

## RESURRECTION OR BUST

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Theme: Christians stake their lives on the reasonable proposition that Jesus Christ rose bodily from the grave and presented himself alive to his followers.

Text: I Corinthians 15:1-20

On this Sunday after our glorious Easter celebration, it would seem a shame to rush on to another aspect of the Christian life, when there is so much to explore regarding the resurrection of Christ. Let's turn this morning to the apostle Paul's classic defense of the resurrection of Christ recorded in the first 20 verses of I Corinthians 15.

### Read I Corinthians 15:1-20

I want to reflect this morning on the nature of faith. What do we mean when we say that we are people of faith?

I confess that this topic is a bit of a pet peeve for me. When I hear the way that both Christians and our popular culture at large reference the meaning of faith, I get annoyed. It pushes some hot button within me. So I hope to provide some correction to what I consider false notions of faith, by examining the understanding of faith that is implicit in the text of Scripture we have just read.

What are some of these common, but false notions of faith?

**1. Faith is what ever you sincerely believe.** Our society is so shot through with the assumptions of pluralism, relativism and political correctness, that we actually say things like, "You have your truth and I have my truth. As long as you sincerely believe, then whatever works for you is just fine." In other words, there is no objective standard of truth by which we measure truthfulness, and therefore we can assert the things to be true that are quite incompatible as long as they are true for us. Philosophically we seem quite comfortable in violating what is called the *law of non-contradiction*. The law of non-contradiction says, "You can't affirm A and not A at the same time." There can't be both a God and not a god at the same time. One is either right or wrong. Suppose I slipped here last night and loosened the screws of the pews on which you were sitting. You take your seat unsuspectingly as usual. The next moment you find yourself embarrassing on your backside looking up from the floor. You would sound awfully foolish if you said, "But I was so sincere."

**2. Faith creates it own reality.** This is a version of—"because I believe it, it must be so". I hear believers and non-believers alike make statements like, "The God I believe in is always loving, kind and merciful." Or "My God would never judge someone and send them to hell." It is as if I can project upon God the

qualities I want God to have and it will be so. So many people in our culture are into a designer god. People pick and choose, mix and match from various religious strains finding a belief with which we are comfortable. We hardly stop to think--does this personal belief of mine match objective reality? My faith can do nothing to change the reality of what is.

**3. Faith is for religious people.** There is the world of fact and the world of faith. There is life built upon empirical data we know as science and there is the belief in the unseen world. The world of science is rooted in "seeing is believing", whereas the world of faith is "believing is seeing." In fact, there is a real sense in which all people live by faith. Every human being must size up the world, and make a commitment of faith as a way of life. In this sense, Hugh Hefner lives as much by faith, as you or me. He has decided that the world consists of sensual pleasures. This is all there is: eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die. He is counting on the fact that when he breathes his last, he will simply cease to exist and become mulch in the ground. Is this not a faith commitment? Has he not staked his life on this assessment of what he considers reality? Don't tell me that faith is just a religious category.

**4. Faith and reason are opposed to each other.** We have now come to the peeve that irks me the most. Many years ago I sat as observer in a philosophy class at the University of Pittsburgh, while I was pastor to college students at a nearby church. This particular day they were exploring our topic. The professor asked, "What is faith?" As I recall a confused student brought the house down with his definition, "Faith is believing something that you know isn't true." In retrospect, he may have intended to say something like, "Faith is something you believe even if you have little evidence." According to this understanding of faith, you don't need evidence to have it. Faith and reason are thought to occupy two different realms. A novel contained a dialogue between a scientist and a priest. The narrator comments, "The scientist set forth his reasons and the priest confessed his faith."

Contrary to these notions of faith--Sincerity is enough; faith creates reality; faith is for religious people; and faith and reason occupy separate realms—the apostle Paul argues for a *reasonable faith* in I Corinthians 15. In other words, faith is based upon evidence; it is based upon what is seen, even if it goes beyond what is seen.

Let me summarize Paul's argument in I Corinthians 15:1-20: 1. In verses 12-20 he says in essence, if you can produce the body of Jesus, it is all over. Let's have enough intellectual honesty to say, that our faith crumbles like a house of cards, if Jesus did not rise bodily from the tomb. 2. We have empirical data to demonstrate that this is exactly what happened by his post-resurrection

appearances on six different occasions to individuals and groups, including to me on the road to Damascus.

Within the last month, you will recall the stir that was created by the documentary that aired on the Discovery Channel and a book of the same title, *"The Jesus Family Tomb"*. TV Director Simcha Jacobovici and "Titanic" director James Cameron are making the claim that there was a high probability that they had discovered ossuary that contained the bones of Jesus. Should we take such claims seriously? Should it concern us that there is demonstrable evidence that Jesus, in fact, did not rise from the dead and ascend to heaven, but his bones are in a family plot? The apostle Paul would say, *"You bet."* If this clay box contains the remains of Jesus, it is all over. Put your faith in something else.

Militant atheism is gaining more air time in recent days. Three of the current best selling books are by Oxford Professor Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, and two books by a PhD. candidate in neuroscience, Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* and a little book, which I have just completed entitled, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. The April 9<sup>th</sup> edition of *Newsweek Magazine* contains a debate between Sam Harris and Rick Warren, the well known evangelical pastor at Saddleback Church in Southern California. In this debate Harris asserts, *"I no more believe in the Biblical God than I believe in Zeus, Isis, Thor and the thousands of other dead gods that lie buried in the mass grave we call 'mythology.' I doubt them all equally and for the same reason: lack of evidence."*

I believe if the apostle Paul were alive today to enter into this debate with Sam Harris, he might have considered him a kindred spirit. They both seek evidence for their faith and they both clearly state what is at stake. For all his diatribe and haughtiness, Harris begins his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, with an honest acknowledgement, *"I would like to acknowledge that there are many points on which you and I agree. We agree, for instance, that one of us is right, the other is wrong. [Forget this fuzzy headed notion that two contradictory realities can be true.] The Bible is either the word of God or it is not. Either Jesus offers humanity the one, true path to salvation or it does not...If the basic doctrine of Christianity is correct, I have misused my life in the worst conceivable way. I admit this without a single caveat. The fact that my continuous and public rejection of Christianity does not worry me in the least should suggest to you how inadequate I think your reasons for being a Christian are."*

It is in the same spirit that Paul lays out the consequences of Christ not being raised from the dead.

Let's summarize his argument in the section, I Corinthians 15:12-19: 1. v. 14: *"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your*

faith." In v. 17 Paul adds, "your faith is futile." RSV says, "your faith is in vain..." It is empty, or "without content." There is no there...there. 2. v. 14-15: "Our preaching is useless...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." As one raised on the Ten Commandments, it was bad enough for Paul "to bear false witness" about another human being, but to misrepresent God--that violates all the moral standards of a Pharisee which Paul was. 3. v. 17: "You are still in your sins..." If Jesus was not raised from the dead, he could no more for you than any other imperfect human being. It is only the resurrection that demonstrates victory over sin, guilt and death and that Jesus was the Son of God. If Jesus died like everyone else we still have a basic problem—condemnation before a Holy God. 4. v. 18: "Those who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost." You know all that hope preachers give people at funerals that we will one day be reunited with our loved ones—just forget it. It is all just a bunch of nice thoughts and wishful thinking. 5. v. 19: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." If our hope is just an empty wish that will not transcend the grave, we have been operating in a delusional manner. What a way to misspend a life!

If Paul were playing poker, this is the time when he places all his chips on the table. It all comes down to one hand. The entire foundation of the Christian faith, Paul says, rests on one thing—the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the tomb. So he asserts in verse 20: "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead..."

Upon what does Paul base that claim? We have now entered the branch of Christian theology called *apologetics*. The apostle Peter writes in his first letter, "Always be prepared to give an answer (an apology or defense) to anyone who asks you to give the reason for your hope that you have" (I Peter 3:15). Part of being a Jesus' follower is to use our minds. We are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, *mind*, and strength. So I am going to ask you to think this morning. Follow me, please.

Knowing what is on the line, considerable evidence has been marshaled to support the reasonable conclusion that Jesus Christ is alive today as our risen savior. Canon Westcott, a Cambridge University scholar, has written, "Indeed, taking all the evidence together, it is not too much to say that there is no historical incident better or more variously supported than the resurrection of Christ."

The arguments for the resurrection are too voluminous to cover in their entirety today, so let's turn to Paul's defense of the resurrection in the first part of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter to both summarize an overview of the arguments for the resurrection and then to land where Paul does—that is Jesus was able to

convince a considerable number of people through his appearances that He, in fact, did rise from the dead.

Paul begins the marshalling of his evidence first with a statement of one of the earliest creeds that has already been turned into a summary formula of the Christian faith. "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. [On what do we take our stand?] By this gospel you were saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. [Now this earliest creed was formulated within the first 5 years of the growth of the church.] For what I received I passed on to you of first importance [I am just an instrument passing on settled tradition. It preceded me and I am a conduit]; that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scripture..." (I Corinthians 15:1-4).

The evidence for the resurrection can be gathered under three headings: 1. Jesus surely died; 2. His tomb was empty; and 3. He appeared to his followers who were forever changed.

**Jesus died and was buried:** Some have seriously argued against the resurrection on the basis that Jesus survived the crucifixion. If you were to google in "The Tomb of Jesus", you will immediately get the Discovery document previously cited and a website for "The Tomb of Jesus" in Kashmir, India. There are a whole set of fanciful theories that Jesus was drugged, revived in the cool of the tomb, was able to push over a heavy stone, fight off the Roman guards and present himself as thriving before His discouraged disciples. If this occurred that in itself would be a miracle of monstrous proportions.

**Jesus tomb was empty:** This is certainly implied in Paul's formula, that Jesus died, was buried and he was raised on the third day. Again there is no question that we must explain an empty tomb. Some have said the women went to the wrong tomb; others that Jesus' followers stole the body, which, in fact, was the rumor that the religious leaders wanted to promulgate when they got reports that the tomb was empty. All the religious leaders needed to do to end this hoax when the first apostles started to declare the power of the resurrected Christ was to produce the body. They couldn't. The tomb was empty.

But the apostle Paul takes us to what he considers to be the most compelling evidence—the reported appearances of Jesus to his followers in multiple settings, some individually, some corporately. "And he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than 500 hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles,

and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." (I Corinthians 15:5-8).

Let me make a couple of observations about Jesus appearance to his followers and then dwell mostly on Jesus' appearance to Paul himself.

1. First, we are impressed that the appearances of Jesus come in variety of settings. He appeared to Peter and James, the brother of Jesus individually; to the Twelve all at once, and as we know on multiple occasions; to 500 in mass — and if you would like to investigate this, most of them are still alive to be interviewed. Jesus shows up behind closed doors, on beach on the Sea of Galilee, along the road to Emmaus, on a mountaintop, etc. If Jesus appeared to just a few isolated individuals in familiar surroundings, we could dismiss these manifestations as wishful hallucinations. Such diversity of settings and groupings of people must be taken seriously.

2. It is significant that James, the brother of Jesus, is mentioned in this list. He later becomes the presiding elder for the church in Jerusalem. What makes this significant is that we know that Jesus' own brother, John tells us, "did not believe in him" (John 7:5). What accounted for the change in James?

For that matter, how do we account for the change in the attitudes of Jesus' followers? What was the state of mind after Jesus died on the cross? First, they had scattered like cock-roaches when Jesus was arrested and put on trial. Peter's denial is exhibit A. They huddled together behind closed doors in fear that they would be next on the hit list. After Jesus died there apparently was no anticipation that he would rise. When the women came with the reports of the empty tomb, Luke reports, "They did not believe the women, because their words seemed to them like nonsense" (Luke 24:11). How do we account for their change in demeanor? One moment they are clinging to each other in cringing fear, and the next moment out proclaiming in a public setting amidst ridicule that Jesus has risen. They then go on and spend the rest of their days traversing the world so that others would know what they had seen. Ten of the eleven original (except for John), died at martyrs death.

Dr. J. P. Moreland puts it like like: "The apostles were willing to die for something they had seen with their own eyes and touched with their own hands. They were in a unique position not just to believe Jesus rose from the dead but to know for sure. And when you've got eleven credible people with no ulterior motives, with nothing to gain and a lot to lose, who all agree that they observed something with their own eyes—now you've got some difficulty explaining that away." The key question: Is it conceivable that these 11 apostles would give their life for something they knew to be a lie?

Perhaps the greatest transformation comes with the person who described himself as **"one abnormally born"**. I prefer the RSV translation "as one untimely born." Paul means by this that his encounter with the resurrected Christ came out of sequence. All the other apostles encountered Christ during the 40 days between His resurrection and ascension. Paul's encounter with Christ occurred on the road to Damascus some time after Jesus took his place at the right hand of the Father.

If the disciples were despondent and fearful when they met the resurrected Christ, Saul, as he was known then, was a self-appointed enemy of the faith. Acts 9 recounts Saul's conversion. He was a zealous Pharisee committed to protecting the name of God who was being profaned by these preachers who claimed Jesus as God no less. Acts 9 begins, **"Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples" (Acts 9:1)**. He was on his way to Damascus, Syria with the authority to arrest these Christians. Caught totally off guard without any warning, this is how Saul's transformation occurs, **"As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked. "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:3-5)?**

Psychologists have had a field day here, trying to explain the redirection of Saul's life. Saul must have had a psychological break with reality, they say. Because he had presided over the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the church, he was carrying an enormous burden of guilt. The angelic face of Stephen stalked his conscience, and like Lady MacBeth trying to wash the blood from her hands, Saul groaned, "Out, damned spot." He could run from his guilt no longer. The closer he got to Damascus the more his guilty conscience accused him, and finally the break occurred. To absolve his conscience he imagined this conversation with Jesus. Of course, it was as real to him as could be. This is the nature of an hallucination. He externalized his imagination, projected it on the screen of our mind, but it was not more real than a hologram. Sound plausible?

The only problem is that Paul seemed to evidence none of the guilt we have projected upon him. In his own words prior to his conversion, Paul says, **"as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless" (Phil. 3:6)**. **"I was advancing in Judaism beyond many Jews my own age and was extremely zealous for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. 1:14)**. Paul does not give any indication of a psychological struggle. If anything, Paul was absolutely convinced of the righteousness of his cause, and he was on a career path to supersede all of his peers. His conversion was volcanic interruption. He ran smack dab into the resurrected and reigning Jesus. This one he had been persecuting, he spent the rest of his days proclaiming. When Paul tells his story

of life change he comes back to this moment. He never questioned that there was an external reality that he could shake.

Did this encounter fade quickly? No, Paul could never get over it. For someone who supposedly had a psychological break, he was able to write the letter to the Romans, which is considered one of the great achievements in the history of any Western literature.

My goal here this morning has been to replace some fuzzy headed notions of faith—sincerity is enough; faith creates my own reality; it is just for religious people; and faith and reason have an impregnable wall. No, we can have a reasonable faith, based on what is seen, even if it goes beyond what is seen. So we might put it this way: We trust Christ, who was seen, about matters that are unseen.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century scientist, Blaise Pascal, had two passions, faith and mathematics. He had his own Damascus Road experience. With the exactness of a mathematician he recorded it. From half past 10 to half past midnight on Monday, Nov. 23, 1654, Jesus appeared to him; God was real. He recorded in his journal, "Certainty, Certainty, heartfelt, joy, peace. God of Jesus Christ. God of Jesus Christ. My God and Your God."

He later laid out what has become known as Pascal's Wager. It is rather simple: It is smarter to bet that God exists, and to believe in him, because if he turns out to be real, you win everything; if he is not, you lose nothing. So why not take the leap of faith? I would add, it is a reasonable leap, but it still requires that we bet our life. In the resurrection of Jesus, all the chips are on the table. Have you placed your bet?