4-21-19

1 Corinthians 15:20-28 Easter Sunday

Today we celebrate one of the most foundational elements of the Christian faith: The resurrection of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. As Christians, we know that God created everything that is and that human-beings were given a special place of fellowship with Him. People have the singular privilege of being created in God’s image. It is with remorse, that Christians also know that human-beings turned away from God in rebellion; in so doing, our fellowship was destroyed, all creation was cursed, and that beautiful image in which we were created was damaged.

Our plight was hopeless; we had no way to restore things to the way they were, because God is absolutely just. He must punish sin; if He does not, He will be denying His very character, which He will not do. But in addition to being just, God is also merciful and loves us beyond what we can imagine. He is the God of the impossible and He has made a way back into fellowship with Him for those who will accept it.

That way is through His Son, Jesus. Jesus is the only way; while that is very exclusive, we must be eternally grateful that we have any way at all. Remember that we have all sinned against God and only deserve His wrath.

We know that there is one God, yet He exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While we can’t fully grasp this concept, the Bible makes it very clear that this is reality. It is this creator God, who through His Son, made it possible for us to have fellowship with Him again. The Father sent the Son, Jesus, to become a human-being, to live on the earth and save those who accept Him from eternal suffering.

Here is another mystery: Jesus is both fully God and fully human. Again, difficult for us to grasp; but the Bible makes it abundantly clear that this is the case. In both of these difficult concepts, it is necessary to remember that God is God; He is far above us. He is not like us, He is above our level, He is actually the One who made us.

Isiah 55:8-9

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,  
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord.  
“For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth,  
So are My ways higher than your ways  
And My thoughts than your thoughts.

So, God Himself, in the person of Jesus Christ, became a man. He lived His life dealing with all the things that any other person would. But in so doing, He fulfilled what had already been revealed by God to the prophets we read in the Old Testament. In this way, we have proof of who He is.

There was only one way for God to satisfy justice and His wrath against our sin, and at the same time have mercy on us and forgive our sin. Jesus took the punishment that we deserve upon Himself; God spent His wrath on Jesus. Since a just punishment for our sins has taken place, God can now forgive us. He can exercise His mercy while His justice is satisfied.

This punishment is what Jesus endured during His last couple days on earth. We are all familiar with the torture He endured at the hands of the Romans. We know He was nailed to a cross. In addition to His physical pain, He endured separation from His Father; a pain we can only scarcely imagine. Was all this fair? Was it fair for Jesus to suffer and die in our place so that we could go free? No. No, it was not fair. Jesus didn’t deserve what He got; that was our punishment. But it was the only way for us to avoid eternal punishment and separation from God.

Here we catch a glimpse of how much God loves us. The Father was willing to have His Son suffer on our behalf; the Son was willing to suffer in our place. No where else, will you hear of a god suffering and dying in place of His people. But this is the Gospel; the good news. Jesus has died for us and we are all invited to accept what He did for us. The Holy Spirit will provide the faith we need and we just need to say “yes”.

But that’s not all. As Christians, we know that Jesus didn’t stay dead; He didn’t stay in the tomb they placed Him in on that Friday night. On that Sunday morning His life was given back to Him and He was given a new, recreated body that will never die again. This is the resurrection; this is what we celebrate today. The One who is our Saviour is alive; we don’t worship someone who is dead. When some women came to Jesus’ tomb early Sunday morning, they were met with an empty space, except for a couple of angles.

Luke 24:1-6a

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.

What marvelous words! “He is not here.” And He wasn’t simply moved somewhere else. “He has risen.” He got up and moved Himself. The Bible tells us that Jesus was active on the earth for the next forty days and appeared to hundreds of people; more than enough witnesses to prove His being there. Then, He bodily ascended into heaven, His rightful place, the place from which He has come. These are basic, foundational, Christian truths; to deny any of these is to deny Christianity. While we think on all these things often, we set aside some special days to focus on a particular truth: today, we focus on the resurrection of our Saviour.

In our reading today, Paul starts off with a statement of fact, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead”. Right before this in this letter to the Corinthians, Paul had been dealing with a false teaching that there was no resurrection of the dead. Paul refuted this by saying that if there was no resurrection of the dead, then Christ Himself would not have risen; plainly, He had.

Paul goes on now to talk about Jesus’ resurrection showing that we too could look forward to a bodily resurrection. He does so through a Levitical foreshadowing of first fruits. Paul says that Jesus, who has risen from the dead, is the first fruits of those who are asleep.

There are a couple things to keep in mind here. “Asleep” is a Christian euphemism for being dead. It comes from the belief in the resurrection. When we are simply asleep, we wake up again; so, it is with being dead, we will come back to life.

Also, Paul is speaking here of a bodily resurrection, of a bodily awakening; not a spiritual one. The reason for this is that a person’s spirit doesn’t lose consciousness. It is obvious to us that when a person dies, their body stops functioning and begins to decay (Fortunately, upon our resurrection, our bodies will be renewed!) But the Bible tells us that our spirit continues. Let me point out some places.

Luke 23:42-43

And he was saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

This is the repentant thief who hung on the cross beside Jesus and asked for mercy, which Jesus granted, based on his belief in Christ. Jesus’ body was laid in a grave that day and remained there all the next and part of the third. Yet, Jesus told him “this day”. The spirit of the thief would be with the spirit of Jesus immediately upon their deaths.

2 Corinthians 5:6-8

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord— for we walk by faith, not by sight— we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

That is, our spirit is restricted now, by our physical bodies. Once we die, our spirits will be released and Christian spirits will go to be with Christ in heaven. This is something we are to look forward to because we know that it will be far better for us. Having said this, it is not something we need to hurry along; as long as the Lord gives us breath, He has work for us to do. Along these lines Paul writes in

Philippians 1:21-23

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better.

In this, Paul is not saying that he gets to choose now whether or not he dies, but that he wants to be with Christ, which will happen in spirit when his body passes away. Here again, while alive, he has work to do. But once he dies, he knows his spirit will immediately live with Jesus.

In our passage for today, the mention of first fruits refers back to Leviticus 23:9-14. The Israelites were commanded to bring the very first of their harvest to the LORD. The priests would waive the offering before the LORD. What this did was signify that not only the first fruits, but all the following harvest belonged to God. What was commanded here goes against human reasoning. We would think that we ought to keep the first of the harvest. After all, this is what we have been waiting for; and, there is no guarantee that we will get anything else. To give it away seems foolish.

But God wanted the Israelites to make this offering to demonstrate their faith. Part of the promise was that if they sacrificed the first of their harvest to God, He would see to it that they would have plenty afterward. In this way they demonstrated their trust in God’s word, dedicated everything else to God (although they would still have access to it), and received God’s promise of abundance.

When Paul refers to Jesus as being the first fruits of the resurrection, we see that we have the promise of resurrection ourselves. Although other people had been raised from the dead, they faced death again. Jesus was the first to be raised to eternal life. And He was certainly dedicated to God. God brought Him back into heaven to be with Him. From this, we see that God will bless Jesus with an abundance in His Kingdom; there will be a large harvest of people resurrected to be citizens of His Kingdom. Additionally, all these citizens are also dedicated to God.

That is us. Jesus was the first of the harvest. We are the rest of the harvest. We are dedicated to God and will be resurrected with glorified bodies. We will then spend eternity with Christ. Jesus’ resurrection is our earnest, our guarantee, that we will be raised from the dead.

Another way to look at this is that as Christians, we are a part of the body of Christ. When we believe on Jesus for salvation, we are then “in Christ”. There is a real, actual bonding that takes place; our lives are intertwined as a branch is connected to the vine. If Jesus’ body is resurrected, and we are part of His body, then we must be resurrected too.

This is a wonderful thing for us; when Jesus died on the cross, He conquered sin and satan; when He rose from the grave, He conquered death. All of these enemies of ours have been defeated. We must still deal with them, but when we are in Christ, they have no ultimate power over us.

As we see in the rest of our reading, the time will come when all enemies of Christ will be defeated and vanquished; put away forever. These enemies will never have any effect on us again. These include satan and all demonic powers, every spiritual enemy, sin, and death itself. It will also include all who have not turned to Christ, because all of us are enemies of Jesus until we turn to Him as our Saviour.

While Christianity is based on faith, it is not based on random feelings. We are presented with facts; with the truth. Each of us must decide whether to accept Jesus and spend eternity with Him or to continue to reject Jesus, and spend eternity paying the price for our sins ourselves. What will you decide?

Prayer

Lord Jesus, we praise You. As You told us in Your word, You had the power to lay down Your life and You had the power to raise it back up again. You proved Yourself true in the crucifixion and the resurrection. You are truly God and You deserve our worship.

Jesus, when You came out of the tomb, You still had a physical body, but it was changed, it was made new. We don’t know what all the differences are, but Your word tells us that when we, Your people, meet You face to face one day, we will be like You. A beautiful gift of recreation from You.

Thank You, Jesus, for rising again. Thank You for that demonstration that gives us the sure hope that we too will be resurrected to eternal life with You. Provide us with that work You have for us now, that Your Kingdom may have a great harvest, and that You may be glorified.

Lord Jesus, it is in Your most holy name we pray

Amen