

If Christ Has Not Been Raised

1 Corinthians 15:12-26

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In her best-known story, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” Flannery O’Connor tells the story of the Misfit, a criminal and serial killer roaming the highways of Georgia. Near the end of the story, the Misfit has sent members of a family one by one into the woods to be shot by his men. Now he holds the grandmother at gunpoint, and she begins to talk to him about Jesus. The Misfit gives a speech that puts the choice we face on Easter about as starkly as it can be put:

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead, and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.”

The apostle Paul puts the matter a little more politely by quoting an Epicurean motto: if Christ has not been raised, and he does not raise us from the dead, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). Or as Peggy Lee put it, “If that’s all there is, my friend, then let’s keep dancing, let’s break out the booze and have a ball.” Did Peggy Lee ever live on Block Island?

There’s an interesting scene in Acts 17 where Paul is in Athens, on Mars Hill, at the place where philosophers gathered to hear what was “trending.” The Greek philosophers are fine with this itinerant Jewish preacher as long as he tells them what they want to hear. Paul quotes their own Greek writers and speaks of God as the one in whom we live and move and have our being. So far so good. This is the philosopher’s god, the god of New Age thought, the god who is out there and in here, who is one with the cosmos and your own spirit, the one who, as a friend of mine said the other night, “when you encounter it you are really encountering yourself.” But then Paul said that God had raised someone from the dead, and the philosophers scoffed. They laughed him off the platform, although a few were interested.

As long as Paul talked about God as pure spirit, no one had a problem with him. But when he talked about the physical reality of a man who was dead being brought to life in order to judge the world, he lost them. They probably thought he was hopelessly Jewish—not understanding that the spirit has nothing to do with the material world, still believing literally in miracles and not seeing them as metaphors. Paul was hopelessly Jewish, and not from the cynical-philosophical side of Judaism you find in Job and Ecclesiastes and many writers today, but from the apocalyptic side of Judaism which expects God to intervene in real time in human history. To the Greeks—and to many today—it was OK to believe in a dying-rising god in a myth, as a metaphor for something spiritual. But to believe in dying and rising as historical fact—as if death could actually be overcome and the decay of flesh reversed—well, that was hopelessly naïve.

We have little difficulty believing that Jesus died on a cross. It is easy to believe that state power can be abused, especially when combined with religion—whether it is the neopaganism and liberal Protestantism of Nazi Germany, or the crusading atheism of Stalin and Mao, or the

fanaticism of the Inquisition, the Puritan Revolution, or Al Qaeda. It is no stretch for us Americans to believe that even a noble republic, faced with the demands of fighting insurrection on the outer reaches of its empire, might resort to torture and execution. That Jesus died seems not only plausible but predictable now. But that Jesus rose from the dead is hard for many to believe. The good dying young we see all the time. But the good rising from the dead we have seen only once.

Can we believe this? Can we believe that God raised Jesus from the dead, not as a metaphor for something else, but as a fact in historical time, under Pontius Pilate, with a body that was nailed and pierced but then appeared to hundreds of people, witnesses with names? Can we believe that this event was the beginning of God turning the tide against death for the human race?

Paul says that believing that Jesus was raised from the dead is the whole ball game. If you lose that, you lose everything. Denying that the resurrection happened is not a slippery slope but a cliff. It's not like walking down the icy patch from Harbor Church to the Post Office in midwinter; it's like falling off Mohegan Bluff. If Christ was not raised, then everything we are doing and saying is nonsense and we are nothing but pathetic. If Christ was not raised, then we are still dead in our sins, and dead, period, destined for nothing but dirt.

The problem Paul faced in Corinth was that some of the people in the church did not believe that their bodies would be resurrected after they die. You see, they were Greeks. They assumed that bodies were temporary and spirits were permanent. Bodies were for this realm and spirits were for the higher realm. They might well believe in the immortality of the soul, but their culture did not teach them to believe in the resurrection of dead bodies. You might say that their culture was a lot like ours. Many Americans think of death the same way, as leaving a body to become a spirit being.

But the whole Jewish hope, which Paul believed in and which Jesus exemplified, was the hope that your body and your whole self would be restored to a new life someday. It seems that Paul assumed an in-between state when his spirit would go to be with Jesus, but his hope was focused on the great day when Jesus would come to take over the world and establish his kingdom. On that day, all who believe in him will be raised from the dead—not just as spirits, but as fully human beings in the image of God with new and improved bodies. On that day, the world will not disappear or be dissolved into spirit, but the created earth will become even more glorious than it already is, and will be what God originally intended it to be—free of death, and sorrow, and crying, and full of his presence.

So what Paul addresses in our verses from 1 Corinthians 15 is not first of all the question of whether Jesus rose from the dead, but whether we as believers will rise from the dead. His logic is this: the resurrection of Jesus—the event we celebrate on Easter—is so connected to the final resurrection when all of us will be raised, that you can't have one without the other. Jesus being raised from the dead has no meaning to Paul if he is not the first fruits of many brothers and sisters. The whole meaning of the resurrection for Paul is that this is the beginning of the messianic age and the foretaste of what will come for all of us. So Paul says, if there is no resurrection of the dead for us, then Christ himself has not been raised from the dead.

We need to pause on Easter to take in that hope. We say at the end of the Apostles' Creed—if we say it as Baptists—"I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." The early Christians were sure that this was at the center of the Christian faith. It wasn't enough to believe that our souls would somehow survive death in heaven. The heart of the gospel for them was that the body itself would be resurrected to eternal life. That is part and

parcel of what we are celebrating today: not only that Jesus was raised from the dead, but that we too shall be raised someday--that my individuality, my self, and the image of God reflected in my quirkiness will not be extinguished forever at death or absorbed into the one, but that I will survive in a body with an eternal form to enjoy continuing relationships with people, with God, and with a restored planet.

Paul says that if you don't believe in your own resurrection, you must not believe in Jesus' resurrection. And if Christ has not been raised, then the gig is up. This whole Christianity thing is a crock. If he did not rise from the dead, Jesus was a lunatic or liar—or at best a wise man who foolishly surrounded himself with liars. If the Easter story is not really, historically true, then your faith is futile and I am a liar, and those who have died believing in Christ are simply dead and gone.

But in fact, Paul says, Christ *has* been raised from the dead! That is the good news we sing and shout this morning. It was not a subjective experience that his followers had. They were in no mood to fabricate a victory; they had been defeated when Jesus was killed. The tomb was really empty. Jesus appeared to his followers on Sunday morning, which was why, historically, these Jews abandoned worshipping on the Sabbath for worshipping on the first day of the week. Only the fact that Jesus was raised from the dead can explain how the church even got started and grew to take over the Roman Empire. If Jesus had stayed dead, it would have been easy enough for the authorities to produce the body and debunk the myth. Only the resurrection gave the believers the confidence to say that “This Jesus whom you crucified God has raised to be both Lord and Messiah.”

And if Jesus was raised, then he was the first of many. Death came into human life long ago with Adam's choice to turn away from God, and we have all lived under the curse of death since then. But now, life has come back into the human race through one man—Jesus Christ. One day those who “belong to Christ”—those who believe in him and are part of his body, the church—will be made alive with him. This is what we symbolize in baptism: that as we are one with Jesus in his death and burial, we will be one with him in his resurrection. Someday Christ will reign over everything, including death, and death will be no more.

My oldest brother dropped dead two days before Christmas. Without warning, his aorta burst, and he was gone. Many of you have lost, over the past year, husbands or wives, mothers or fathers, brothers or sisters, friends or lovers. They are with us in a special way on Easter Sunday. Or, to tell the truth, they are *absent* from us in a special way on Easter Sunday. Did their lives end forever when they died? Is death the end of their story? Or it is true that the dead are raised to life someday as Jesus was? What we celebrate this morning is the truth that Jesus was raised from the dead, the first of many brothers and sisters, and because he lives we too shall live. Thanks be to God. Alleluia and alleluia!