

CHRIST HAS BEEN RAISED

1 Corinthians 15:1-20

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany (Series C)

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Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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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. This epistle lesson continues the readings we've heard the last four weeks from 1 Corinthians, but Paul moves on to another subject. And in my opinion, chapter 15 is the highpoint of the letter. In fact, I would put 1 Corinthians 15 on the short list of the most essential chapters in the entire Bible. Please stand as you are able for the 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.

I have a question for you. And this question is for everyone who professes to be a Christian: *Is there anything that would change your mind?* I want you to think about this. Is there anything that would cause you to deny Jesus? Is there anything that would convince you to give up the

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faith? And I'm especially talking about proof or evidence against Christianity. Is it possible for scientists or historians to discover something that would disprove Christianity? Is there some archaeological or scientific discovery that would convince you to give it all up? Is there anything that would change your mind?

Pious Christians are tempted to say, "No." We're afraid to be seen as wavering in the faith or doubting. Faith is a virtue, and we want to be strong in the faith, so we're tempted to say, "No; nothing could ever change my mind." But this is the wrong answer. There is at least one thing that, if it were proven, should change our minds. There is at least one thing that should convince us that Christianity is a complete hoax, and the Bible is not to be trusted.

The concept I'm talking about here is called "falsifiability." Don't let the sound of the word deceive you. I'm not saying that the Christian faith is false. On the contrary; I am convinced it is true, and one of the reasons I am convinced of this is the falsifiable nature of Christianity. Christianity can, theoretically, be proven false. There is at least one thing we believe that, if it were proven false, would completely unravel our entire faith. And Christians should all acknowledge this.

If we're not open to our faith being proven false, then it reveals that our faith is really unreasonable. And this concept applies to many areas of knowledge, not just religion. Science is all about falsifiability. You run tests that will either prove or disprove a hypothesis. And if you come up with something that you think is important, you probably need to have it peer reviewed before it's published. That is, other scientists have a chance to check your work and see if they can prove it wrong. And if the other scientists prove your work to be wrong, you can't just say, "I don't care what you think. I know I'm right, and nothing you say can change my mind."

Or in a court of law, suppose a defendant says he was home alone, watching TV at the time of the crime. Well, he could be telling the truth, but there's no way to falsify his claim, so it doesn't count for much. A good alibi needs to be falsifiable.

And this applies in every other area of knowledge, including math, history, and even religion. If we're not open to our faith being proven false, then we're really no different than the Flat-Earthers. Maybe you've never heard of them. I had never heard of Flat-Earthers until just a few years ago. Apparently there are people who believe that the earth is not a sphere, but is instead flat like a disc. And these people are adults. I've never met one, but I'm told that if you get into a debate with one of these people, the evidence doesn't matter. NASA images don't matter. Planes that circle the globe in every direction don't matter. Physics doesn't matter. Their theory is not open to falsifiability. Instead, they have an answer for everything. And those answers are usually not falsifiable. This is a common characteristic of conspiracy theories. All of the contrary evidence can be manipulated to prop up the conspiracy theory, usually in a way that is not falsifiable. And the problem isn't just with conspiracy theories, but there are actually a number of social ideas that used to be on the fringe a few years ago, but have now become mainstream ideas. Things like gender theory or critical theory. One giant problem with these theories is that they're not falsifiable. Most everything founded on postmodern relativism is this way.

One of the signs of an unreasonable belief is when a person is not open to falsifiability. And a good way to get at this with a person is simply to ask the question, "Is there anything that would change your mind?" And if the answer is, "No," then you know that a person is not open to reason and their belief is not based on reasonable evidence. The thing itself could still be true, but the person's conviction is not based on reasonable evidence, because if a conviction is based on reasonable evidence, then the thing should be falsifiable by disproving the evidence it is allegedly based on.

One of the sad things about Christianity today is that Christians were acting like postmodernists before postmodernism was even cool. When modern rationalists attacked the idea of miracles, some Christians stepped up and provided reasonable defenses, but others basically said, “I don’t care what you say. I know Christianity is true, because I can feel it in my heart.” One example of this is the hymn, “I Serve a Risen Savior” (*Ambassador Hymnal*, 527). It’s in our hymnal, but we don’t sing it, and this is why. It says, “I serve a risen Savior, He’s in the world today; I know that He is living, whatever men may say.” Then, at the end of the chorus, it gets to the supposed proof: “You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.” That was almost a hundred years ago. More recently, there was a popular song that says, “My God’s not dead, he’s surely alive. He’s living on the inside” (*Newsboys*, “God’s Not Dead”). Okay; it’s true that we serve a risen Savior, and our God is alive, but the evidence is not in our hearts. This is like punting on first down. We have solid reasons for why we believe the Christian faith is true. But if we appeal to our internal feelings at the first sign of attack, it makes it look to outsiders like our faith is unreasonable.

But if our faith is true, and if we have good reason to believe it, we should be open to falsifiability. We should say to the skeptics, “If you can prove this one thing to be false, then I will change my mind.” There is one big, giant, vulnerable claim in Christianity where, if someone proves it false, our entire faith unravels. And it’s in this text. Verse 17: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” The Christian faith is falsifiable. And this is how you prove it false: Find the body of Jesus. Or find some kind of historical evidence that proves Jesus was still dead on the third day. Or find some kind of testimony from Israel in the first century that contradicts the testimony of the eyewitnesses.

Falsifiability isn’t just saying, “I think this thing is true. Now prove me wrong. And if you can’t, then I must be right.” No; a falsifiable argument sets forth positive evidence, so that the critics have something to work with. It says, “I believe this thing to be true, and here is the positive evidence for it. Test this evidence to see if it holds up.” The more positive and testable evidence you put forth for something, the more falsifiable it is, and this is good.

This is what the apostle Paul is doing in verses 1 through 11. He sets up a legal argument. This is similar to what a lawyer would do in a trial. Paul reminds the Corinthians of the Gospel he preached to them. And his Gospel consists of four points. Number one: Christ died. Number two: he was buried. Number three: he was raised. And number four: he appeared to eyewitnesses. He died, was buried, was raised, and appeared. Those are the four points of Paul’s gospel. But really, the Gospel consists of only two of those points, the first and third, that Christ died and that he was raised. The second and fourth points are there as evidence that the first and third points actually happened. The burial is the evidence that Jesus died, and the appearances are the evidence that he was raised. You see, it’s a legal argument.

The death and resurrection of Jesus are really the key points. These are the two points that were prophesied in the Old Testament. That’s what Paul means when he says, concerning both the death and resurrection of Jesus, that they occurred “in accordance with the Scriptures.” “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (15:3). And, “He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (15:4). The New Testament was only now beginning to be written, so the Scriptures he refers to are the Old Testament. The prophets had foretold both the death and resurrection of Jesus. So these are the two main points of the Gospel. The other two points prove them as historical events.

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The burial of Jesus proves that he was actually dead. He wasn't just beaten within an inch of his life, but he actually died. This is evidenced in *The Gospel of John*, when a soldier punctures his side with a spear, and blood and water flow out. This was one of the methods Roman soldiers used to confirm that crucifixion victims had died (19:34). With this kind of execution, the victim's lungs would fill with fluid when they died. And if the victim was not yet dead, puncturing their side would speed up the process. Roman soldiers were experts in killing people. They knew how to do it, and they knew what it looked like when it happened. So when Joseph of Arimathea, who was a member of the Jewish council and also a secret disciple of Jesus, asked Pilate for permission to bury Jesus' body, Pilate called for the centurion, that is, the commanding officer, to confirm whether or not Jesus was already dead. The centurion confirmed that Jesus was dead, so Pilate granted Joseph permission to bury Jesus. Nicodemus also went with Joseph (Mark 15:42-47; John 19:38-42). So these two men carried the cold and lifeless body of Jesus from the cross to his tomb. It's not like the soldiers just assumed Jesus was dead and threw him in a nearby pit. There are steps involved with burial that give eyewitnesses the opportunity to confirm that a person is, in fact, dead. The burial of Jesus is the proof that he died.

And the appearances of Jesus are the proof that he was raised. We don't depend merely on the testimony that the tomb was empty. If that's all we had to go on, it would be possible, though still unlikely, that the disciples had stolen the body. There are at least six different appearances of the risen Jesus recorded in the four gospels. Paul lists six more in this passage, some of which probably overlap the appearances in the gospels, but not all of them. Some of them are either different appearances, or Paul provides some extra details. First he appeared to Cephas, who is also called Peter; then to the rest of the disciples; then to a crowd of more than five hundred people; then to James, that is, the brother of Jesus; then to all of the apostles; and last of all to Paul himself. Two of the most noteworthy appearances, at least in my mind, are the appearance to more than five hundred people at one time, because that makes the resurrection of Jesus a very public event, and the appearance to James, the brother of Jesus, because the brothers of Jesus did not previously believe in him (John 7:5). But two of Jesus' brothers, or we should really say "half-brothers," James and Jude, became significant leaders in the New Testament church and even wrote letters that became part of the New Testament. These brothers had been skeptics, but were eventually convinced, most likely, by the appearance of Jesus after his resurrection.

This is the positive evidence for Jesus' resurrection. And this is what makes it falsifiable, in a good way. We have large numbers, specific names, and places of Jesus' appearances. This is the positive evidence for Jesus' resurrection. If someone could demonstrate that this eyewitness testimony is really a lie, and that Jesus is really still dead, then it would completely unravel the entire Christian faith. Our faith would be futile, and we would still be in our sins. But if this evidence holds true, then the most reasonable thing to believe is that Jesus really did rise from the dead and he really is the Son of God. The resurrection of Jesus is the singular event that holds all of the Christian faith together. This gives us an indescribable hope that far transcends anything the world can offer.

And in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul singles out two points of doctrine that are proven by the resurrection of Jesus. And these two points are the sweetest Gospel promises. The first one is the forgiveness of your sins. And the second one, I'll save for next week. But your homework is to read ahead and figure out what it is. When you come up with the answer, let me know, because I'm kind of curious how many of you actually do the homework I assign.

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But the first one is this: your sins are forgiven. Jesus' resurrection is the proof of that. Why? Because "Christ died for our sins." The resurrection does not forgive our sins, but it proves that Jesus' crucifixion did. "He bore our sins in his body" (1 Peter 2:24). "He is the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 2:2). "God made him to be sin" (2 Cor. 5:7). "God condemned sin in [his] flesh" (Rom. 8:3). "Christ died for our sins." How do we know this is true? How do we know the sacrifice of Jesus was really acceptable to the Father? How do we know that Jesus was really righteous and that he could be the pure and perfect substitute for us? Because God raised him from the dead. The resurrection of Jesus is the Father's justification of Jesus. What I mean is, by raising him from the dead, God declares that Jesus is, in fact, righteous, and his sacrifice is righteous. And by justifying Jesus, God the Father also justifies you. God the Father is pleased with you. He declares that you are righteous. And you know this because the one who sacrificed himself for you lives.

We search for assurance in all the wrong places. The first place we look is our behavior. *Have I been a good enough boy or girl that Santa Claus, I mean, God, would be pleased with me?* Or we might look to our faith. This sounds a little more Christian, but it's really not. We ask ourselves, *Do I believe this firmly and sincerely enough that my faith can make up for my sins.* This is also wrong. The only place to look, where we will actually get the right answer, is to Jesus Christ. Did Christ die for our sins? Yes. And did God raise him from the dead? Yes. And there's nothing to be added to that, so we might as well say ... Amen.

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