because it is the proof that Jesus was really dead. A Roman Centurion, who was an expert in all things killing people, confirmed that Jesus was dead, and Joseph and Nicodemus actually carried this cold and lifeless corpse to a tomb. It's the forensic proof that Jesus was really dead, so if he is going to appear alive later, it's going to have to be a real resurrection.

Then the third event, "that he was raised on the third day," is the second primary event. And this also, like the first primary event, happened "in accordance with the Scriptures." That is, the Old Testament prophets had spoken of it. You might recognize this language from the Nicene Creed, where we confess, "And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures." The way that's worded kind of makes it sound like we're not really certain it happened, but the Scriptures say it did. None of the other articles in the creed get the qualification, "According to the Scriptures," so it almost sounds like we're doubting both the resurrection of Jesus and the reliability of the Scriptures. But that's not what it means. What's happening is that the Nicene Creed is borrowing language from this passage in 1 Corinthians. So the point of the creed is the same as the point of this text. Jesus rose again from the dead on the third day, just as the prophets said he would (Ps. 16:9-10; Is. 53:10-12; Hos. 6:2; Matt. 12:40). That's what the Nicene Creed means when it says, "And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures." So these two primary events—Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection—are what the Old Testament prophets spoke concerning him.

Then the fourth event, "that he appeared," is the corroborating evidence that Jesus really did rise from the dead. And this isn't just one event. Paul lists six different occasions on which

Jesus appeared to people after his resurrection. And there are actually more appearances than what Paul lists here. If you read through the resurrection accounts in the gospels and catalog all the appearances, you will come up with a few more that Paul doesn't even mention.

The point is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a real, historical event, and we have proof. We have eyewitness testimony. And it's not just a few people. One of the appearances, Paul states, was "to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive" (15:6). The point is, you don't have to take my word for it; there are literally hundreds of eyewitnesses.

Now for us, obviously, none of these people are still alive. It's been almost two thousand years. So you and I can't fly over to Israel and interview the eyewitnesses. But the Corinthians could have, and this matters, not only for them, but also for us, because you just can't say the stuff Paul said if it's not true. You can't claim to have hundreds of eyewitnesses when you really don't. Someone will call you on it, prove you to be a liar, and debunk your whole religion. And this is what we see with every other religion in the world. No one else even claims to have eyewitness testimony like this. It's always some kind of private revelation to the person who claims to be a prophet, or the proof is just in the way it makes you feel, because if you don't have the facts on your side, that's all you can do.

But Christianity is different. All the claims to Jesus' resurrection were written while the eyewitnesses were alive, and the verbal report of it spread right away. If it's not true, all the opponents have to do is produce the dead body of Jesus. Whether it was the Romans or the leaders of the Jews, there were plenty of opponents who would have liked to prove that Jesus was still dead, but they couldn't. There was no body to be found, and what they had instead was hundreds of people reporting that they had seen Jesus alive, many of whom were willing to die for their story. You don't do this for a lie, especially if you know it to be a lie.

There is only one religion that invites the world to test its historical claims. Christianity is the only religion in the world that stakes everything on one historical event that either did or did not happen. If it didn't happen, our faith is in vain. But if it did happen, it means that Jesus should be trusted when he claims to be the Son of God, when he affirms the accuracy of the Old Testament, and when he promises to send the Holy Spirit to inspire his apostles to write the New Testament. All of this depends on Jesus' resurrection from the dead and the eyewitness testimony.

When the world presses us to give evidence for our faith, give it to them. We're often tempted appeal to our internal feelings. *I know he's alive, because he's living inside me.* This seems like a safe defense, because no one can challenge it. They can't argue with what I'm feeling. But this is a big mistake, because it doesn't actually prove anything, and it does no good for the person who challenges us. We shouldn't just want to get off the hook for believing something crazy. Out of love for our neighbor, we should want them to also believe that this crazy thing actually happened in real history so that they might also believe and have everlasting salvation. So when someone asks you why you are a Christian, don't say, "Because it helps me cope with life," or, "I can just feel it; you know?" When they ask you for a reason, say, "Because the eyewitness testimony that Jesus rose from the dead is overwhelming."

Dear saints, we have certainty concerning the things we have been taught. If you're not yet convinced, I invite you to investigate it for yourself. Check and see if what I'm telling you is true,

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because this isn't merely an academic issue. Sometimes history really matters, and here it matters more than anything. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (15:17). Furthermore, your loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus would be gone for good (15:18). "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied" (15:19).

But if Christ has been raised from the dead, and indeed he has, then we are not still in our sins, but they are forgiven. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the proof that his sacrifice was effective. The wrath of God has been satisfied, Christ has been vindicated, and you have been vindicated in him. We know this because Jesus rose from the dead.

And what's more, his resurrection is only the first of many. If God can raise Christ from the dead, he can also raise your loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus, and he can also raise you. Not only is he capable of doing this, he has promised to do this. Jesus is called "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (15:20). This means that there are more to be raised, and we will be raised just like him, not like we are now, while sin and death torment our bodies and souls. You will be raised perfect, with no blemish, either in your body or in your soul, for you will be raised like Christ. This is our sure and certain hope, because our Savior is risen indeed. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.