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# Easter 2019

**1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-26; Luke 24:1-5**

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> **But on the first day of the week, at early dawn, they came to the tomb bringing the spices which they had prepared. And they found the stone rolled away from the tomb, but when they entered, they did not find the body of the Lord Jesus. While they were perplexed about this, behold, two men suddenly stood near them in dazzling clothing; and as the women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground, the men said to them, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here, but He has risen**. (*NASB, Luke 24:1-5)

This past week I felt compelled to contact a friend of mine from college. He was probably my best friend in college. He was a groomsman in my wedding but, as often happens over the years, we haven't seen each other much. But every time we get together, we just pick up as if there was no break in the relationship. But I just felt compelled to contact him, and my heart was saddened when he told me his son had been killed in an automobile crash. His son was a great kid. He had been accepted to be a missionary; he was out raising support. He was hit by a car and immediately killed. I was reminded, "Death is real and it's powerful and it breaks our hearts." Death is like the ultimate bully. He's out there. We all know he's out there. He hides in the shadows. You can ignore him; you can pretend like he's not out there, but we all know he's there and we all know it's only a matter of time before he's going to kick in the door and he's going to break your heart. So here's the deal: If the body of Jesus is still in a tomb somewhere around Jerusalem, then it's, "Game over!" Then there is no hope. Your loved one has simply died, and you will never see them again—end of story! But, if the tomb is empty, well now that changes everything! That's what we want to talk about this morning. If you have a Bible, turn with us to 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15. Corinthians was written about twenty-ish years after the resurrection of Christ, so well within the eyewitnesses of the events. The way Corinthians is organized is kind of a question-answer format. The Corinthians had sent a list of questions to Paul. Paul was answering them back in a letter. In chapter 15 the nature of the question is obvious in verse 12:

> **Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?** (*NASB, 1 Corinthians 15:12)

So the issue was: "Is there a **resurrection of the dead?"** Now, what's meant by that is much more than just life after death. Both the Jews and the Greeks believed that there was life after death. That's not really the question. The question had to do with whether or not there was a literal, physical, bodily resurrection of the dead. A lot of people today believe in life after death, but what they believe about that is purely made up. They just come up with some idea that has no basis in support or facts. Christianity is different from that. We do believe there is a literal, physical, bodily resurrection to come and our belief is rooted in our belief that Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead—so shall we! That's the nature of the conversation in chapter 15. So, I want to go back to the opening verses of the chapter where Paul establishes what we would consider the earliest creed of the Christian church. Verse 1:

> **Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.** (Vs. 1-2)

So he's about to deliver the good news—**the gospel**—the foundational creed of the Christian church by which we are saved. Verse 3:

> **For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,**

That **Christ**—the Messiah, the anointed One—died, but He didn't just die. He **died for our sins**—the fulfillment of a promise **according to the Scriptures**. The death of Jesus was not a plan gone badly. It *was* the plan from the beginning, from Genesis 3:15 all the way through. It was pictured and foreshadowed again and again through Noah, through Abraham, through the law, through the tabernacle, through the temple, all the way to the fulfillment in the death of Christ. He died to pay the penalty for our sin. He became the ultimate sacrifice, once for all—that sin might be paid for. He became the propitiation as we learned in Hebrews. He made the offering that satisfied the wrath of God, that He might offer forgiveness and salvation in return. **He died for our sins according to the Scriptures**.

> **…and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,** (Vs. 4)

Again, both the prophets and Jesus Himself predicted on **the third day** He would rise from the dead. The theological logic goes like this: It was sin that brought forth death—eternal spiritual death, which is pictured by physical death. When Jesus paid the price for sin, Jesus, in essence, conquered sin. Therefore, having conquered sin, He also conquered the consequence of sin. Therefore, death itself was defeated.

In verse 12, when Paul talks about **raised from the dead…no resurrection of the dead,** in the original Greek language there is no "**the**" that's called the definite article. It doesn't exist in the original. It's actually not saying Jesus rose from the dead that He might someday die again, but rather the idea is He didn't just rise from the dead; He rose from death—the principle of death. He conquered death once and for all, because the cause of death had been dealt with. Therefore, death was defeated! So that's the idea there. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was evidence that the price for sin had been paid.

How do we know that God was satisfied with the offering of Jesus on the cross? Answer: if God was satisfied, then sin has been conquered and the evidence would be in the resurrection—having conquered the state of death once for all time.

Now, I understand there are a lot of people today that find the idea that Jesus rose from the dead to be rather silly. As a matter of fact, this Easter Sunday they will give little thought to the message of Easter. They don't care; it's not relevant to them. But I would suggest to you that those people that laugh at the thought of a resurrected Savior, do not do so because they've done thorough research and concluded it's not true. They do so because they want to be their own gods; they want to run their own life. They don't want God intruding into their affairs, so they just ceremoniously dismiss the idea of a resurrected Savior.

I once heard a scientist say, "I can't believe in the resurrection; I'm a scientist. People don't rise from the dead." To which I would say, "I couldn't agree more…I couldn't agree more. They don't, but then again, isn't that the point? People don't just rise from the dead, so, if it's possible that Jesus actually did, wouldn't we have to sit up and take notice? Wouldn't we have to come to grips with that—that there appears to be some sort of a miracle? Something happened if Jesus actually rose from the dead!"

Now, over the years there have been a number of theories put forth to explain away the resurrection of Jesus. For starters I would say it's very interesting that theories are necessary at all. If the resurrection of Jesus is just so ridiculous and silly, why do we need theories to explain it away? But those theories—the swoon theory, the idea that Jesus' disciples stole the body, the idea that His followers conspired some sort of a lie to fool people into believing Jesus rose from the dead—all of these theories have, for the most part, today gone away. They're just so ridiculous. They're so unsubstantiated. They've just kind of drifted away.

One of the theories that's been a little bit more popular in our lifetime is the idea that it's just some sort of a legend—that somewhere along the way this legend of a resurrected Savior kind of came forth—that's what it is! But that's actually very easy to dispute. All the experts agree it takes roughly 400 to 500 years for a legend to develop of a historical figure. We know for certain that the Gospels were written well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses to the events. We're reasonably sure that three of the four Gospels were written before 70 AD. We know Corinthians was written about 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus. As a matter of fact, Paul goes on in this passage and he says, "By the way, here are names of the people that saw the resurrected Christ." Cephas, which is Peter; He names James. He says, "By the way, there were at least 500 people that saw the resurrected Christ at one time." He even adds to the discussion, "Most of them are still alive; feel free to go talk to them."

But what is presented in this text in Corinthians is considered the earliest Christian creed, and we can date this back to about two years after the resurrection of Jesus. So we know with great certainty that within two years they were declaring a message of a crucified, buried, resurrected Savior—again well within the lifetime of the eyewitnesses of these events. There's just virtually no chance that it's some sort of a legend that developed over time. The Christian church did not create the resurrection. The resurrection created the Christian church, so Paul identifies this core creed. Now to Verse 12:

> **Now if Christ is preached, that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found *to be* false witnesses of God, because we testified against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact 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 worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep** [died] **in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.** (Vs. 12-19)

So here's the argument: whether or not those of us that have accepted Christ as Savior will experience a literal, physical, bodily resurrection one day is directly tied to whether or not Jesus literally, physically, bodily rose from the dead. One is connected to the other. Paul's argument is: "If Jesus is still in the tomb, then we've got nothing." As a matter of fact, he goes so far as to say

preachers like me were liars. We're deceivers. We're actually offending God by proclaiming something that simply isn't true. He says, "If the body of Jesus is still in the grave, **your faith is worthless**. Your sins are not forgiven. **You're still in your sins**. Welcome back shame and guilt. You stand condemned before a holy God. Your loved one that perished, by the way, they're gone. Game over. No hope. Gone forever…and we as a people are just a people **to be pitied."** Those are pretty strong words!

It's very interesting, we're talking about twenty years after the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and the Apostle Paul is putting a target on the resurrection, saying to the critics and opponents of Christianity, "Here is the jugular vein. You prove that the body of Jesus is rotting away in a tomb somewhere and Christianity falls. End of story." Now stop and think about this. There were many, many, many, very powerful people that wanted Christianity stopped—to such a degree there was a slaughter in the first century of Christians, and yet the Apostle Paul twenty years after the resurrection says, "All you have to do is show me the body of Jesus and everything falls apart." But what history tells us is, "That's not what happened." What happened is the opposite of that. Just within Jerusalem alone—the very place where the resurrection took place—the church exploded. Under great persecution, the church grew to over ten thousand people in just a matter of months. What is the explanation for that other than the tomb was empty, and people believed? If that's true, then our faith is not worthless. It's of great value. We're not still in our sins. Our sins have been forgiven. Our loved ones have not perished. It's not game over. They're not gone forever. Death does not win. The bully is not victorious. Jesus conquered sin and death. The story is not over. The best is yet to come. The future is glorious and that is at the heart of the resurrection of Jesus! Verse 20:

> **But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep.**

So what does he mean by **asleep**? In both the Old and New Testaments, the term **asleep** is used for Christians or the people of God who have died. It's not talking about some sort of a "*soul sleep*". The Bible doesn't teach that. It's talking about the body. So the spirit, the immaterial part, goes to be with Jesus—*absent from the body, present with the Lord.* The body is laid in the grave but, because of the promise of a resurrection at the return of Christ, the metaphor is "*sleep*," because that body will awaken, will be reunited with that spirit, will be changed into an immortal body and ushered into the new haven ad the new earth where it will be glory forever. So, he identifies the resurrected Christ as **the first fruits.** That's language from the Old Testament, from the old covenant. It's the idea that the first part of the crop was brought in as an offering to God, with the understanding that this is the first offering, expecting a grand harvest to come with the blessing of God. The first readers would have clearly understood what's being said is the resurrection of Jesus is **the first fruit.** Jesus has resurrected from the dead—very much alive in the presence of God, having completed His assignment. That is the down payment. It's the guarantee that's there's a grand harvest to come. At the return of Christ, there will be a resurrection. This body, literally, physically, will rise from the dead, be reunited with my spirit, changed and ushered into the new heaven and the new earth forever. Verse 21:

> **For since by a man *came* death, by a man also *came* the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ's at His coming, then *comes* the end, when He hands over the kingdom to the God and Father, when He has abolished all rule and all authority and power. For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.** (Vs. 21-26)

At the end of the story, death doesn't win. Death dies because Jesus conquered sin and death once for all time. For those who are in Christ, for those who have accepted Jesus as Savior, there is a resurrection—a literal, physical, bodily resurrection. If that's true, that changes everything.

This is a big crowd this morning, and I am just telling you this: Some of you in the room this morning, before we gather again next Easter, will experience the pain of deep, deep loss. The bully is out there, and he is real, and he is going to kick down your door, and he is going to break your heart and inflict pain like you've never known before. In that hour of deep pain and loss, you have to remember that Easter isn't about family gatherings. It's not about bunnies and eggs. It's about the message of hope—that Jesus rose from the dead and in that hour of deep pain and need, you must remember the story is not over. It's not over…Death doesn't win! The bully is not victorious. Jesus has conquered sin and death once for all time. For those who are in Christ, the best is yet to come and, in your hour of need you have to remember that. That is the message of Easter. Some of you in the room this morning, you know exactly what I'm talking about. Over the last few years you have experienced deep loss. Some of you have lost a child. Some of you have lost a spouse, a parent, a dear friend, and you know that pain is real. It's devastating and there are days when you're not sure you'll make it one more day.

Let's imagine we gathered together, and we've talked about that and we shared our stories. And then somehow, miraculously, we gathered in a time machine and we went back to first century Jerusalem, and we gathered around the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea that first Easter morning, understanding what's at stake. Understanding what's at stake is: my sins, and whether they are forgiven, or will they condemn me? What's at stake is my loved one is gone, and I want to know, "Is it game over, or will I see them again?" Everything is at stake in that moment, and we gather around that tomb, and we wait. Imagine what it would be like if we just waited, and we waited, and we waited. The sun is setting—no Jesus—Jesus is simply rotting away in the tomb. In that moment, we of all people would just be ***a people to be pitied.***

Contrast that to what actually happened: We are gathered around that tomb, and we understand what's at stake in this moment is everything—and suddenly out of nowhere there is the glorious resurrected Christ—literally, physically, bodily—He walked. He talked. He ate. They touched Him. He bore the scars from the cross. It was the resurrected Jesus who had conquered sin and death once and for all! In that moment we would know, "My faith is not worthless. It has great value. I'm not in my sins. My sins have been forgiven!" I would know that my loved one has not perished. It's not game over. There will be a resurrection, and the best is yet to come, and we are of all people—a people filled with hope! You have to remember: "That is the message of Easter…and it is filled with good news! It is filled with hope. Jesus rose from the dead…the tomb is empty and that, my friends, changes everything!"

> *Our Father, we are thankful this morning that the tomb is empty, that the many of us who have lost loved ones understand that this is not game over. But there is coming a resurrection, and the best is yet to come, and our future is glorious in Christ! Lord, that's what we celebrate together as your people this morning, with hearts filled with hope. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

*(Video)*

*"So, I grew up surrounded by religion. It was all about rules and things I had to do to get into heaven."*

*"I think I grew up the way a lot of people did. I was just trying to be a good person."*

*"I have struggled with depression and anxiety for a really long time. I've always felt really alone and that I couldn't really connect with God."*

*"I had been totally sober for over 20 years and for some reason decided I could handle a drink."*

*"I always knew He was important growing up but I just didn't really feel like I needed Him."*

*"I found a lot of my value in the people around me in getting attention from them and getting my self-worth from them. I spent a lot of time ruining relationships and sort of tearing things apart. Getting people to try to think that I mattered."*

*"I was trying to be perfect for God and earn His love."*

*"I felt a lot of guilt all the time because I was constantly thinking about what I was doing wrong."*

*"I always kind of lived for the next week. When's the next party? It was just all about me. It was pretty much everything was about me."*

*"In college I went through a few hard things and came out of that thinking, 'Okay I'm not perfect anymore. I'm not earning God's love anymore. If He were looking at my life, He would not be impressed anymore.'"*

*"Every morning, 'Change me, change me, change me change me.' By nighttime I did the same thing. I almost felt like, 'Give up. It's too big; you can't handle this.'"*

*"I did end up thinking suicide was the best answer."*

*"Yeah, I was asking God, 'Could you please help me because I'm desperate.' I was a mess, and I really asked myself, 'Why would He even want someone like me?'"*

*"I ended up in the hospital. That was where I had my first experience with God. It was because I think I was questioning why I was still alive. My sister and my mom were a big influence on me because they showed me a lot of Scripture and kind of taught me a lot about Jesus and God, Himself".*

*"I always put everyone else's needs on hold. I could not go on living that way, and I had to change, or I was going to lose it all. I understood I needed someone to get me out of this sin situation."*

*"I was very legalistic, trying to do everything just right and trying to be perfect or whatever. And then once I heard about grace just that it is nothing I can do; it's all God's doing."*

*"If I have to be perfect to be with God, then it's over. It's hopeless."*

*"I wouldn't be able to do it. I can't do it. I need somebody that can save me."*

*"Jesus did that when He died on the cross, was buried and then rose again."*

*"He paid for my sin so that I could be with Him forever, and I can experience the freedom that He so desperately wants me to have in this life."*

*"I had to say in my heart that I had messed it all up and, Jesus, I need You."*

*"If there is something that I could do to get right with God, what was Jesus for? The only thing I bring to my salvation is my sin."*

*"I can't do any of it, and Jesus did it all, and I just get to accept it."*

*"There's been a lot of genuine repentance in a lot of areas of my life. I just need Him. There's just something in my soul that says, "I need You," and I know that my soul will never be fulfilled with whether it could be drugs or alcohol or partying or women or sex or whatever this world provides for us."*

*"God took me from a place where I was really lost and searching into a place where I felt like He loves me not because of my performance, but He loves me because He made me, and He chose me and I'm His daughter."*

*"In my past, I used to think that I could do everything, and I thought I had control over what I able to do. Once I gave that control over to Jesus and let him take over everything, He gave me what I wanted, and He didn't let me be alone anymore, and He gave me that companionship, and I just think that it's awesome."*

*"Instead of focusing on what I did wrong, I can really think about what I can do to glorify God in my life because it's brought me so much joy, like actual joy, and it just makes me happy to do things that make Him happy."*

*"Because Jesus loves me, I don't have to look for value in the people I surround myself with. I know I can get that value from God, and that's made a huge difference in my life. Through knowing Jesus, I've been made a new creation in that I'm not the same person I was before, but I'm becoming the person that God made me to be."*

*"Now, because of what Jesus has done in my life, my sin is forgiven, and I'm free."*

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