



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

Evangelical • Reformed • Catholic

Why is the Resurrection Important?

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Fr. William Klock

December 6, 2009 – Advent 2

Human beings are funny things. If you tell a man that astronomers have charted 581,678,934,341 stars in the night sky, he'll believe you, but if he sees a sign that says, "Wet Paint," he has to make a personal investigation and get paint on his fingers. St. Thomas wasn't there when Jesus appears to the disciples after his resurrection. The gospels tell us that they told Thomas about Jesus having risen from the dead, and yet despite all those eyewitnesses, he said he wouldn't believe until he himself had not only seen Jesus, but touched the nail marks in his hands and the spear wound in his side, he wouldn't believe. In fact when Jesus did appear to Thomas, it took exactly that to prove it to him.

But Thomas is typical of a lot of us. We've heard and received the greatest news ever: that Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and rose from the dead on the third day. We've experienced the life-changing grace of God and we've seen that same grace changing the lives of our friends, but we still often have those "what if" moments. What if...the gospel isn't true? What if...the Bible isn't reliable? What if...Jesus was just some guy – a good teacher, but not truly God – just some guy who died?

It doesn't help that our faith is often under attack by the world. You don't have to live in Communist China and you don't have to be sitting in a secular university lecture where some professor is trying to discredit Scripture or the gospel or some other aspect of our faith. Our faith is bombarded regularly in subtle ways by the non-Christian culture around us – a culture that stands condemned without the gospel and that wants nothing more than to reassure itself that it's really okay and that there is no God to judge its sins – and that if there is a God, he isn't the judging kind. The world around is like a sinking ship. She's going down and there's no question about it, but instead of heading to the

lifeboats, everyone just wants to convince himself that everything's okay – that it's normal that the ship's listing to one side, that it's normal that the lower decks are full of water. And so because we're surrounded by denial and doubt on every side, it's no wonder that even mature Christians have periods of doubt. Sometimes we let the world rub off on us.

But as we doubt, we start to slip back into a worldly way of thinking. When we doubt we lose our eternal perspective. We climb out of the lifeboat and back on the listing deck – the casino and bar are still open, the midnight buffet is all set, there's a show in the theatre and a good band playing in the lounge. The ship may be listing, but the ship looks more attractive than the little lifeboat does. Even if the world sometimes does acknowledge it's sinking, it takes the attitude: "Hey, if I'm gonna go down anyways, I might as well go first class."

This is what was going on Corinth. We've seen St. Paul getting at these problems throughout the letter – especially in the first several chapters. They were going to the parties in the pagan temples, they were taking advantage of the temple prostitutes. Ultimately they were living like people with no eternal perspective. Paul's main purpose here in Chapter 15 is to address the root problem. That's why we saw in verses 1-11 last week, Paul outlining the gospel for them: Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and he was resurrected. Each of those three points is important.

Now it wasn't that the Corinthians were denying any of those points. They did believe that Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. The problem was that they were missing the implications of what Jesus did. They believed he rose from the dead, but they were denying that that meant we too as Christians will one day be resurrected. They had bought into the Greek philosophy that taught that the body is bad and that the spirit is good, and not only that, but that the great thing about death is that it finally frees the spirit from what they thought of as the body's dead moral weight. Their idea of spiritual maturity was to live as if you were already freed from the body – but that also meant that you'd better take advantage of your body while you still have it. That's where we get the phrase, "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." That was one of the popular philosophies of the

Greek world and the Corinthians had bought into it. They'd climbed out of the lifeboat and back onto the sinking ship.

Look with me at 1 Corinthians 15:12-13. Paul's laid out the gospel as we saw last week. In the rest of the chapter he's going to tell us *why* the resurrection of Jesus, as part of that gospel, is so important.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.

It's really simple: If this life is all there is as far as our physical bodies are concerned, then that would also have been true of Jesus. He literally became one of us. He was just as human as we are, so you can't make the argument that he rose from the dead, but our bodies won't. If Christ wasn't raised, then we have no hope of being raised, *but* if Christ was raised – and we know he was, Paul gave us all the evidence in the verses we looked at last Sunday – we *will* be raised too. That's the heart of Paul's argument.

And if Paul is right, then the whole "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow you die" attitude is wrong. People will say things like, "I don't want to die until I've been to such and such place or seen this or that thing," or "I don't want to die a virgin" or "never having been married." The basic attitude is that if I can't indulge my body in its appetites before I die, somehow I haven't been fulfilled or somehow I've been cheated. But Paul's reminding us that death isn't the end. Just because you "missed out" on some earthly pleasure doesn't mean you've really missed out at all.

I don't think I have to argue with anyone here that our earthly bodies are capable of great pleasure and enjoyment. We all know the joy and delight we find when we eat and drink. We all enjoy a favourite meal or a favourite desert or a favourite drink. We all know the joy of seeing the beauty of nature around us. You don't have to go to some exotic location on the other side of the world to see the beauty of a sunrise or a sunset or a mountain or the sea or flowers or wildlife. We all know the enjoyment we can find in listening to good music or seeing a good play or movie, the enjoyment we find in interacting with the people we love. Our

bodies allow us to experience all those delights.

But when we die, do we lose all that? After death will there be no more delight and enjoyment and pleasure that come from our bodies? Well, if the body isn't raised, then it makes sense to "eat, drink, and be merry" today, because this is the only chance we'll ever have to enjoy the delights of the flesh. But Paul's telling us the answer is really "No." We don't lose these forever. In fact, when our bodies are raised from the dead, we'll be able to enjoy all these delights in a fuller and more powerful way than ever before. God isn't only concerned for our souls. He has an eternal plan for our bodies too – and that means that our experience of enjoyment and pleasure *after* our resurrection will be *greater* than it is now.

Consider what God has already done for us – what he's already given us as a down payment to guarantee that future resurrection. There are two resurrections that every believer experiences. We tend to think of the resurrection of the body – the resurrection that we haven't experienced yet and won't experience until Jesus returns, but every one of us who has put his or her faith in Jesus Christ's death for our sins and had made him his or her Lord, we have already experienced the first resurrection – the new birth. Paul says in Ephesians 2:1 that before we came to Christ, we were *dead* in our sins, but that through him we've been made *alive*. A few verses later he writes:

Even when we were dead in our trespasses, [he] made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:5-6)

Consider your old life apart from Christ with the new life he has given you. We were each once dead in our sins, but now we have new life and are indwelt by his Spirit. Once we were each slaves to sin, but now we're free to serve and follow Jesus as Lord.

That first resurrection – that new birth – is the down payment or the earnest of what God promises to give us when he sends Jesus back to consummate his kingdom. Right now his kingdom is a spiritual reality and we live in it by his Spirit, but

when he comes back at the end of the age to judge the living and the dead, he will resurrect and renovate our bodies the same way he has already resurrected and renovated our souls so that we can live in his eternal earthly kingdom.

We think of the things of this world as fun and delightful, and yet the pleasures of this world and of our bodies as they are now are just a shadow of eternity. Yes, the food, the drink, the scenery, the conversation, the companionship, or the sex might be wonderful here, but none of those things compares to the delights of resurrection bodies and the New Jerusalem.

At the end of his *Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis captures this idea as well as anyone I can think of. Aslan the lion, the Christ-figure of the books, returns. The old world passes away as he leads the main characters into his own country. And as they make their way "further up and further in" they all struggle to describe the beauty around them. One of them describes it in relation to the old world as "More real." Lewis described the difference this way:

"You may have been in a room in which there was a window that looked out on a lovely bay of the sea or a green valley that wound away among mountains. And in the wall of that room opposite to the window there may have been a looking glass. And as you turned away from the window you suddenly caught sight of that sea or that valley, all over again, in the looking glass. And the sea in the mirror, or the valley in the mirror, were in on sense just the same as the real ones: yet at the same time they were somehow different—deeper, more wonderful, more like places in a story: in a story you have never heard but very much want to know. The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more."

And yet it's more than just the a new heaven and a new earth. In his sermon *The Weight of Glory* Lewis also talked about the implications of the resurrection on our *personal* relationships:

"It may be possible for each to think too much of his own potential glory hereafter;

it is hardly possible to think too often about that of his neighbour. The load, or weight, or burden, of my neighbour's glory should be laid daily on my back, a load so heavy that only humility can carry it, and the backs of the proud will be broken"

What does it mean to live our lives in such a way that we recognise that God has a plan not just for "me" but for everyone around me? He goes on:

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses [he's using those terms figuratively], to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would strongly be tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or the other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe of circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."

Again, Lewis titled that sermon *The Weight of Glory*. How do we live our lives with eternal perspective and with the resurrection and the consummation of God's kingdom in our view? Just like the Corinthians, we know these things – we know that Jesus was raised from the dead – but even though we know these things we somehow forget them or we fail to keep them in view. Because it's something for the future, we file it away for future reference instead of making it part of life here and now.

But if we do live with this eternal perspective, we don't need to worry that we're going to miss out on anything in this life. So you didn't experience it here and now – God has something far better waiting for you in a new life. A greater glory waits for us. That's the great truth of the resurrection and I think that more we mature in the faith and the more practiced we become at living life with that greater glory in view, the more we long for that day. We come to find that our hope lies not here in the present, but in the future and it gradually becomes so entrancing that we no longer fear growing

old, we no longer fear death, and in fact we can hardly wait for it to come.

But getting back to our text. Look at verses 14 to 19. Now Paul asks: “What if...?” What would things be like if Jesus hasn’t been raised from the dead? What if the women who went to the tomb that first Easter morning found the stone still in place? What if the body was still wrapped in the graveclothes and lying in the tomb? Paul writes:

And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. 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. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.

There are six history-changing things that Paul says would have followed if Jesus had not risen from the dead. First, without the resurrection every sermon ever preached and every sermon you’ve ever heard, every Christian book you’ve read – all of them – would have been a total waste of time if Jesus had not been raised.

Now there are some people who would say that you can take away the resurrection and still be left with the Sermon on the Mount and all of Jesus’ moral teachings. When I was an undergraduate I got an invitation to meet with a recruiter from Harvard Divinity School. She introduced herself to me as a “Christian Atheist”. She denied the resurrection – in fact she denied the deity of Christ – but she said that she held to all of his moral teachings. The problem is that without the resurrection, none of those moral teachings would do us any good. Just like the Old Testament Law, they’d only serve to condemn us, because we’d have no power – no new birth and no Holy Spirit – to empower us to keep them.

Without the resurrection, Paul says, all Christian faith would be useless. What would be the point in coming to church or studying the Bible or trying to live in a

way pleasing to God? There wouldn’t be a point. It would just be a religious game. Without the resurrection Christianity would lose the one thing that makes it different from every other religion – and it would leave us hopeless and in spiritual darkness.

If the resurrection didn’t happen, Paul also says, it would make the apostles the world’s biggest liars: “We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ.” If Christ wasn’t raised from the dead, the apostles were hypocrites and deceivers, because they staked their reputation on the fact of Jesus’ resurrection.

But it gets worse. Fourth, if Christ wasn’t raised from the dead, then all of us, you and me, are still dead in our sins. If there is a God, it means that one day we’ll have to stand before him and give an account for all we’ve done – but without the resurrection, there’s no escape for us from his just wrath. No hiding place. No hope for mercy. No loving Christ to wrap us in the long robe of his righteousness. No, without the resurrection, we stand before God to get everything we deserve for every sinful thought, word, and deed we’ve ever had or done.

Without the resurrection we’re left hopeless, but if you want to talk hopeless, consider that if there’s no resurrection, “those also who have fallen asleep in Christ” are left for dead. Everyone we ever thought died and went to be with the Lord, everyone we hoped to be reunited with in eternity – nope. We’ll never see them again, except maybe in hell where we’ll all be condemned to spend eternity.

Finally, sixth, Paul says, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, *we are of all people most to be pitied.*” Even the present is changed. As Christians our hope is in that future resurrection where we’ll be changed into the beings God created us to be and where we’ll live in his promised earthly kingdom and most importantly where we’ll go from seeing him as in a mirror darkly to seeing him face to face – to being in his presence. Nope. Not anymore. If Christ is not risen that all crumbles. Everything that has given us joy and peace and hope – everything that drives us to worship and service – vanishes and leaves us in hopeless

darkness. We’ve been wasting our time. “We are of all people most to be pitied.”

Again, if Jesus wasn’t raised our preaching is in vain; our faith is empty; the apostles were all liars; we remain dead in our sins; our believing loved ones are all in hell or at best simply rotting in the grave; and life itself is made utterly miserable.

Brothers and sisters, it’s sad to say that that’s life for most of the people in this world – for all those who don’t know the reality of the risen Lord. They have to live their lives without the hope that comes from his resurrection. That’s why the world seeks so desperately for some – for any – kind of anaesthetic to dull the pain of an empty and aching heart. That’s why people try so hard to get caught up in a continual round of noise and activity that keeps them from thinking about life, because they can’t stand life without these things. And so we can thank God for verse 20:

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

That’s the verse that makes all the difference. It means that the most fundamental fact of our life, of our history, and of the world, is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we understand that – if it’s true – then it’s the hopeless darkness and despair of death that are unnecessary. It’s reality for those who don’t put their faith and trust in Jesus’ death for our sins, but it’s a needless despair, because the great reality of all history and life is that Jesus has risen from the dead. When you confront the glorious fact that Jesus rose from the dead it answers all the doubts. It means that we too can rise with him one day. All the unfilled desires of our life and our body are put in perspective – the joys of this world are the shadowy reflections of the glories of life on the other side of our own resurrection, when God will give us new bodies fitted to make life “more real” than we ever dreamed it could be. Brothers and sisters, that’s our hope. That’s what gives us perspective for this life and that’s what drives us not only to worship and service, but to share the good news with the dying world around us.

Please pray with me:

Father, chances are nobody here is living in denial of our future bodily resurrection, but it's true that many of us do live our lives as if today is all that really matters – that many of us tend to live without an eternal perspective. Remind us each day as we come to you on the merits of our Lord, Jesus, that his resurrection from death is the firstfruits of our own future resurrection. Teach us to live with eternity in view that we might be better motivated to prepare ourselves for life in the New Jerusalem and share the good news of Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection with those who *will* otherwise spend eternity apart from you. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and Lord. Amen.