March 30/31, 2024

Following the One True King

Risen and Reigning

1 Corinthians 15

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I am so glad that we are gathered here together today because, "This is It!" This is what? I mean for many people, today's just another day. For a lot of other people, it's a holiday, a chance to celebrate and do something fun with your family. For some others, today might be unusual because someone you love asked you to come to church with them, and we are so glad you said, "Yes." We are so glad you're here. But when I say, "This is It," I mean, that what we celebrate today is so significant that it makes Easter the most important day in all of human history. Did you catch that? I would contend that what we celebrate and remember today makes Easter the most important day in all of human history. Now that is a big statement, a ridiculously bold claim, and I had better have something to back it up.

Well, whether or not you agree with that statement, I want to invite you this morning to think about what we are going to talk about together, and come to your own conclusion on whether Easter is just another holiday with bunnies and candy or if, in fact, it is the time when we remember that which took place on Easter changed the world forever—for you, for me, and for everyone. That is what we want to talk about this morning. So, if you have a Bible with you, would you open with me to 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15? And if you don't have a Bible, no worries; we will read the text together. In the Bible today, we're looking at a part of a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to some people in a church in a city called Corinth. Thus, they're called the Corinthians. And that city is what is now modern-day Greece, about fifty miles to the west of Athens. And near the end of the letter, in chapter 15, Paul says he wants to remind these Corinthians of the **Good News**. In fact, in verses 1 and 2, he twice refers to this **Good News**. So, what was it? That's what we want to talk about today. We'll pick up the story in verse 3 of 1 Corinthians 15, and I'm reading today from the New Living Translation:

> **I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me,** (*NLT, 1 Corinthians 15:3a)

Now notice, Paul says, "***I am passing on to you what is most important***." It's strong language. He wants to make it clear what I'm about to say really matters. Notice also that he says he "***passed on what had also been passed on to me***." In other words, this isn't Paul's idea. It's not something he came up with. It's not his teaching. Instead, this is something that Paul actually encountered, was passed to him, and now he is literally giving his life to passing this on to others. So, what was this most important **Good News**?

> **I passed on to you what was most important, and it also been passed on to me, Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said.** (Vs. 3-4)

The most important news is the *gospel*, a word which simply means *good news*. And that news is of the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. God knew the situation that the world was in. He knew that, because of sin, man had made a mess of this place, and God would not allow it to stay that way. And thus He sent His one and only Son because He so loved the world. And Jesus came for the express purpose of dying. What happened on Good Friday wasn't an accident. It wasn't a chance circumstance. It was the very plan of God, that the Son of God would go to a cross to pay the very real penalty that you and I owe for our sin. And when He died, and He was certified as dead by the Romans, He was buried. He was placed in a tomb. But then, on the third day, He rose again. And notice that Paul says it twice, as he shares this good news…**just as the Scriptures said.** "**Christ died for our sins, *just as the Scriptures said*. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, *just as the Scriptures said***." Just as this is not Paul's teaching that he is making up, he wants us to understand that this event was foretold in prophecy hundreds of years before Jesus came, and in striking detail. We read in the Old Testament what would come with Jesus' life, His death, His burial, and even His resurrection. So twice Paul wants to emphasize this is **just as the Scriptures said**.

And why is this important news, the most important news? And why would I possibly say that today is *the* most important day? How can I possibly make such a claim? There are so many important days, so many things to celebrate, to honor, to remember, and to learn from. Is it not the height of arrogance for me to claim that this one Christian holiday is somehow more important than every other day that could ever be celebrated in the history of the world? Honestly, I don't think so. And I want you to know that I in no way mean to be arrogant in making this claim. I don't even mean to be excessive, or hyperbolic. But here's the deal. At the end of the day, every single one of us must deal with life's most important question, and that is this: "What happens to us when we die?"

As a pastor, I have been with people as they die. I've been with families immediately after they have lost someone they deeply love to death, and nothing more quickly reorients your perspective. I once sat with a man named Art for an entire day by his bedside, as his life came to an end. And as I sat there with Art, I realized that where Art lived didn't matter. It didn't matter what kind of car he drove, didn't matter what kind of clothes he wore, didn't matter what job or jobs he had had. It didn't matter whether he was wealthy or poor, whether he was famous or obscure. In that moment, there was really only one thing that mattered for Art, and that was, "What comes next after death?

Now, most people spend most of their lives just trying to avoid that question. Why? First, it's unpleasant to even think about. And second, most people think it's simply unanswerable. They say, "Who knows?" "Nobody knows," and so most people spend most of their life seeking to avoid the question, "What happens to us after we die?" But eventually, every single person will come face to face with that question, ultimately for themself, but typically—usually first—in the death of someone they deeply and dearly love. And it is devastating!

And to be honest, I have seen people make up so many things about what happens after we die, or when they lose a loved one, in order to deal with the sting and the pain of the loss. Truthfully, people will say anything they need to say in order to experience some measure of comfort in the face of death. And many people believe that the Christian story is just one of those stories, that

heaven is what we talk about to comfort ourselves in the face of loss. And most people say, "What difference does it make what you believe, as long as it gives hope to the living?" But when the materialist, the person who does not believe in the supernatural, but only in the material, when the physical world comes face to face with this question, then they must put forth a cold, hard proposition to, "What happens to us when we die?" "Nothing. Nothing happens. We just cease to exist, and our bodies become food for worms." There are so many people with so many ideas. But what if there was evidence? What if there was something we could look to, to find out what actually happens after death? Well, there is, and it is right here. Verse 3 again:

> **Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said**.

This is the claim. And now Paul says, "Here are the eyewitnesses." Verse 5:

> **He was seen by Peter and then by the Twelve. After that, he was seen by more than 500 of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he was seen by James and later by all the apostles. Last of all, as though I had been born at the wrong time, I also saw him. For I am the least of all the apostles. In fact, I'm not even worthy to be called an apostle after the way I persecuted God's church.** (Vs. 5-9)

So after proclaiming the Good News of the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, Paul then says, these are some of the witnesses, people who actually, literally, saw Him after He rose again, and He goes through the list. And then he comes to himself, and he begins to talk about his story. His is an unusual story, because unlike those other witnesses, he saw Jesus later. Paul was actually trying to stomp out Christianity. In fact he supported even the killing of Christians, and he was on his way to persecute Christians when he encountered the resurrected Jesus on the road to Damascus. And it completely changed everything about his life and about his future. And so Paul tells us that bit of his story, and then he brings us right to the issue that he's addressing, the reason he's writing. Verse 12:

> **But tell me this—since we preach that Christ rose from the dead, why are some of you saying there will be no resurrection of the dead?**

Some of those people in Corinth, like so many people today, are saying, "Come on. There's no resurrection. It's just not possible." This is the very reason that Paul is writing, and it leads to the fundamental question that we must wrestle with today. Did Jesus bodily, physically rise from the dead? Did Jesus of Nazareth—the actual person verifiable in history—did He actually bodily rise from the dead…never to die again? And Paul has already given his answer. He says, "Absolutely!" And he backs it up with a litany of witnesses, which leads to a verse we kind of went right past, which is verse 6, and is pretty important in this whole conversation.

Look what verse 6 says: Paul says that after Jesus was resurrected, after He had been publicly crucified and known to certainly be dead, **He was seen again on one occasion by more than 500 people at once.** If this had just been a few people in the inner circle, many could make the argument they made this whole thing up, whatever it is. But more than 500 people saw Jesus bodily

resurrected from the grave. And here's what's incredible! It's now been just about 20 years since the death, the burial, and the resurrection of Jesus, but Paul says that of the 500 followers, most of them are still alive, so here's what he's saying to the skeptics in Corinth. "Listen, if you don't believe me, just go ask them. There are hundreds of eyewitnesses still sharing this message." Because this message is true, Paul wants to make it crystal clear. This is a historical event that actually happened, and Paul also wants to make clear what it is that the skeptics are saying.
Verse 13:

> **For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either.**

No resurrection means **no resurrection**! But what difference does it make? I mean, many people think Jesus was a good man. "He was a wise teacher, a model for us to emulate and to follow in Christianity. Oh, and that became a nice religion. They've done good things in the world." But Paul says, "No! he will have none of any such thinking." Verse 14:

> **If Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless.**

That is a strong statement! But there's more. Verse 15:

> **And we apostles would all be lying about God—for we have said that God raised Christ from the grave. But that can't be true if there is no resurrection of the dead.**

Wow! Peter, James, John, and Paul are not heroes of the faith then, according to Paul in this verse. If this is not true, they are all a bunch of liars, people who are actually lying about God. And it gets even worse. Verse 16:

> **And if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless, and you are still guilty of your sins. In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost!** (Vs. 16-18)

The empty tomb is what substantiates the efficacy of the cross. What I mean by that is, if Jesus didn't rise, on what basis do we have to believe that His death paid for our sins? In such a case, Jesus may be a dead hero, but He is no savior, and not a Lord to worship and to follow. And then in verse 19, Paul says something absolutely staggering. He says:

> **And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.**

Wow! **To be more pitied than anyone in the world?** Why? Well, who gives their life to following a dead hero? Paul is saying we are fools if we are followers of Christ, and His body is somewhere in the grave. If Jesus' body is in a grave somewhere, we might as well just end the service right now, and everybody go home. Let's eat ham, and look for Easter eggs, because that's all this day is about. For everything that we are about in this place as a church, and everything the follower of Jesus Christ is about, hangs on the premise of this day. And we are not fools! For He is not dead! He is risen! And Paul wants to make it clear again. Verse 20:

But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died.

Christ is risen! And not only that! His resurrection set in motion a harvest of future resurrections! Verse 21:

So you see, just as death came into the world through a man, now the resurrection from the dead has begun through another man. Just as everyone dies because we all belong to Adam, everyone who belongs to Christ will be given new life. But there is an order to this resurrection: Christ was raised as the first of the harvest; then all who belong to Christ will be raised when He comes back. After that the end will come, when He will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father, having destroyed every ruler and authority and power. For Christ must reign until He humbles all His enemies beneath His feet. And the last enemy to be destroyed is death. (Vs. 21-26)

Adam turned the garden into a grave. But Jesus is turning the grave into a garden. The risen and reigning King is bringing things back into order, providing a way of escape from even our greatest enemy, which is death! This is who Christ is. This is what He is doing. Thus, this is the question without compare. What happens to us when we die? Is Christ risen? Is there actually life after death? Well Paul, and countless others, literally stake their very life on this fact. And he wants us to understand that he's explaining it, beginning in verse 30:

And why should we ourselves risk our lives hour by hour? For I swear, dear brothers and sisters, that I face death daily. This is as certain as my pride in what Christ Jesus our Lord has done in you. And what value was there in fighting wild beasts—those people of Ephesus—if there will be no resurrection from the dead? (Vs. 30-32a)

Paul literally, daily staked his life on the resurrection. In his second letter to the Corinthians in chapter 11, he's going to outline for them just a little bit of some of the suffering he endured. He was beaten countless times, almost to the point of death. Five times he was imprisoned; numerous times he was beaten with rods; he was stoned; he was shipwrecked. Paul spent a night and a day just gasping for air in the open seas. He was in danger countless times. He went hungry and thirsty and sleepless…and on and on the list goes. Why would he? Why would anyone endure all of that? For a lie? A story? A fairy tale? Even a cause? It makes no sense. Paul would actually later die for this message he was proclaiming. And do you realize that of Jesus' original close followers, only one lived long enough to die a natural death: John, and he was exiled to Patmos. All the rest were killed propagating the message of the resurrection of Jesus. Who would die for a fairy tale? And so Paul brings the logical thought to its logical conclusion at the end of verse 32:

And if there is no resurrection, let us feast and drink for tomorrow we die.

Paul calls it exactly as it is. And this is the way of the world today. "Eat, drink, and be merry. Life is short. You better live according to YOLO, so you don't end up with FOMO. *(laughter)* And it just makes sense. If there is no resurrection, and this life is all there is, if this is all we have, the logical course of action is to try and get all that we can out of this life, however we define that. If

you want fun, “Great, go for it!” If you want life that's a great adventure, “Go for it!” If you want to experience pleasure, “Why not?” If you want to conquer and capture, compete and win, “Then get all you can before it's too late and you become food for worms!” That is the guiding philosophy. It's the life plan of the people of the world. And if that doesn't work, then we just try and survive. When we fail to find life in what we have hoped for, then we start to just look to things that will make us feel better, even for a moment. And out of that comes all kinds of destructive actions, habits, addictions, decisions to pursue something so we can just feel alive, even for a moment in this life before death.

Many years ago, we shared a video story of a person who was a part of our church named Pat. He had had a very hard life, and he told about things that had happened and what had gone on in his story, and just how difficult it was. And then Pat said something staggering that I have never forgotten. He said, “And then I found alcohol…and alcohol was beautiful!” And Pat said, “In spite of the destruction, and even the devastation that came from his alcoholism,” he said, “it was worth it…just to have moments of actually feeling good…feeling alive.”

And if there is no resurrection, we are left with being driven by our desires, by our longings, by our feelings, by just wanting to somehow, in some way, even if it's just for a moment, to feel alive. But what if the dead in Christ are raised? What if there actually is life after death? What if God is actually inviting us to be a part of an epic narrative that He is writing in which we step into life? That's how Paul sees it. Verse 33:

> **Don’t be fooled by those who say such things, for “bad company corrupts good character.” Think carefully about what is right, and stop sinning. For to your shame I say that some of you don’t know God at all.** (Vs. 33-34)

Bad company corrupts good character. We simply become like those we are around, and we believe the narrative of the world in which we live. But Paul says, “Come to your senses; think this thing through. What if there is actually life after death?” We might wonder how could that even work? I mean, look at us. Our bodies are wearing out. How could we possibly live forever? And beginning in verse 35, Paul uses an illustration from nature to help it make sense. He says:

> **But someone may ask, “How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?” What a foolish question! When you put a seed into the ground, it doesn’t grow into a plant unless it dies first. And what you put in the ground is not the plant that will grow, but only a bare seed of wheat or whatever you are planting. Then God gives it the new body he wants it to have. A different plant grows from each kind of seed. Similarly there are different kinds of flesh—one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish.**
>
> **There are also bodies in the heavens and bodies on the earth. The glory of the heavenly bodies is different from the glory of the earthly bodies. The sun has one kind of glory, while the moon and stars each have another kind. And even the stars differ from each other in their glory.** (Vs. 35-42)

So think about how a tree, a plant, or a flower comes to be. It comes from a seed. And that seed looks nothing like what it will become. It doesn't have even a hint of the glory that will be seen in the blooming flower, or the majestic tree. And so it will be with us.

And Paul continues his line of thinking in verse 42:

> **It is the same way with the resurrection of the dead. Our earthly bodies are planted in the ground when we die, but they will be raised to live forever. Our bodies are buried in brokenness, but they will be raised in glory. They are buried in weakness, but they will be raised in strength. They are buried as natural human bodies, but they will be raised as spiritual bodies. For just as there are natural bodies, there are also spiritual bodies.** (Vs. 42-44)

Verse 50:

> **What I am saying, dear brothers and sisters, is that our physical bodies cannot inherit the Kingdom of God. These dying bodies cannot inherit that which will last forever. But let me tell you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies.** (Vs. 50-53)

Spectacular! God's Word says the seed will become the beautiful flower. The acorn will become the majestic oak. The perishable will become the imperishable. The weak will become the strong; the mortal will become immortal. God has something far greater for us than simply to eat and drink for tomorrow we die. God's plan, His hope is light years beyond grasping for moments of happiness while waiting to become food for worms. Rather, His plan is for the perishable to be clothed with the imperishable, and for our mortal bodies to literally be transformed into immortal bodies. Incredible! And thus Paul says, beginning in verse 54:

> **Then when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled:**
>
> > **"Death is swallowed up in victory.**
> > **O death, where is your victory?**
> > **O death, where is your sting?"**
>
> **For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.** (Vs. 54-57)

The wages of sin is death. Sin brought death. But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord, and by placing our faith, our trust, our confidence in Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection in what He has done and Him alone, this brings the certain hope of Easter. Because of the promise made possible because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we no longer have to live as people who

suffer under the cloud of the sting of death. We can actually be given eternal life, and the literal future resurrected life into an eternity of being a part of an epic and grand narrative that God is writing for all those who will accept His salvation, and His redemption story.

What happens to us when we die? Do we just become food for worms? What if there is more? What if God is inviting us into something more? What if you and I will actually be somewhere doing something forever? According to the Bible, death is not the end…and that makes this day history's most important day! How, then, should we respond? By choosing to live under the rule and reign of history's greatest King, the risen and reigning King, as an integral part of His plan to build and expand His kingdom of goodness! Verse 58.

> **So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.**

If death is not the end, it should change everything about how we live. If, upon death, I cease to be, then I can and should live for me seeking to get out and experience everything I can out of this life, before it is too late. But if death is not the end, I ought to live investing my life into things that will still matter 10,000 years from now, and giving myself, stepping into the daily opportunities that I have to being a part of building something truly beautiful that will last forever: The Kingdom of God!

And so we want to invite you, over the next two months, to join us on a journey as we talk about the kingdom stories of Jesus, and as we consider together what it looks like to live, not just as though we will soon die, but instead as people who will be living with Him—that heavenly Man—forever, bringing His love and His light and His goodness forever more! What happens to us when we die? The answer to that question should inform and direct every decision we make about how we live today and every day. So that makes it life's most important question. And that makes this day—Easter—*the* day, for He Is Risen!

> *Jesus, I thank You that right now, in this moment, we can talk to a living God. We don't come here just to honor someone who did good things while they were on the earth. We come into the presence of the living God who made all things new, and who was revealing through us Your plan to bring life and hope and goodness not only for today, but for all eternity. Oh, God, we ask You, help us to understand the significance of the difference. Help us to live, investing our lives. Help us to make decisions on the basis of whether or not death is the end, for we will be somewhere forever. May we be the people who are building Your beautiful kingdom of love and light and truth for Your glory and our good. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.*

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