

The Gospel and the Witnesses

Easter Sunday Sermon

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The Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes says: It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting. It's such a strange and alien sentiment, one wonders: did I hear that right? It's better to go to a funeral than to a party. Better to be in the house of mourning, then at the social gathering afterwards. Yes, it is.

How can this be? The text tells us why. It continues: For death is the destiny of everyone, and the living should take this to heart. Death (mortality) is the central reality, the all-pervasive, mocking reality, the dominant fact, the decisive thing, about human existence. And we are practiced at suppressing this, at averting our eyes, at pretending that the planet is really NOT a global dust and bones factory. So, we keep busy, we look the other way – perpetually. Thus, the house of mourning is needed. It performs a service. There's a certain sobriety, a stark realism there. And there is a kind of wisdom, that can only be had in a funeral home.

And it is this reality – on display in every casket – that Jesus Christ came to address. He was not chewing around the edges of our plight but dealing with the heart of the human predicament. He comes to destroy death, the New Testament tells us, to abolish it, to bring life and immortality to light.

In 1 Corinthians 15 (where our text is taken from) the apostle Paul does not shrink from the fact that Christianity rises and falls with the bodily resurrection of Jesus. If the resurrection is false, the whole fabric of our faith unravels. If Jesus is not raised, Paul says, we are the most pitiable of men. Yet, if it is true, and Paul argues vigorously that it is, there is joyful, certain, solid hope for the world.

This morning, we will look at verses 1-8. The Corinthians, being ancient Greeks, had great difficulty with the idea of a bodily resurrection. The immortality of the soul was fine, but the resurrection of the body was unnecessary.

So, Paul begins with the bodily resurrection of Christ. And he sets forth both, the centrality of the resurrection, and the compelling evidence for it. We'll have two main points: first, the gospel, and second, the witnesses.

I. The Gospel

First, then, the gospel. He speaks of the gospel as past, present and future. The gospel in the past is spoken of as “that which also you received.” They had received the gospel. It is the defining event in their past. It is the reason for their existence as a church; it is the ground of Paul’s appeal to them now. Thus, the gospel is a present reality. Paul calls it the gospel in which you stand. Right now, in the present moment, we stand in, and by, the gospel. Nothing else.

The gospel is also our future. In v.2 Paul says the gospel is that, “by which you are being saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you.” The gospel is our salvation, and will be our salvation, in the future – IF we cling to it. This gospel is, v.3 says, of first importance.

The late Richard John Neuhaus (First Things) famously said: The first thing that must be said about politics, is that politics is NOT the first thing. Take out politics, and put anything else but the gospel, in the sentence, and it still holds.

The content of the gospel is unpacked beginning in v.3: The gospel, that which is of supreme importance, is first of all the fact that Christ died for our sins. The significance of the word “FOR” is that Jesus died as our substitute, in our place, bearing our punishment. And this death was according to the Scriptures which promised, and pointed to, a suffering Messiah.

The next phrase, at the beginning of v.4, and that he was buried, serves to confirm the reality of the death which took place. He didn’t just swoon or appear to die. He really died, and a corpse was laid in the tomb. Death, burial, and finally, resurrection: Christ is risen! This is, as we have said, the hinge, and it is this point Paul is emphasizing here. The text says, “that He was raised on the third day.”

The reference to the third day refers to a number of OT texts which speak of deliverance or salvation coming on the third day. Hosea 6 speaks of a third day restoration; Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days. So, his being raised on the third day is also in accordance with the Scriptures.

Paul has just given us the inner content of the gospel, the irreducible core, the non-negotiable stuff. And it’s simple. Don’t get bored with it – for this is what you received, this is that in which you stand, and by which you are saved. This is of first importance: Christ died for our sins, was buried, and was raised, all in accordance with the Scriptures.

II. The Witnesses

This brings us to our second point, the witnesses. The witnesses serve here powerful confirmation, of the reality that Christ has been raised. The risen Christ was seen, v.5 tells us, by Cephas, the Aramaic name for Peter. The tradition of the resurrection stems from the Jerusalem church, and from its leader Peter, who saw him with his own eyes. There is no gap between the resurrection and the witnesses; they were there at the beginning. And then he was seen, the end of v.5 says, by the twelve. The gospels record a few different appearances to the twelve. For example, in Luke 24 he appears to the twelve and there were *many* others present.

Paul doesn't say which appearance this is, but his point is simple, in addition to Peter he appeared to the rest of the twelve. But notice that, in at least one instance, the 12 were accompanied by, not a few, but **MANY** others. Then, in this great cloud of resurrection witnesses, we get the utterly fascinating information in v.6. Then he appeared to more than **FIVE HUNDRED** brothers at one time. Now, this is a staggering piece of information.

It tells us, first of all, that there were probably a number of appearances we may not even know about. Notice that this appearance to over 500 hundred occurred **AT ONCE**. Now, a single person or two or, three maybe, can have a mystical vision of something and be mistaken. But for 500 people to simultaneously see the risen Lord is virtually irrefutable evidence. To deny this evidence one would have to believe in some sort of synchronized delusion.

So, we have not only Peter, not only the twelve, not only the many others who were with the 12 on one occasion who Luke mentions, not only the women whom Paul doesn't mention here... but in addition to that group of at least 15 or 20 (plus many others) we have, not 500, but **OVER 500** additional witnesses. And just to drive the point home that Paul and the early church knew these 500 plus people, he gives us a crucial biographical detail in the middle of v.6. Most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. I know which ones (roughly) have died and which one are still living.

So, most of these 500 plus people are alive and known to the broader church. You can go talk to them, some have died, but the greater part remain. Go interview them. If you doubt the bodily resurrection, you Corinthians, go ask - the information is public, and it is first hand, eye-witness testimony.

But Paul is not done. In v.8 he says, "after that." Notice that Paul not only knows about the appearances, he knows about their sequence. First Peter, **THEN** the twelve, **AFTER THAT** over 500, **AFTER THAT** James. Now, this James is an important witness. He is the Lord's half-brother, later a key figure in the Jerusalem church. But we are told that James did **NOT** believe Jesus during His earthly ministry. So here is a man who was inclined against Jesus, and later becomes a witness to the resurrection.

The second half of v.7, continuing with the sequential language, says THEN to all the apostles. Now this is a different group than the twelve. The term apostle is sometimes restricted to the twelve, sometimes used more broadly of those who were commissioned to preach the gospel.

So, Paul has piled up perhaps some 600+ witness (conservative #) at this point. But there is one more witness to be named, and it is Paul himself. V.8 Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. Now, Paul is referring of course to his Damascus Road experience (saw the Risen Christ). This event is referred to five times in Scripture. Paul had many chances, over many years to recant his story, to reconsider it, to psychologize it away. But he doesn't do any of that. He is finally, like many in this list, martyred for his testimony to the risen Christ.

Now, in closing, I want to say a word about this last witness, Paul, since he is the one providing this astonishing catalog. Paul is an undeniably historical figure, no one questions Paul's historical existence. And here we have a man, who, the record shows, hated and persecuted Christians, and sought to have them killed. He has a conversion encounter with the risen Christ, with witnesses standing by, he records it five times, and is utterly transformed, becoming the apostle to the Gentiles... and is eventually, according to tradition, beheaded in Rome, as a martyr for this faith.

What do we know about him? Well, what we know, we know from his letters. And he wrote thirteen letters preserved in the New Testament. What do these letters tell us about Paul? Well they tell us a lot. A lot that is relevant in a witness. What is revealed is that Paul is a tested, sober, gifted, utterly brilliant, thoroughly sane, passionate and humane, confident, yet broken and humble, man. HE is judicious and wise.

My point is this: I believe Paul. I find him entirely credible. Not only credible, but compelling. All the atheists and skeptics in the world are lighter than a puff of smoke when weighed against his testimony. And not simply his testimony, but the testimony of the some 600+ witness he adduces for us here. The witnesses verify the joyful, unbelievable truth. Jesus is risen! And it is the height of irrationality to deny it, to affirm it is sanity.

In the house of mourning we often get cold, and really, pitiable comfort. People say things, well-intentioned of course, but we know that there is an irrevocable, bitter loss, a wound that cannot be healed by human kindness. And while time may heal, it does not restore. For what we want – what we really want – though we have been conditioned to not even hope for it anymore, is we want the person (our loved one) raised out of death. We want immortality. We want death shattered. We want all things restored in world without the agony of death.

This, and nothing else, is the promise made and secured by Jesus Christ. This is why he – audaciously – calls himself (I am) THE RESURRECTION and the life. This is why Jesus, when his friend Lazarus died, could say to Lazarus' sisters:

He who believes in me will live, even though he dies. And whoever lives and believes in me, will never die. Do you, he asks them, believe this? I ask you: Do you believe this?

This is the good news, the astonishing news. The uniquely Christian news. This is comfort that moves one from the house of mourning, to the house of everlasting feasting. Believe the gospel. It is of first importance. Jesus has been crucified for our sins, buried, raised, AND SEEN, by MANY, hundreds, of faithful witnesses. Dying he destroyed our death, rising, he restores our life. Praise the Lord! Amen.

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