

Doctrine: Risen

1 Corinthians 15:12-28

Opening Question: What do people turn to when times get hard in life? [Slide: Question]

[Write answers up on Flipchart]

Now let me ask you another question: which of those things will do any good in the event of death, ultimately?

We live in a society which is obsessed with life, good health and youth. For example, if you Google “anti-aging cream”, you are shown a whole bunch of products which have names like ‘revitalising cream’ and that kind of thing. [Slide: Google results] It seems to me that our society is obsessed with basically airbrushing death out of the picture. It’s the taboo subject of our generation, isn’t it: apparently back in the Victorian era they refused to talk about sex; I don’t know if that’s completely true but it definitely seems like today death is a subject which people are ill-equipped to deal with.

I wonder what you think about death, if you’ve had much experience of it. What does it make you think of? What does it make you feel? What does it make you feel about life today, if you know that your death one day is inevitable – however much anti-aging cream you apply you can do nothing to escape it? Do you feel like Woody Allen, who famously said: “I am not afraid of death; I just don’t want to be there when it happens”?

Well let’s turn to what God’s word has to say to us.

In our passage today, Paul is writing to the church in Corinth. Now one of the difficulties we have with this letter is that we don’t know exactly what the situation was in the church which caused Paul to write the letter! My suggestion is that some people in the church were saying, “Hey, our life now is great. We don’t need a resurrection; *this* life is where it’s at.” They thought they were living the good life. [Slide: The good life] And so somehow the church got round to denying the resurrection of the dead.

I wonder if any of you can relate to that: maybe you’re focussed so much on living life here and now that, for you, the resurrection of the dead becomes something extra to the Christian faith. It’s a nice to have, it’s a kind of a safety net, but it doesn’t really mean anything day by day. As long as things are going well, we can cover our ears and pretend death doesn’t really exist.

[Slide: Black]

But Paul, being Paul, won’t let us live with that. First of all he tells us what it means if there is no resurrection of the dead. He says in vv12-14:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.

Those are strong words, aren't they? The Corinthians were saying that there was no resurrection of the dead. But Paul says if you don't believe in the resurrection of the dead, then you don't believe in the resurrection of Christ. And if you don't believe in the resurrection of Christ, we might as well all give up and go home. For Paul, the resurrection of Christ cannot be removed from the Christian faith without it collapsing. The resurrection is like a cornerstone which everything else is built on.

He goes on in vv15-16:

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. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.

So he says that if Christ has not been raised, then all those people who claimed that Christ was raised are basically false witnesses. To put it bluntly, they are liars. The witness of the Apostles was built on the historical facts of Jesus' death and his resurrection. [Slide: Empty Tomb] If their message about the resurrection was false, then everything else they said is false as well. These people were trying to deny the future resurrection while holding on to the gospel, and Paul says "you can't do that". You can't hold onto Jesus' redeeming work on the cross, as Richard was talking about two weeks ago, while at the same time denying the resurrection. You have to have both.

Paul continues in vv17-18:

And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.

This is the real sucker punch. If Christ has not been raised, *your faith is futile*. If Christ has not been raised, we are all still in our sins. In other words, if God did not raise Christ from the dead, then God has not declared Jesus Christ to be righteous. And if Christ Jesus is not declared to be righteous, then we have no hope: because our righteousness can only come through Jesus Christ. Our present faith depends on the fact that Christ was actually raised!

There's a real irony here: if you deny the future resurrection, as the Corinthians were doing, you deny the past resurrection. If you deny the past resurrection, then our faith is meaningless. In other words, if Christ was not raised, then we don't have a past, we don't have a present, and we don't have a future. Anyone who dies in Christ is "lost".

So, Paul says in v19: "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." If we are Christians just for this life, then we are of all people most to be pitied. Paul says the Christian faith without Christ's resurrection is meaningless. As he says later on in the chapter, we might as well say "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die." If there's no resurrection, let's just live our lives to please ourselves now – because it's the only life we've got!

What would the benefit be of living a Christian life if there was no resurrection? If there was nothing in the future to look forward to? Paul is saying that if the resurrection is not true, then a Christian life is essentially pointless. We'll come back to this a bit later on, but I think it's worth pondering: if someone was to look at your life today, would they find evidence of the hope of the resurrection? Are you happy and content to live a Christian life, taking up your cross and denying yourself in this life, knowing that there is a better future yet to come?

So Paul has told us what would happen if we say that the resurrection was not true. Now he tells us what the resurrection *does* mean. So in vv20-22 he says:

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

Now although that's a fairly short section, there's a huge amount going on in that passage. Let's just take a step back and think for a minute: in the Bible, when does death first come into the world? The clue is in the verses I've just read out. Through Adam, that's right: Adam and Eve were disobedient to God, and through them death came into the world.

Now what Paul does, and to my mind this is breathtaking stuff, is parallel Adam and Christ. [Slide: Adam / Christ]. On the one hand we have Adam, the original created man. All of humanity is in a sense "in Adam": all of us are under Adam's curse, all of us are born with sin, all of us die. That is the fate of every single man and woman who has ever lived.

But, on the other hand, Christ lived the perfect life, he bore Adam's curse and defeated death. Whereas Adam is death, Jesus is life; where Adam is creation, Jesus is renewed creation; where Adam failed, Jesus succeeded.

So what Paul is saying to us from 1 Corinthians 15 is that the curse which we are all under at the moment *is going to be reversed in Christ*. Death itself is going to die. And Paul says to us we can know that's true because Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead! Look down at the word he uses in v20: Jesus is "the *firstfruits* of those who have fallen asleep". Jesus is the first one of the new creation. He has paved the way for us. How do we know there is a resurrection of the dead? Because Jesus has been raised!

So Paul is saying, we are all of us under Adam's curse, we will all die. But Jesus Christ broke that curse: by rising again from the dead he reversed the curse of death and anyone who is "in Christ" – anyone who believes in Christ – will rise again.

But, we should take note of v23: it hasn't happened *yet*. Christ, the firstfruits, has been raised up; but those of us who are in Christ have yet to be raised – it's still to come in the future. But it will happen, and we can be certain it will happen because Jesus has been raised. [Slide: Black]

Finally, vv24-28 says this:

Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For he 'has put everything under his feet'. Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

This is another slightly complicated section and we don't have time to go into it fully. But I think here Paul is answering a question about God's character. If death was not part of God's original creation

plan, how can God still reign? And the answer is, God is in the process of destroying all dominion, authority and power. Death currently has power over us. But, in the resurrection, God has said: "I have promised to restore what I have made; I have promised to destroy death." And when the resurrection of the dead happens, God will have fulfilled that promise and God's reign will be complete.

In short, what I'm saying is that the resurrection of the dead is grounded in God's character. There is nothing we can be more confident in than the resurrection. We can be more confident in the resurrection than we can be believing that the sun will rise tomorrow. None of us can know for sure that the sun will rise tomorrow – but we can be 100% confident that those in Christ will be raised up to eternal life, because God has promised to do it; and we know that God is truthful because he raised Christ from the dead.

So, what does all this mean? What does it mean for us today to believe in the resurrection? Well I want to say to us today that the resurrection is our only hope. Can we be 100% confident in anything that we wrote down earlier? No, of course not!

I'd like to tell you a story about how that worked out in my own experience. Some of you may know that my Mum died about a month ago. She died "in Christ", as Paul puts it. The one major thing which has been keeping me going for the past few weeks is the fact of the resurrection. I know that any separation now is only temporary. I know that, for her, she is now with the Lord. And I know that she will be raised up with Christ. Let me tell you that the belief in the resurrection is not an optional extra for me!

Now if you're someone here at the moment who's not facing death imminently, or who hasn't experienced it recently - and I want to say this particularly to you younger people here – you need to get this sorted in your mind now. Don't leave it too late, don't wait until someone close to you dies before sorting through this stuff. This is important to work through while you're actually in a good place.

The second thing is, we come back to the question of what we do in life now. The Bible scholar Gordon Fee says about this passage: "We do not merely live out our length of days and then have the hope of resurrection as an addendum; rather, as Paul makes plain in this passage, Christ's resurrection has set in motion a chain of inexorable events that absolutely determines our present and our future." The resurrection determines our present and our future. Because Christ was raised, we can be sure of our salvation, our faith has meaning today; and because Christ was raised we can have confidence in our own future resurrection.

Because of the resurrection, we don't have to worry about hardship in this life, or persecution we may receive because we're Christians, because we know that the best is yet to come. The resurrection is our only hope.

What I'm going to do now is finish with a verse from the end of this chapter. This is how Paul finishes his section on the resurrection, and I think it's an appropriate place for us to end as well. So I'm going to read out v58, and then we'll have a few moments of quiet to think about it and try to apply it to our own lives.

Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labour in the Lord is not in vain.