

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

12 But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 15 More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. 19 If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. 20 But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Luke 6:17-26

17 He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, 18 who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, 19 and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. 20 Looking at his disciples, he said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. 21 Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 22 Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. 23 'Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. 24 'But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. 25 Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. 26 Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

I'll just read you a very early christian creed, taken from 1 Corinthians 15, the bit just before our reading today:

1:3 Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, and then to all the apostles,

This bit was not written by Paul because he never used the phrase 'according to the scriptures'. It was probably used regularly in worship, just as we repeat the Nicene Creed. Paul is using it as a kind of hymn to the cross, to lead in to the passage we heard, which is a hymn to the resurrection, because all of this chapter is a crucially important statement about our faith. Every one of us, whether they believe in God or not, has wondered whether life takes another form after death, but many just dismiss it as a fantasy they would like to believe but can't. This is what it really comes down to when we say we follow Jesus because it's fair to say that if you don't believe Jesus rose from the dead you might want to ask yourself if you are a believer after all. Admittedly there are christians who say it's not necessary to believe in a bodily resurrection, who see it as a spiritual thing.

As a society we've become cynical, we don't want to believe 'unscientific' things. Look at what we're actually told in the gospels – that the risen Jesus had a body capable of eating a meal, although it was clearly different – to start with no one recognised him: Mary in the garden, the Emmaus Road disciples, the disciples at the beach. Paul was not, as some at Corinth were saying, referring simply to the raising of corpses. A zombie church! No, we can see from the descriptions of the risen Jesus that a resurrected body was definitely a body, but it was radically different and better. Later in this chapter Paul likens the transformation to that from a seed to a fully grown plant: *42 The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable ... 44 it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*

But there's no mincing of words here. This is St Paul, not me, saying this: *13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. 14 And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.*

There are many different beliefs across different denominations about many different aspects of the faith, but this is really the one around which most orthodox Christians come together, and Paul doesn't hold back. If you follow Christ, then this pretty much comes with the deal. To believe something which most non-believers, and certainly all atheists, would regard as simply an impossibility. Nobody comes back from the dead. And if anyone claims it, they don't usually have 500 witnesses.

So the resurrection is what sets Christianity apart.

The fact that our faith is based on physical historical evidence.

The risen Jesus was definitely not an apparition or a ghost.

The teaching of the bible, from Genesis to Revelation, is that physical death is the result of sin.

That's a whole other sermon, but briefly the rebellion and disobedience of the human race towards its creator has caused something to be broken in his creation. What God declared good was fundamentally damaged to the extent that death and decay is everywhere. This is what theologians refer to as a 'fallen world', a world no longer as God intended. And so the reason Jesus' resurrection is so crucial is that it's proof that God has fixed the problem. That death no longer has any power if we follow Jesus.

Now whether we all say we believe it without any doubts or questioning, well that's something even Paul would not claim. But he's seriously annoyed with the way the Corinthian church has been behaving, and if you like, he's bringing them back to ground zero. Some were denying the resurrection. Some were dividing into factions supporting different leaders, Paul, Apollos, Peter and others, a bit like denominations but within the same church. So he's staying true to Jesus' passionate prayer for unity in John 17, *I pray that all of them may be one Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.*

He's pulling them back to what really matters.

And what really matters is the resurrection, because without it the cross is meaningless.

If the cross is the centre of the faith, the resurrection is the bullseye. So if there is no resurrection *15 ... we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we've testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. 17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*

So the challenge is whether we really do believe and whether we are prepared to act on it. The Corinthian church had to face the fact that they were not uniting around their faith in Jesus and were letting it weaken their mission. Jesus made a big deal of people's faith. When he healed Bartimaeus of blindness he said "Go, your faith has saved you" (Mark 10:52). And to the woman who anointed his feet. "Your faith has saved you, go in peace" (Luke 7:50). How we live our lives as Christians should be rooted not in what we can prove or measure or achieve through our own good deeds, but in our belief, along with Paul, 2 Cor 5:19 *that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting people's sins against them.* And it's the faith of those early witnesses to the resurrection that sparked what is the greatest movement in history. Our faith is that God is able to set us free from the disastrous effects of sin and unbelief that we see all around us.

That God did raise Jesus from the dead is the central fact of our faith and it's the proof that God has overcome death itself.

As Paul says in 1 Cor 15:26, *the last enemy to be destroyed is death.* I'll finish with these words from Revelation 21:3 *God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. ...and God said 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.'* Amen.