

“It’s a Wonderful Life”
1 Corinthians 15:12-26
April 5, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

Easter is a special day for us for the simple reason that the resurrection of Jesus changes everything. Consider, for example, the simple fact that the first Christians soon changed their day of worship from the Jewish Sabbath, Saturday, to Sunday, the day of the week on which Jesus was raised. This was done in spite of two very large obstacles to such a change. The first was the fact that all the early followers of Christ were Jewish, and the Jews took very seriously the fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath day holy. The second obstacle, familiar to anyone who has been around churches very much, is that Christians don’t like to make even small changes in the way they worship. Can you imagine the pushback we would receive if our church governing board, the Session, announced that we were going to stop meeting on Sundays and begin meeting on Saturdays? Yet that’s what happened in the early church, and it happened because of the resurrection of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 15 is the longest passage in the Bible on the resurrection of Jesus. In the part of the chapter we are looking at today, Paul does the same thing done by the angel Clarence in the Frank Capra movie *It’s a Wonderful Life*. George Bailey runs a small bank that almost goes under financially, leaving Bailey depressed and suicidal. Clarence comes to the rescue by showing him what life in his town would have been like had George never existed. This part of the movie is something of a nightmare for George, as he sees all the dreadful things that would have happened were this hypothetical scenario to become reality. Then Clarence returns him to reality. Paul does the same thing in this passage. He shows us the difference made by Jesus’ resurrection by describing first the hypothetical world in which Jesus had not been raised, and then turning to the real world in which he had.

I. If Christ Has Not Been Raised – v. 12-19

Paul’s Corinthian readers didn’t actually believe that Jesus had not been raised from the dead. What they believed was that life after death was only a spiritual existence, with no material component whatsoever. So what they denied was a bodily resurrection, not a life after death. The Corinthian church was largely Gentile, with the result that the Greek philosophical worldview was very significant to them. This worldview, originating mostly with Plato, was about as opposite today’s worldview as it could be. Our worldview is materialist, a worldview that believes only material things are real. There is no soul, no spiritual existence, and no life after death. When the material part of

you dies, there's nothing left. Other than the brief memories others may have of you, you're just gone. The Greek philosophy of Plato was just the opposite, believing that only the spiritual was ultimate and would last. Of course, they acknowledged that the current life is a material life, but regarded it as only temporary. The hedonism expressed in verse 32 arises out of this spiritualized philosophy. Their motto, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die," came from the belief that the senses are to be indulged as fully as possible in this life because there are no bodily pleasures in the next.

The resurrection of Jesus challenges both of these worldviews. Paul points out to the Corinthians how their spiritualized worldview that denies any material existence after death is inconsistent with the resurrection of Jesus. **"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised"** (v. 13). How does it challenge our materialist worldview? It teaches that there is a part of us left after our bodies die, an immaterial and immortal soul. It is this soul that will be reunited with material bodies that Jesus will raise up. This life is not all there is. In light of eternity, it is but a blink of the eye.

So Paul asks the Corinthians to imagine a life that was consistent with their spiritualized worldview, a life without the bodily resurrection of Jesus. The first thing Paul mentions is that such a view makes the apostles to be liars of the worst sort, because they are misrepresenting God. They testified that God did in fact raise Jesus bodily. One of the common ways the resurrection is denied today is to explain its origin in the desire of Jesus' apostles to keep alive his memory after his death. They continued to speak of him as if he were alive simply because they missed him so much. Pretty soon, others started assuming that he actually had been raised. This would still make the apostles guilty of lying. If someone draws the wrong inference from something you say, and you don't correct that mistake, you are guilty of lying. Either the apostles are evil men deliberately leading people astray, or they are truthful witnesses. There is no room for something in between these two possibilities.

Next, Paul says that if Jesus had not been raised, the faith of Christians is futile and we are still in our sins. All of Christianity stands or falls with the resurrection of Jesus. Why? From the very beginning of the Bible, a connection is made between sin and death. Adam and Eve were told that death would be the consequence of the sin of eating from the forbidden tree in the middle of the garden. They sinned, and death in all of its ugliness and sadness entered into the world. Jesus ended both by his death and resurrection. So if there is no resurrection of Jesus, then there could not also be any forgiveness. The world order of sin and death still prevails.

The third consequence of denying the resurrection of Jesus is that **"those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished"** (v. 18). Paul is talking here about Christians who have already died. He's saying that you will never see them again if Jesus has not been raised. They are just gone. Then Paul's

concluding consequence of a life without a resurrected Jesus is that Christians become people more to be pitied than any other. We have built our lives on a fiction, denying ourselves and giving ourselves completely to a God who turns out to be good at raising hopes, only to disappoint eventually. We end up being like people who sell everything they have and move to the desert to be taken away by a flying saucer that never comes.

Paul's description of a world without Jesus' resurrection will not allow us to tame the resurrection. Many try to do that by saying that Christianity at its essence consists of the teachings of Jesus. They want to make of it what every other religion is: advice on how best to live in this world. N. T. Wright recounts an objection someone once raised with him about the resurrection. "We can't say the resurrection happened, because that would make Christianity different from all the other faiths." I like Wright's summary of Christianity with a resurrection.

Christianity, you see, isn't a set of ideas. It isn't a path of spirituality. It isn't a rule of life. It isn't a political agenda. It *includes*, and indeed gives energy to, all those things: but at its very heart it is something different. It is good news about an event which has happened in the world, an event because of which the world can never be the same again. And those who believe it, and live by it, will (thank God!) never be the same again either. That's what 1 Corinthians 15 is all about.

II. **But in Fact Christ Has Been Raised – v. 20-26**

With verse 20, Paul moves from his imaginary world with no resurrection back to the real world, a world in which Jesus has been raised. The verse begins with a cancelling "but." A cancelling "but" indicates the cancellation of all that preceded it. The transmission breaks on your 15 year old car, and you have no money to get it repaired. Even if you did, the cost of the transmission would exceed the value of the repaired car. Your parents hear of your dilemma, call you and say that they have decided to give you a brand new car. Your old car is broken beyond repair, *but* now you have a new one. That is the force of this conjunction in verse 20. "**But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.**" Paul then goes on to give instruction about the results of Jesus' resurrection.

The first thing he says is that the resurrected Jesus is "**the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.**" The word "firstfruits" comes from the world of agriculture. The Jews were supposed to bring as an offering to God the firstfruits of their harvest, signaling his ownership of it all. The firstfruits indicates two things about what is to follow: it is both a pattern and a pledge of what is to come. In calling the resurrection of Jesus a firstfruits, Paul is teaching us that our resurrections will be patterned after that of Jesus, and that our resurrections are certain because of Jesus'. Let's consider this aspect

of Jesus' resurrection being a pattern for ours. Our resurrection bodies will be like that of Jesus. Jesus' resurrection body was a material body, and ours will be too. He could be touched. He ate and drank and existed in a material world. Jesus' resurrection body is immortal. It is now almost two thousand years old, and still going strong. Our resurrection bodies will no longer suffer the ill effects of aging. Let me mention just one additional feature of Jesus' glorified body. Its wounds were still visible. Do you remember that? The gospel writers mention how the nailprints in his hands and feet were still visible. What does that mean for our future? Let me answer that question by mentioning a point made by Tim Keller. He said that the best stories are not just the ones with the happy endings, but the ones where the setbacks and obstacles of the story actually become part of the happy ending. For example, in Tolkien's *Return of the King*, the happy ending occurs when Frodo manages to destroy the evil ring by casting it into the fires where it was forged. But he couldn't bring himself to do it, and the happy ending would not have occurred without the evil Gollum grasping for the ring and causing it to fall into the fires. The setbacks caused by Gollum actually became part of the solution. The same will be true of us in our glorified state with our resurrected bodies. The wounds of this life will be transformed and made into part of the solution. They won't be obliterated, but transformed into something of a trophy of God's grace. Whether through our own sins or that of others, or just the difficulties of life, we have all been wounded. What are your wounds? I have experienced betrayal by those to whom I gave myself in service. I know you've been wounded too. In our final glorified state, those wounds won't disappear. They will be transformed by God's grace through becoming part of the happy ending God has appointed for his children.

The second result of Jesus' resurrection is the reversal of the fall of humankind into sin. Paul explains, **"For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive"** (v. 22-23). A man, Adam, got us into this mess. Another man, Jesus, will get us out of it. He does so as the God-man by taking care of sin through his death, and now leading the way into the life God always intended for his creation. This isn't just a nice story of God making a happy ending for Jesus as a reward for his obedience unto death on a cross. As N. T. Wright says, through the resurrection, "the present evil age has been invaded by the age to come. The time of restoration, return, covenant renewal, and forgiveness. An event has occurred as a result of which the world is a different place, and human beings have the new possibility to become a different kind of people." It is the restoration of the entire world. It means restoration, he says in verse 24, for those **"who belong to Christ."**

The next result of Christ's resurrection is the reign of Christ until all enemies have been destroyed. Paul teaches that Jesus is reigning today. **"For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet."** Who are these enemies? He names them as **"every rule and every authority and**

power” (v. 24). He is talking about all rivals to his reign, those who prefer their own will to that of the reigning Christ. Are you an enemy by that definition? Do you prefer your own will to that of Christ?

In the next verse Paul names another enemy to be defeated. **“The last enemy to be destroyed is death.”** Death is our enemy, not our friend. The materialist tries to make peace with death, accepting it as the natural end of life, after which there is nothing at all. Somewhere deep in the heart of every human being is a desire for life beyond this one. God has put eternity into our hearts. We have a collective memory of Eden and the tree of life found there. Everything in us knows that death is an enemy that needs defeating. But none of us, until Jesus, could do so. This means that our resurrection bodies will be immortal. The body you have always wanted will be yours. The pain and suffering of aging will be no more. The lives of precious little children will no longer be attacked by cruel diseases.

Some might ask, “Why does Jesus wait to bring about this final victory over death? Why not now?” The answer relates to the defeat of the enemy named in the previous verse, the rule, authority and power. Jesus is going about the business now of removing such enemies. He does so through the gospel, by turning his enemies into his friends. So if you have set up your reign over Jesus’ reign, preferring your own will to that of Jesus, surrender to him now through repentance and faith. Jesus is delaying the final defeat of death to give opportunity for that surrender to happen. Consider the cost of this delay to Jesus. When Jesus’ friend Lazarus died, John says twice that Jesus was “outraged” (John 11:33, 38). He looked at this fallen world, at the loss of beauty and life he had in mind for it when he made it, and his soul was deeply troubled to the point of indignation. Jesus continues to have that response to death. Why, then, doesn’t he end it? So that more enemies might become friends and share life with him for an eternity. The door of opportunity is open now to join Jesus’ resurrection life. You must surrender your life to him through repentance, and accept the life he brings. You became part of this messed up world by birth as a child of Adam. You can become part of the new world through rebirth as a child of God.

CONCLUSION:

I have known of John Updike mostly through his novels that I have enjoyed. This week I came across a poem he wrote about Easter. One of the seven stanzas of the poem reads as follows: “Let us not mock God with metaphor, analogy, sidestepping transcendence; making of the event a parable, a thing painted in the faded credulity of earlier ages: let us walk through the door.” He’s writing of all the ways we avoid the obvious truth of the resurrection, and urges simply that we stop our avoidance, surrender to Jesus and walk through the door.