

I'm willing to make a bet in church today. Now, this is no wildly outlandish, "risk the house" type of bet. It's a rather safe bet, really. The kind of bet you pretty much know the outcome of before you make it. I believe that's called short odds. I'm willing to bet you're more focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ today than you are most any other day of the year. And that's to be expected. It's Easter Sunday, right? The majority of the world knows this is the day Christian people celebrate what many claim is not just the greatest day of their faith, but indeed the greatest day in all of history. And if the majority of the world knows this, then certainly Tulsa, Oklahoma - the "buckle of the Bible Belt" - knows it! And remember, I'm not even asking at this point whether or not you believe the resurrection of Jesus Christ is true; rather, I'm simply assuming you're focused on it more today than you would be most any other time of the year.

We've just sung a song with these words:

*Who, O Lord, could save themselves, their own soul could heal?  
Our shame was deeper than the sea; Your grace is deeper still.  
You, O Lord, have made a way; the great divide, You healed.  
For when our hearts were far away, Your love went further still.  
You alone can rescue, You alone can save,  
You alone can lift us from the grave.  
You came down to find us, led us out of death;  
to You alone belongs the highest praise.*

But on this day when you're focused on the resurrection, please allow me to add these words to your radar screen: **If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins.** Whoa, preacher! Not so fast! Whether I'm a regular churchgoer or not, I think I prefer words like the ones in that song: grace, love, rescue, save, highest

praise. And you do well to like those words. They're Biblical words...words the Bible actual uses in reference to all this stuff we focus on every Easter Sunday. But did you know those other words - **If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins** - are also from the Bible? That's right. You can find them in a book of the Bible called 1 Corinthians, and more specifically verse 17 of chapter 15. And this morning I want to spend a few minutes challenging you to slow down...and to think about those probing, penetrating words.

Now I'm going to let you in on a little secret. Many preachers spend a pretty decent amount of time in prayer each week, asking God to show them what they should say to their congregations during the upcoming Sunday morning. And I'm no different. Furthermore, I suspect the volume of preacher prayers takes a decidedly upward turn every year heading into Easter. You know, it's sort of the Super Bowl Sunday of the Christian faith...the day when we commemorate the greatest victory ever...victory of life over death! Add to that the fact preachers are also aware that a good number of additional folks may be sitting in the seats in front of them on that day compared to most other Sundays of the year, and preacher prayers abound. And again, this week I was no different. And as I prayed, God led me to 1 Corinthians 15:17. I'll confess that as this direction from God became more clear and more convicting in my own heart, I struggled with whether to focus on such a verse on a day when the lights sparkle just a little bit brighter, when the songs are sung with an extra dose of vigor, and when even the most questionable looking among us - people like me - actually clean up pretty well! Why? Because isn't this supposed to be a

day of beauty, a day of joy, a day in keeping with the title of one of those other songs we've sung...a happy day? Indeed, a day of life?! If so, then where does a heavy, even somber verse like this - **If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins** - have a place on a day like today?

But here's where my thinking turned. More importantly, here's where my heart turned to surrender to what I believe is God's direction for this sermon. And the turning point is this: What we do with the resurrection of Jesus Christ is indeed the most important issue of life! [repeat] And if that statement is true, then considering the implications of the resurrection is immediately, unrelentingly and vitally important for your faith and your life...for my faith and my life...today...and every day.

Let's get down to business then and answer the questions that leap out at us from the verse, working in reverse order. And let's answer the questions from the Bible, not from our own opinions or wishes...and not from the opinions and wishes of other people or religious systems. First, there's the issue of our sins. The first part of Romans 3:23 says this: **...everyone has sinned**. I'll pause there. Anyone disagree with this statement? And to be clear, we're not talking about Jesus Christ here. We're talking about us. God's Word says **everyone has sinned**. Sadly, I don't believe we can dispute that statement. The second part of Romans 3:23 then goes on to give us a definition of sin...of our sin: **...we all fall short of God's glorious standard**. More specifically, God's glorious standard is perfection. Okay, then. True enough. You're not perfect because you've sinned, and I'm not perfect because I've sinned. So we've squared away the sin part. What

about the fact, though, that the verse also talks about us being guilty of our sins? That sounds a bit more serious...a bit more personally uncomfortable at least and downright foreboding at worst. Well, Romans 6:23 tells us what the phrase means...and to be clear it confirms that the worst end of the spectrum is reality: **...the wages of sin is death**. Translation: what our sin has earned us is death forever...and it's a death where we would actually live forever apart from God and under the everlasting judgment that our sin would have earned us. Foreboding indeed. Chilling. Tragic. 1 Corinthians 15:17 also says that if Christ has not been raised, then our faith is useless. My dictionary defines the word useless as "not fulfilling or not expected to achieve the intended purpose or desired outcome." Some synonyms for useless my dictionary lists include futile, pointless, hopeless, ineffective, fruitless, incapable. So, let me state it again as simply as our verse of the day puts it: **If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless....** In the verses surrounding 1 Corinthians 15:17, the Apostle Paul wrote about the fact that there were people in the church of ancient Corinth who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead generally. Rather than try to summarize the passage, it should speak for itself. Hear God's Word from 1 Corinthians 15:12-19:

*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? For if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. 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. 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! And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world.*

So now the summary, and it's a bit like a logic problem. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the linchpin of faith...indeed of eternal life. If Jesus rose from the dead, that means there is/will be resurrection of the dead generally...and that includes you and me. However, if there is no resurrection of the dead then even Jesus did not rise again. And if that is the case, then we might as well all pack it up right now and go home. And frankly, not bother coming back to church services ever again...not to mention our annual Easter services. The passage I read says so: preaching is useless, faith is useless, the apostles were liars, the death penalty for sin for all who ever have, are or will live is unassailable, and frankly our hope vanishes and is revealed as something that is counterfeit and pitiful.

But hold on a second. In the verses preceding the passage I just read, Paul had reminded the Corinthians...and he reminds us...that Jesus' resurrection was attested to - that is, that there were eyewitnesses of Him after He rose from the dead - as follows (in order): by Peter, then the entire group of twelve disciples, by more than 500 followers at once, then James, later by all of the apostles, and finally by Paul himself. Furthermore, Matthew 28:11-15 tells us that even the guards from the tomb knew Jesus was gone and the tomb was empty on the third day following the crucifixion. To cover things up the Jewish priests and elders cooked up a story about Jesus' body having been stolen by His disciples, and then they bribed the guards to spread the story around to anyone who would listen.

Getting back to the Apostle Paul, he didn't rely on his own opinion or wishes to prove the point. He went to hard and verifiable facts and eyewitness accounts...facts and eyewitness accounts that have been handed down to us, celebrated throughout the centuries, and celebrated here today. And then Paul puts an exclamation point on his argument in 1 Corinthians 15:20-28:

*But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died. 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. For the Scriptures say, "God has put all things under His authority." (Of course, when it says "all things are under His authority," that does not include God Himself, who gave Christ His authority.) Then, when all things are under His authority, the Son will put himself under God's authority, so that God, who gave His Son authority over all things, will be utterly supreme over everything everywhere.*

So, let's review. Since Jesus has been raised from the dead, there is resurrection of the dead generally. But just because everyone will be resurrected from the dead does not mean everyone will be resurrected to enjoy eternal life with Jesus in heaven. Just as clearly as the Bible tells us heaven is a real place, so too it tells us hell is a real place. In John 5:24-29, Jesus Himself tells us of the implications for those who believe in God alone for the salvation of their souls and for those who do not:

*I tell you the truth, those who listen to My message and believe in God who sent Me have eternal life. They will never be condemned for their sins, but they have already passed from death into life. And I assure you that the time is coming, indeed it's here now, when the dead will hear My voice—the voice of the Son of God. And those who listen will live. The Father has life in Himself, and He has granted that same life-giving power to His Son. And He has given Him authority to judge everyone because He is the Son of Man. Don't be so surprised! Indeed, the time is coming when all the dead in their graves will hear the voice of God's Son, and they will rise again. Those who have done good will rise to experience eternal life, and those who have continued in evil will rise to experience judgment.*

To be clear, the phrase "those who have done good" in that last verse does not mean we somehow earn our way to heaven if the so-called life ledger many think God is keeping for each one of us ends up with more good than bad when all is said and done. Rather, doing good in this passage means what the first verse says: listening to Jesus' message and believing God who sent Him. Another passage of Scripture, Titus 3:4-7, puts it this way:

*...When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, He saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit. He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. Because of His grace He declared us righteous and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.*

After I finish talking in a moment, another one of our pastors will come up here to share a few announcements with you about things that are going on in and around our church. And I want you to know something about those announcements. Everything we say and everything we do is made possible by, driven by, and secured by the hope we have in light of the reality that Jesus has risen from the dead and He is alive today and forevermore!

As a pastor, I have an interesting and sacred privilege...a privilege that is not without its share of pain and heartache. I get to share more closely than most in some of the deeply intimate moments in peoples' lives when they are confronted with life and death. I've been around families grieving through the murder of a loved one, through untimely deaths, through tragic outcomes, and through devastating diagnoses and terminal prognoses. And it is only by God's grace that I myself have not been on the receiving end of any of those things. Something interesting happens, though, when people are confronted with material life and death. If not already properly in place, priorities tend to start taking shape. What matters most from an ultimate standpoint becomes very clear very quickly in those situations. I have been humbled time and again by people who passionately, hopefully and triumphantly declare their trust in the living God, and their desire to see Him glorified whether in life or death. And just as it is in those obvious material circumstances, may I suggest to you today that the same life or death grid is true for all of us all of the time from a spiritual standpoint. So in light of all we've considered these past few minutes, I close by joining with the Apostle Paul in His bold declarations from 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2:

*So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak for Christ when we plead, "Come back to God!" For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. As God's partners, we beg you not to accept this marvelous gift of God's kindness and then ignore it. For God says, "At just the right time, I heard you. On the day of salvation, I helped you." Indeed, the "right time" is now. Today is the day of salvation.*

**[Break]**



Two nights ago in this room, we experienced a moving Good Friday worship service. We focused on the death of Jesus Christ as our substitute and the perfect sacrifice to pay the penalty for all of our sins. During the service, we were led in a celebration of the ordinance of communion by one of our elders, Doug Jackson. In his comments, Doug read 1 Corinthians 11:26, which states: **For every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are announcing the Lord's death until He comes again.** Then he gave us a one word summary of that verse: Hope. In considering that verse's reference to the return of Jesus Christ some day, Doug defined hope as follows: *the assurance of the reality which we have not yet fully experienced.* Because of Jesus Christ's death on the cross, we have hope. That is what we remembered on Good Friday. And because of Jesus Christ's resurrection, we have hope. That is what we remember today on Easter Sunday. And may we remember - and hope in - both His death and resurrection every day!

I made one short odds bet earlier in this service: that you're more focused on the resurrection of Jesus Christ today than you are most any other day of the year. Well, I'm going to make one more short odds bet now. And here it is: that you're longing for hope...the kind of hope that is the assurance of the reality which we have not yet fully experienced...the kind of hope that gives you an identity, a purpose for living, and a secure and lasting destination. Maybe, just maybe, that's why you're here today.

I also said something like this earlier in the service: since Easter Sunday is a day when the lights sparkle just a little bit brighter, when the songs are sung with an extra dose of vigor, and when even the most questionable

looking among us actually clean up pretty well, then isn't it supposed to be a day of beauty, a day of joy, a day of happiness...indeed, a day of life?! Well, the hope of the resurrection brings the possibility of ultimate light in life, an enduring song of praise in your heart, a beautiful new identity, everlasting joy and happiness...indeed, the possibility of life with God that is abundant now and goes on that way forever! And a life like that is not limited to the extent of human potential or desire or agenda. Listen to the kind of life the resurrection of Jesus Christ makes possible. Romans 14:7-9 puts it this way:

*...we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honor the Lord. And if we die, it's to honor the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.*

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 puts it this way:

*...Christ's love controls us. Since we believe that Christ died for all, we also believe that we have all died to our old life. He died for everyone so that those who receive His new life will no longer live for themselves. Instead, they will live for Christ, who died and was raised for them.*

Like the key words from those previously mentioned song lyrics remind, if by His grace and love Jesus has saved you...rescued you...then you live for Him, not yourself. We live for Him, not ourselves. We live - and die - to honor Him. We belong to Him. He is the Lord of both the living and the dead. His love controls us so that we will no longer live for ourselves, but for Him...because He died and was raised for us.

Now, does all of this mean life as a Christian will never be hard again...that you'll never experience disappointment, pain, suffering, and the like from this day forward? Absolutely not! Nonsense! Despite what others may try

to peddle you, we all know that a guarantee of a pain-free, hassle-free, challenge-free life is just not true. As a matter of fact, post-Garden of Eden it's not even possible! So how then does Jesus Christ's resurrection apply to a life that can in fact be painful, hassled and challenging in the here-and-now? A contemporary of the Apostle Paul, the Apostle Peter, wrote a letter to Christian people who were scattered about and living as foreigners in various provinces of ancient Asia Minor, a part of the world known today as western Turkey. These people were being persecuted for their faith...some were even being martyred for it. To be sure, life was hard for them...very hard...even at risk. And some were actually dying. Into this most difficult arena, Peter had a letter of hope delivered to these suffering people. After a brief greeting, Peter immediately drives home the reason they can live in hope despite difficult circumstances. Here's what he says in 1 Peter 1:3-9:

*All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is by His great mercy that we have been born again, because God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now we live with great expectation, and we have a priceless inheritance—an inheritance that is kept in heaven for you, pure and undefiled, beyond the reach of change and decay. And through your faith, God is protecting you by his power until you receive this salvation, which is ready to be revealed on the last day for all to see. So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world. You love Him even though you have never seen Him. Though you do not see Him now, you trust Him; and you rejoice with a glorious, inexpressible joy. The reward for trusting Him will be the salvation of your souls.*

There's an old hymn called *Great Is Thy Faithfulness*, and not surprisingly it celebrates God's great faithfulness. In it, there's a line that speaks of God's guiding presence in the life of a Christian. Such a presence is described as "strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow." Were I to apply that line to the overwhelming blessings of the resurrection as just conveyed by the Apostle Peter, it would go like this: strength for today and bright hope for today...and tomorrow...and forever!

I'm going to ask the choir to return to the stage now. As they're taking their places, I want to preview for you the chorus of the song they will be singing. The song is called *Behold Our God*, and the chorus shouts forth the following proclamation:

*Behold our God seated on His throne  
Come let us adore Him  
Behold our King nothing can compare  
Come let us adore Him!*

Because the death of Jesus Christ gives us hope...and because the resurrection of Jesus Christ gives us hope...our only proper response is to worship Him. Come let us adore Him!