

Sunday, February 6, 2022 – “The Core of the Gospel”
– Bible Study & Reflection on 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Dear Members & Friends:

I invite you to read the following passage from 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (*Common English Bible*).

¹ Brothers and sisters, I want to call your attention to the good news that I preached to you, which you also received and in which you stand. ² You are being saved through it if you hold on to the message I preached to you, unless somehow you believed it for nothing. ³ I passed on to you as most important what I also received: Christ died for our sins in line with the scriptures, ⁴ he was buried, and he rose on the third day in line with the scriptures. ⁵ He appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve, ⁶ and then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at once—most of them are still alive to this day, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me, as if I were born at the wrong time. ⁹ I’m the least important of the apostles. I don’t deserve to be called an apostle, because I harassed God’s church. ¹⁰ I am what I am by God’s grace, and God’s grace hasn’t been for nothing. In fact, I have worked harder than all the others—that is, it wasn’t me but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ So then, whether you heard the message from me or them, this is what we preach and this is what you have believed.

In 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, this Sunday’s epistle, we have what is believed by biblical scholars to be the oldest testimony of Christ’s resurrection by one among many eyewitnesses, namely the Apostle Paul. Here Paul gives us the core of his resurrection testimony that Paul considered to be his rationale for establishing congregations, and the Corinthians’ hope as disciples of the Risen Christ.

The first thing we are apt to notice about Paul’s testimony is that Paul says nothing about some of the key figures and events that occur in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection: no mention of the women’s discovery, no Mary Magdalene, no Roman guards at the tomb, no earthquake (read Mark 16:1-8; Matthew 28:1-10; Luke 24:1-11; John 20:1-18). About the closest that 1 Corinthians 15 stands to the other Gospel resurrection accounts is Paul’s identification of Simon Peter, the Twelve, many other witnesses, and James as among the first ones to whom the Risen Christ appeared. Again, only Simon Peter and James are named in 1 Corinthians 15 (cf. Mark 16:7; Luke 24:8; John 20:1-8).

Perhaps Paul simply assumes that his listeners or readers knew the Gospels’ treatment of the resurrection. But those accounts were written probably two to five decades after Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth. It’s possible while writing around 54 C.E. that Paul simply didn’t know these accounts in the Gospels.

Paul’s proclamation in 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 is the foundation of the primitive Church’s evangelical (meaning “good news”) witness. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 sets the stage for Paul’s constant concern in 1 Corinthians 15:12-58: how to give answer to those who say, “There is no resurrection of the dead.” But, although implied by that issue (see 1 Corinthians 15:13-19), I’m not sure that’s the main problem Paul is addressing in 1 Corinthians 15:3-11.

Verses 3-7 can well be characterized as the heart of the Christian gospel – “Christ died for our sins” -- and the primary means by which followers of the Way of Jesus have considered how that claim was asserted. Jesus was truly dead (“he was buried” for “three days”) then Christ was unexpectedly (at least for his own disciples) raised from death into new life. God was the One who raised Jesus from the dead. God had raised no one else from the dead, so that by raising Jesus from the dead, God vindicated Jesus’ way as God’s way. God thereby asserted

that Jesus' words were God's Word, that Jesus' identity was God's. In the resurrection, God irrevocably committed God's Self to Jesus.

Though the resurrection was unexpected, and was a completely new event in history, the resurrection occurred "in accordance with the scriptures." Jesus' death was so momentous that it dealt with human sin against God, and was validated by the only God capable of undoing that death and bestowing life. If we believe that, then the death and resurrection of Christ had to be in accord with the character and intentions of God all along, the God who engaged Israel in conversation throughout the Hebrew Bible, the God of the Law and the Prophets. And now, God's miraculous act of raising crucified Jesus has been corroborated by hundreds of witnesses like Paul, to whom the Risen Christ appeared – but not just to Paul.

The Risen Christ appeared to Cephas (Simon Peter), to the Twelve, to over five hundred disciples, to James the brother of Jesus, and to the rest of the apostles (read Galatians 1:17-18; 2:1-10). Paul wants everyone to know that these are real events, not figments of Paul's fertile imagination or wishful thinking on his part. Paul has simply handed over to others what he had first received. This is what preachers do in their sermons, when we are living up to apostolic expectations: handing over to others a gift that we have received. Down through the generations, witness after witness has handed over testimony to the events behind 1 Corinthians 15.

"Last of all," Paul says, "Christ appeared to me" (1 Corinthians 15:8). For Paul, this is the key. Paul's honest admission was after hundreds of witnesses (verses 5-7), to the last individual witness before Paul (James), then to Paul's own witness of his apostleship (verses 9-11).

It's here that Paul gets personal and speaks of the difference his own experience of these events has made on his life. There are other Pauline autobiographical references in other letters (2 Corinthians 11:21-12:10; Galatians 1:11-2:14; Philippians 3:4b-11). In 1 Corinthians 15:9-11, Paul mixes humility ("least important of the apostles"), a bit of vanity ("I have worked harder than all others"), along with credit-giving to God ("that is, it wasn't me but the grace of God that is with me"), admission of unknowing ("whether you heard the message from me or them"), and grateful recollection ("this is what we preach and this is what you have believed").

Paul admits openly that he was the unlikeliest of apostles, not because he was unfaithful to the faith of Israel (see 2 Corinthians 11:22; Galatians 1:14; Philippians 3:4-6), but rather because Paul had been Church Enemy Number One, violently intent on the persecution of God's Church (1 Corinthians 15:9; Galatians 1:13; Philippians 3:6). For Paul, his own previous enmity to God's Church makes Christ's grace in appearing to him shine all the brighter and seem all the more impressive: "I am what I am by God's grace, and God's grace hasn't been for nothing" (1 Corinthians 15:10).

Christ is not a fiction of our collective imagination. The Risen Christ is an event that occurred, and because of the resurrection, continues to occur in human history. We continued the ministry of the Risen Christ when we donated \$10,000 to the Pines of Perinton Fire Fund. We continued the ministry of the Risen Christ when members of our church designated a \$10,000 memorial gift and divided it equally to support Family Promise and Rochester Refugee Relocation Services. We continue the ministry of the Risen Christ as our youth and congregation raise money and collect bedding for the Sleep in Heavenly Peace Project.

Indeed, the Risen Christ is an event that occurred and continues to occur in human history as we follow the Way of Jesus.

This is the factual announcement that Paul made two thousand years ago. And it is a testimony to the facts that has momentous personal consequences. But the gospel is not merely personal, a transaction between an individual's piety and Jesus. Nor is it only the precepts of a creed. As I have said, it is an historical and contemporary occurrence that still happens among those untimely born who follow the Way of Jesus.

Blessings on the Continuing Journey with the Risen Christ,

Pastor Greg Rupright