

**+ 1 Corinthians 15:12-22 + If Christ Has Not Been Raised... + 2nd Sunday of Easter + 15 April 2012 +**

Why do we celebrate Easter? Why is it more than simply a spring holiday with bunnies and chocolate? Why does it matter so much that we not only take a special Sunday, but an entire fifty-day Christian church year season to celebrate the fact that Jesus left his tomb empty preceded by forty days that focus on his suffering and death? Why does it matter so much?

Every year, year in and year out, there's always a big build-up to Easter. The candy starts to appear in the stores in February right after Valentine's Day. Spring sales on everything from clothes to ham dinners pop up in anticipation of Easter. Events like Easter egg hunts are planned and held. Easter eggs and Easter brunches and Easter dinners are prepared for mass consumption. Even students get a day off of school as part of the weekend. In our society, there's a big build-up to Easter, not quite like Christmas, but there's a build-up because Easter means spring is coming. When the day comes and goes, it's time to move on to the next holiday—Memorial Day.

It's not a stretch to say that you and I enjoy celebrating Easter too, including many of the trappings that have come with society's celebration of Easter. At the same time, society's celebration of Easter can have a negative impact on us. We celebrate Easter and Christ's victory over death with glorious hymns and alleluias, but as soon as the day is over, we think it's time to go back to our regular lives and tuck away that Easter celebration for another year. You and I fail to see why celebrating Easter doesn't end. If you'd look at your life and mine apart from the build-up to Easter and the celebration on that day, you'd get the impression that Easter isn't all that important, that Christ's resurrection from the dead isn't such a big deal.

The Corinthian Christians struggled with that too. They celebrated Christ's victory over death, but not only did most live as if it wasn't that important, some even denied that anyone other than Christ would rise from the dead. After all, the dead stayed dead. What they didn't realize was that by downplaying or even denying the resurrection, they robbed themselves of hope, comfort, forgiveness, and even the heart and core of their faith.

The Apostle Paul had to respond to his beloved believers. ***"But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?"*** Such an attitude shocked Paul. ***"No resurrection of the dead?"*** Really? Not only did they reject what God said in his Word, but they completely failed to realize the devastating impact on their own lives if there is no resurrection.

Now actually denying the resurrection of the dead is probably not much of a problem for us here today, but how often don't you and I live and act and think as if we did? So quickly you get caught up in the build-up to Easter and so quickly you celebrate it, but don't you and I just as quickly set it aside as if it isn't that big of a deal? How often don't you find yourself dealing with a particular difficulty or trouble without any real certainty or any real hope? How often don't you go through your day and your week as if you have no peace at all? How often don't you find yourself living as if this life is all you have? How often don't you consider the death of a loved one or even your own death someday as the end of it all? How often don't you and I live as if Christ's resurrection is no big deal? To such an attitude, Paul's question strikes home. ***"If it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can...you say that there is no resurrection?"***

Far too often, like the Corinthians, you and I fail to realize how devastating it would be to our lives if there really is no resurrection. We fail to realize how vitally important, how central to our Christian faith the resurrection really is. If you and I didn't realize it before, Paul makes it perfectly clear to us. ***"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised."*** No bodily resurrection from the dead means no resurrection of Christ either. That would have far-reaching implications we could never imagine. All of this would be worthless. ***"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."*** If Christ has not been raised, then there's no point in me standing up here. You can find far better motivational speakers. There's no point in keeping our church open and Easter becomes nothing more than merely a spring holiday. What makes it even worse is that if Christ has not been raised your faith, like our preaching, is also ***"useless"***, empty, and without substance. If Christ has not been raised, then you have a faith in nothing but empty promises.

If Christ has not been raised, then not only is our preaching ***"useless"***, but it's also a false representation of who the true God is and what he has done. In fact, if Christ has not been raised, ***"We are found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead."*** All those prophets and kings and evangelists and apostles would be terrible liars and so would we. ***"For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either."***

Paul follows that up with a devastating blow that leaves us in tears. ***“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.”*** Not only would your Christian faith be mere futility, but you would have reason to go through this life without hope, without peace, without certainty. You’d have no forgiveness at all! You’d have to deal with all of your guilt on your own! Plus you’d have no comfort for yourself as you face death with its fearful jaws waiting for you or for your loved ones in the Lord who have already endured death. The grave would just be a one-way ticket to hell and eternal condemnation separated from God’s love forever. For those of us who follow Christ, it would have to be true: ***“If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.”***

If you and I truly have certainty that Christ was raised from death and that we will one day be raised from the dead, then why do we live as if we have hope in Christ only for this life? Why do you and I live as if we are without hope, without peace, without certainty, without comfort? Why do you and I so easily fall prey to the temptation to live each day as if this life is all we have? Why do we forget so easily that the resurrection of the dead matters long after Easter Sunday has passed and not just when death is near at hand?

You know the answer, because it lurks in the darkest recesses of your heart and mind. Your sinful nature and the Christ-denying world around you don’t want you to live in the certainty of the actual resurrection of the dead. They don’t want you to keep celebrating Christ’s victory over death. For if you do, they’re defeated and left without their own self-made, so-called “comfort” where resurrection is nothing more than fading memories of loved ones.

When the fear that troubled Jesus’ disciples, when the doubt that troubled Thomas starts to creep back into your mind, turn right to this section of Scripture and read verse 20 to yourself. (Turn to it in your bulletin right now and let’s read it together!) ***“But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”*** Paul wanted the Corinthians, and he wanted you, to realize that Jesus Christ actually did rise from the dead. It wasn’t a myth. It wasn’t a hallucination. It wasn’t a legend made up by lowly Christians to gain power in the Roman Empire. It’s a fact. It actually happened. There’s no need for you to be pitied at all.

...And that changes everything because your whole lifetime becomes an Easter celebration. Consider how Paul describes the fact that Christ actually rose from the dead. He’s not the only one. No, he’s ***“the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep”***. Like the harvest, he’s the first fruit and we’re the harvest that follows—every single believer in Christ. The resurrection of Christ means your resurrection and mine! Paul elaborates, ***“For since death came through a man (that is, Adam), the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.”*** He’s talking about you and the reason you can keep celebrating.

If Christ has been raised, that means you and I have a reason for being here. Our message is not useless because it’s the truth. It’s the heart and core of our Christian faith no matter what the world thinks! If Christ has been raised, your faith is not useless or empty or futile, because it’s based firmly on the One who actually conquered death. If Christ has been raised, your sins are forgiven. If Christ has been raised, comfort and hope are yours, and so is the assurance of your own resurrection. Suddenly you have a different reason for living, a different perspective on life. It doesn’t end here in this life. It’s not all about here. What you have in this life are only gifts from God to prepare you for the ultimate gift of his grace—eternal life in the glories of heaven with him! You can go through your day and week knowing and celebrating that Jesus lives whether it’s a warm spring Sunday or a cold winter’s day, and that means because he lives, each day brings you one more day closer to glory.

Why do you celebrate Easter? It’s not just the springtime and the bunnies and the chocolate. It’s not just the glorious hymns and loud alleluias. You celebrate and you keep on celebrating because the resurrection of Christ means your resurrection one day. The resurrection of Christ means you have hope amidst uncertainty. You have comfort amidst sorrow. You have forgiveness for that impossible heap of guilt. You have life, and you have a reason to celebrate each and every day long after the Easter eggs and spring decorations are put away. Christ has indeed been raised from the dead and for you and me that means everything! So let’s celebrate! Amen.