

Eeyore vs. Easter

1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Easter Sunday eight years ago was the first week that I preached here as your pastor, and for those who were here that day, if you remember, my subject that day was what I called the elephant in the room. Which was to say, that was a day of very significant transition for this church, when your previous pastor began a sabbatical that would eventually lead to his resignation six months later. So that day, in 2016, I was the elephant in the room, my presence was the unavoidable expression of that proverbial elephant, and I spoke of that quite directly.

As I thought about what passage to preach upon this year on Easter Sunday, I thought about another elephant in the room. I knew that my subject would be the resurrection of Jesus, that I would take a week off of our study of Genesis to focus on the resurrection in a specific way this Easter Sunday, but I thought about how would I express that for the most edification of the whole church body? What would be my emphasis, my focus? As I came to answer those questions in my mind with the decision to preach upon this text in 1 Corinthians 15, I rather quickly began thinking about what I believe is very well expressed as an elephant in the room at present. Something large, looming over us, but perhaps, something which we are not willing or able to identify or to verbalize.

That elephant can best be expressed this way—there are a lot of families enduring now, and have endured this past year, significant difficulties. More than normal, more than what might be seen as ordinary. Seemingly, almost everyone. Hardships. Struggles. Pain, even sorrow. Stress. Fear. Uncertainty. Weakness, sickness, even death. As a pastor, I not only have noted those struggles but I have felt a measure of them myself on

your behalf. I could go down the whole list of our members and find almost no one who is excluded from those sorts of experiences in a particularly personal sort of way. I won't identify and list each one, as that might actually become rather discouraging, but it isn't hard to recognize the reality of what I am emphasizing. It's been a hard year. And for some, that difficulty of life is ongoing.

So what do we do with that? As I prepared this week to preach today, I determined to proclaim the gospel of the resurrection in such a way as to give encouragement and comfort in that context—not to ignore the reality of hardship in life, and certainly not to be dismissive of it either. Instead, I determined to preach the gospel in such a way as to be of the most help in the midst of the reality of such a pervasive sense of trouble.

The focal point of that encouragement is to note the contrast between verse 19 and verse 20 of our text this morning. There is this obvious concession that the Apostle Paul makes with regard to the reality of the difficulties of this life,

v.19 “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.”

You might remember the original King James Version, “we are of all men most miserable.” If there is no resurrection, if this life is all there is, then the reality of life would render those who clung to the false hope of Christianity to be “of all men most miserable.” After, the call of the gospel is self-denial. It is the call of service, even the willingness to give up your own life. And if death is the only thing which we receive for that sacrifice, then clearly it isn't worth it.

But then we read,

v.20 “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become

the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

So what I have to preach this morning is not merely a doctrinal proposition. It is not merely the historical fact of Jesus’ resurrection. It is much more than that. Something of a triumphant encouragement. My intended emphasis is the difference that such a faith can have in the living out of your daily lives, even, and maybe especially, in the context of the struggles of life.

There is an alternative to the triumphant encouragement which the cross of Jesus provides to our faith—a bad alternative, exemplified best by Winnie-the-Pooh’s friendly donkey, Eeyore. Eeyore was, shall we say, gloomy. Pessimistic. Depressed. He lived in the southeast corner of the Hundred Acre Wood in an area on the map in the book labelled “Eeyore’s Gloomy Place: Rather Boggy and Sad.” Eeyore would say things like this: “Could be worse. Not sure how, but it could be.” And, “It’s snowing still. And freezing. However, we haven’t had an earthquake lately.” Or, “It’s the only cloud in the sky and it’s drizzling, right on me. Somehow, I’m not surprised.” “I never get my hopes up, so I never get let down.” And, more personally, “When your tail is missing, remember you have every right to mope.” With one final quote, “Don’t worry about me. Go and enjoy yourself. I’ll stay here and be miserable.”

So Eeyore mopes about in those Winnie-the-Pooh stories, focused upon all the troubles of his life and the inescapable sense of gloominess that defines his outlook on life. And sometimes, because of our own circumstances and because of a failure to rightly consider the triumph of the resurrection, sometimes we can become like Eeyore ourselves.

I want to include that warning when noting the elephant in the

room this morning, for it is easy to embrace the outlook of Eeyore rather than focusing upon the triumph of the gospel as expressed by these life-changing words, “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

It is easy to become overwhelmed with the hardships with an outlook that becomes gloomy, and in so doing miss the personal, practical and helpful declarations of this great day in which we celebrate the resurrection. It is worth noting that our weekly worship services every Lord’s Day are timed to commemorate this great event of the resurrection of Jesus, but this day we now call Easter, marked by the annual connection with the Old Testament Jewish celebration of the passover, is a day well suited to for this emphasis we see in 1 Corinthians 15,

v.19 “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. 20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Thus it really is Eeyore vs. Easter. So let’s study this morning what Paul has to say. First, he confronts,

I. A FOOLISH DENIAL: THERE IS NOT RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD.

v.12

Obviously, some are saying just that. As they are today. Religion may still be popular in many quarters, then and now, but believing in the actual existence of supernatural power is a bridge too far for many people. They will allow and permit some sort of personal experience or expression of religious faith, but they will not acknowledge the truth of the supernatural power of God.

And that is why the resurrection takes such prominence in

biblical teaching and in the presentation of the gospel, but here is where doctrine becomes faith. Here is where religious sentiment becomes united with a belief in the power of God, the supernatural power of God, power that transcends human power and human authority. There is something greater than us, someone. He has power greater than ours. And all of that is denied by many, by those who declare that,

A. There is no human existence after death.

It's quite a popular view, for any number of reasons, not the least of which is that it eliminates our accountability and responsibility to anyone beyond ourselves. Death is not a threat, certainly not any threat of judgment, since it is proclaimed that human existence simply ends at death. And that is the issue that Paul confronts here in 1 Corinthians 15. That is the issue that brings to the forefront the unbelief of so many people today. They suppress the truth of the knowledge of God, and in their wicked rebellion against the very existence of God, they declare their own human sovereignty to live out their lives as best they see fit, without any willingness to acknowledge that they will stand before a supreme God and creator after they die.

Sadly, however, that does mean that,

B. Death will gain the ultimate triumph.

That's the inescapable consequence of the denial the resurrection of our bodies. Obviously, all men will die. No human being is exempt from that. But in this foolish denial of the resurrection, that's all there is. It seems to me, then, that unless you adopt the hedonistic philosophy of "eat, drink and be merry," Eeyore's gloominess is about all that is left, if, in fact, you choose to deny the truth of the resurrection of the dead.

Paul goes on in this passage with,

II. AN INEVITABLE DEDUCTION:

Namely, if there is no resurrection of the dead at all, then, Jesus is not raised from the dead either. It is a simple point.

v.13-16

It both or neither. Both our resurrection and Jesus' resurrection. Or neither one. And Paul doesn't hold back from all the terrible and spiritually disastrous consequences of denying the reality of the resurrection. To put it simply, but ever so broadly,

A. A denial of the resurrection destroys the whole of the Christian religion.

If you are unwilling to believe that there is life after death, that you will not continue to exist once you die, believing instead that you will enter some sort of soul-sleep or non-existence, then Christ is not risen. And if Christ is not risen, there is no gospel. There is no religion. There is no faith through which salvation is possible, because everything hinges on this great truth of the resurrection. Only with the resurrection is the promise of life made real, and only with Jesus' resurrection from the dead does our Christian faith have any validity at all. So we read,

v.16

v.13

This is not a secondary matter—it is fundamental to our faith. Fundamental in the reconciliation of our relationship with God. If you don't believe in the resurrection, then you don't believe in Jesus' resurrection. And you are not a Christian.

I frequently say that not everything is black and white, but some things are. And this is one of them. This isn't a matter of personal choice or freedom. This isn't a matter upon which we can disagree and remain in good fellowship with one another

under the banner of Christian. If you deny the resurrection, your resurrection and mind, if you deny the reality of life after death, then you destroy the whole of the Christian Religion. And, related to that,

B. A denial of the resurrection destroys the whole of biblical teaching.

Paul puts it this way,
v.15

Without the resurrection, the apostles who wrote the Bible are all false witnesses. And so am I. That's the inevitable deduction of the foolish denial of the resurrection. And it leads to,

III. A DEVASTATING CONCLUSION.

Namely,

A. The futility of faith.

Do you see Paul's point? I'm trying to make it very clear and very obvious.

v.17. "...if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile."

Futile means empty, useless, without value. And yet, that's what a lot of people want—religion that is emptied of God's supernatural power as that power is revealed in the Bible. They want to deny the supernatural existence of a God that transcends human existence. But they still want to be religious. They still want to be spiritual. They just want to deny the existence and the authority of God's power. And guess what? That's futile. That is absolutely useless. It is empty, and powerful. Maybe religious sentiment will help you feel better for a little while, but ultimately, eventually, it is worthless. "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile."

And then, to go one step further in that devastating conclusion

about the futility of faith, we must recognize,

B. The deadly consequences of sin.

v.17. "...you are still in your sins!"

In other words, you are still held under judgment as guilty before God. This all hangs together, and it all falls together, this thing we call the Christian faith. If the resurrection is just a myth, just a fable, just an inspiring story of devotion and sacrifice but not a true and real account of history, then this is the devastating conclusion—their is no forgiveness of sins.

It is by faith that we are saved, faith to "believe in him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification." That's Romans 4:25. He was raised from the dead to declare his victorious conquest of sin itself. He suffered the guilt and punishment of our sin, and was raised from the dead so that by faith, we might have justification. The declaration of "not guilty," the forgiveness of sins.

If you don't believe in the resurrection, then you cannot have any confidence that your sins are forgiven. "You are still in your sins!" For only with faith to believe in the supernatural power of God to raise Jesus from the dead, only with such faith, can the truth ever become reality that in the presence of God your sins are forgiven.

And that really is what true religion is all about, isn't it? How can you be made right with God? How can you be reconciled with God? How can you receive the blessing of the atonement, the blessing of redemption. How can you be saved? Without the resurrection, there is no salvation. "You are still in your sins!"

And I will go one step farther in the despair of this devastating conclusion. Namely,

C. The meaningless of life.

This is how Paul puts it,
v.19

If your only hope is in this life, if your religion or your spiritual interests only reflect the reality of this life, then you are to be most pitied! Most miserable, as the King James puts it. And why is that? Because death is all that you are left with.

If you don't believe in the resurrection, then let me tell you about the overall conclusion of your own life—you are going to die! If you want to be spiritual, if you want to have some sort of religion in the attempt to give some meaning to your life, but until to believe in the resurrection, then you will fail. You will not gain any meaning to your life. Because I can tell you with absolute certainty, you are going to die. And that is all there is, then what use are the constraints imposed upon you by God.

The consistent view of those who don't believe in the resurrection is, quite simply, the philosophy of life that says quite simply, "eat, drink and be merry." If there is nothing else, then you have nothing else to live for. You're going to get old and die. Or, maybe even worse, you're going to die before you get old. And you die, your body is going to decay and disintegrate. It will return to dust.

I will quote Shakespeare, for only the second time I think in all my preaching, with the declaration of Macbeth, so tragically and devastatingly true, if there is no resurrection: "Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a

tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing."

That is where you are left, if you don't believe in the resurrection. The meaningless of life is all that is left, if all that lies ahead in your is death. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player, That struts and frets his hour upon the stage... Signifying nothing."

Life is meaningless, if there is no resurrection of the dead. Because you are going to die. Everyone of you. And you who claim some form of religion, without the resurrection, why the only reality left to acknowledge is,

v.19

But...there is something more. That is, obviously, the point of this whole passage. And that is the point of this whole sermon. And that is the pointed emphasis of our focus and emphasis upon the truth of resurrection this Sunday morning. There is,

IV. A TRIUMPHANT DECLARATION.

v.20

I declare that to you today just as clearly and as certainly as Paul declared it to the church in Corinth. And notice again that two-fold emphasis, "Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." In other words, those who have died. Christ is risen from the dead—it has already happened. And so will you, for he is the firstfruits, the deposit, the guarantee. His resurrection guarantees ours.

A. Jesus is raised from the dead.

I could read you the historical account in the gospel, as we find in,

Mat. 28:1 "Now after the Sabbath, as the first day of the week began to dawn, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary came to see

the tomb. 2 And behold, there was a great earthquake; for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door, and sat on it. 3 His countenance was like lightning, and his clothing as white as snow. 4 And the guards shook for fear of him, and became like dead men. 5 But the angel answered and said to the women, “Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified. 6 He is not here; for He is risen, as He said. Come, see the place where the Lord lay. 7 And go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead.”

Consider Peter’s opening benediction as well,

1 Peter 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. 6 In this you greatly rejoice.”

“Christ is risen from the dead...” And since he is the firstfruits, Paul would go on in this great chapter to write,

1 Cor. 15:50 “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed— 52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

Thus,

B. We shall be raised from the dead.

So that is what I will declare when I think about that elephant in the room today. That is what I will proclaim when I am weighed down by the hardships of life, even as I perceive they have come

to us as a church above ordinary measure. “...the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

Beloved, it’s too easy to take on the perspective of Eeyore. It’s too easy to forget, in a practical sense, what life is actually all about, what gives meaning to life. And what gives that meaning is the resurrection, the hope and the certainty of life. As Jesus says,

John 11:25 “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. 26 And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. Do you believe this?”

Eeyore’s perspective reflects only misery. “When your tail is missing, remember you have every right to mope.” “Don’t worry about me. Go and enjoy yourself. I’ll stay here and be miserable.”

No, beloved. We don’t need to stay here and be miserable, and we have no need to mope. Because “Christ is risen from the dead.” He is alive...“and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”

Life is not meaningless, nor futile, for there is a resurrection. We don’t live in a sad and gloomy place, because “the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

This isn’t just a doctrine we profess and believe. It is, much more than that, the very foundation upon which our mortal, earthly lives can gain any meaning at all. No matter what the hardships of life might be, whatever they may be for you today, this is the truth. This is the reality of life itself: “Christ is risen from the dead.”

May the certainty of that faith be your great strength and your great delight this day.