

It Is an Easter World!

Text: I Corinthians 15: 20

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is an Easter world!

I stress the positive affirmation. That is the meaning of the text. Paul had been dealing with an idea that would have denied the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. He showed the consequences of denying the resurrection and then he made the bold, simple claim of the text:

But the Truth is, Christ was raised to life...

That is the center of the Gospel, the basis of all we claim in our Christian faith. We believe it is true; Jesus is the living Lord and because he is the living Lord, we are bold to say,

It is an Easter world!

It is an Easter world despite all appearances and we must be quite candid about that. Our affirmation of faith is made in the face of a mountain of data that seems to contradict it. There is trouble in our world. We teeter on the edge of armed intervention in Libya. We tremble with every news report wondering where terrorists will strike next.

And we carry a good deal of personal baggage with us – personal pain, broken relationships, vocational anxiety, and disappointments. Some of our neighbors succumb to the weight of it: Then we have the tragedy of a soul poisoned with cynicism and bitterness. Some, deeply wounded, wall themselves in, making themselves invulnerable to being hurt again, and, at the same time, invulnerable to love and grace – the walking dead.

But this is the First Day of the Week; this is the celebration of the resurrection. This is the day that the Lord has made. We are here to rejoice and be glad because beneath the appearance is a deeper reality. Christ has been raised to life! It is an Easter World after all!

We are going to listen to St. Paul as he lifts up the reality of the resurrection of Jesus. We will reverse his manner of treatment but in so doing we will discover the positive ramifications of the resurrection of Jesus. For his statement, "If Christ be not risen...", after which he spells out what the consequence would be, we will substitute the positive affirmation, "Because Christ is risen ..."

The Corinthian congregation failed to understand or refused to believe that there was yet a future consummation coming, an aspect of which would be the resurrection of the dead. They did believe Jesus arose and they believed they were already alive in him, but they denied that there was still more to come. They considered that they were already "resurrected" – spiritually they had been made alive – and that was true. But for them, the rest of history did not matter and the final summing up of all things – the new creation – had no reality. They "spiritualized" the truth of resurrection. In typical Greek fashion they understood salvation as deliverance from the body, from entanglement in the material world. They had no conception of the new heaven and earth and the "spiritual body," the resurrection body of which Paul speaks in the chapter.

That is the problem Paul addresses. He does so by saying that to deny our future resurrection is to deny the resurrection of Christ. Obviously, Paul argues thus because he sees the vital linkage between Christ's resurrection and our resurrection. Thus he argues backward. To deny our resurrection is really to deny Christ's resurrection. But such denial is limiting. He began the chapter with the broad witness to the resurrection of Jesus. And then in our text he moves to the offensive with the straightforward declaration,

*But the truth is, Christ **was** raised to life – the first fruits of the harvest of the dead.*

I will say no more about the Corinthian problem with resurrection. Rather, I want simply to set forth what Paul says would be the consequence if Christ were not raised, or, stated positively, I want to set forth what is, in fact, the case because Christ is risen.

First of all, Paul claims, if Christ be not risen, the Gospel is null and void and so is your faith.

Later he writes, "... your faith has nothing in it." If we reverse Paul's treatment from the negative:

If Christ was not raised...

to:

Now is Christ risen,

then we can state positively, the Gospel is true; your faith grips the truth, reality. This is of supreme importance.

We want to know the truth; we do not want to live under delusion. We say sometimes "the Truth hurts." Sometimes we do block ourselves off from the Truth; we fear the Truth or we stubbornly refuse to recognize the Truth. Yet, most of us, most of the time, really want to know the Truth.

Freud claimed religion was an illusion. He and Karl Marx and Ludwig Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche created the foundation of modern atheism. There may not be large numbers of atheists in the world, but there is much practical atheism – people living without any essential reference to God or acknowledgement of Him. The foundations of the Christian Gospel have been penetratingly examined in the past two centuries and there is a great mass of agnosticism. The Church has been on the defensive and not always with the calm confidence in the Truth which is the most persuasive witness.

We must always want to know the Truth. We must not duck the issues; we must look at the data, search the evidence and deal with integrity as we bear witness to our faith.

What is our claim? Paul sets it out clearly:

If Christ is not risen, the Gospel is false, our faith grasps an illusion.

What, then, is the positive side? What do we believe to be true if we believe Christ is risen?

We believe that God, the Creator and sustainer of the world, is the living God Whose power raises the dead. We believe He is the Sovereign Lord of the world and that beyond the machinations of governments and all forms of organization and human planning, scheming and conspiring, there is at work in history's unraveling a purpose, a purpose of love, a purpose that is moving all things toward re-creation.

Christ is risen. He is a sign in the midst of history that God will redeem history. He is a sign in our world that life is stronger than death, that when the power of darkness utilizing the forms and structures of human government and religions have done their best – rather, their worst! – God is still God. His power is not limited, His love is all-embracing, His grace abounding.

The Gospel is not null and void. The Gospel is good news pointing to an event, an act of God by which He "signed" the world for final Redemption.

Christ is risen; the Gospel is true; our faith grasps reality.

History looks anything but redeemed, does it not? The American Fleet clusters in the Mediterranean. Terrorists plot to destroy, to maim and to kill. Wherever we look, violence and war threaten to burst forth.

What do we conclude? What are the options? No God, no meaning, just human potential - both for evil and for good, and an endless nightmare? That is one possible conclusion. Then, one might despair and give up. Or, one might seek to maintain the upper hand and through power and cleverness avoid disaster but never find peace.

Or do we acknowledge the continuing obstinacy of the old world, the continuing state of the world unredeemed with all the hell that that entails, but refuse to see the present state of things as the final state? Do we live by another vision and in the community of faith form an alternative community? And do we look for signs of resurrection in the old world?

I happened to catch the NBC interview with Corazon Aquino this week. I was deeply impressed with the sincerity and simplicity of her faith. She was asked about the danger to her life. She responded that she was aware of it, but also that she believed God would enable her to fulfill her mission. And if my mission is fulfilled, she said, then it is all right.

Well, what about her husband who returned to the Philippines to engage in a mission, but was gunned down? That did not refute her faith; rather it confirmed her faith. Her husband's death accomplished what it is unlikely his life could have accomplished. He sacrificed his life for the Philippine people and a remarkable, relatively peaceful revolution ensued.

Corry Aquino lives in an exceedingly dangerous, corrupt, violent world, but rather than being paralyzed by it, she is set free by faith in God to live and lead with a measure of freedom and peace.

When asked if she had a model she admired, she responded that Mother Teresa was a great inspiration to her. And we are bombarded daily with the world's bad news, but we must not forget that Mother Teresa is bringing love and life and healing to the poor and dying in this world.

At the Maui Conference I met a psychiatrist named Jerry Jampolsky. This week we received a letter from him saying he was ready to take fifty children to Russia where he is involved in a national TV special on children titled, "A Child Shall Lead Them." He has forty centers around the world for terminally ill children where love and gentleness effect some amazing healings.

On what basis does one move from possible paralysis of fear, despair, even cynicism and bitterness to loving service, meaningful involvement in the healing of the wounds of persons and society?

Are we not freed for loving service on the basis of the truth that this is not all there is? There is more coming and the "more" will be "the more of God." Do we not seek peace, pray for shalom, bring healing because we believe that we are the instruments of the living God Who is bringing in His Kingdom, creating newness?

If Christ be not risen, says Paul, then we are operating on an illusion. Then dead is dead. Then history is a tale told by an idiot. Then life ends with a whimper. Then weariness and despair will finally prevail.

But Christ is risen - therefore, Paul concludes the great discourse, "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord inasmuch as you know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

There is a second consequence of the resurrection. Again, Paul states the negative:

...if Christ was not raised,... you are still in your old state of sin.

The positive affirmation we derive from that claim is that because Christ is risen our sin has been removed.

This brings us back to the mystery of the Cross. It is perhaps best simply to bow there wondering at what is revealed – the suffering of Jesus for the sin of the world, the love of God demonstrated in that sacrificial death, the total obedience of Jesus to the Father's will, enduring the hostility of humankind and entering the darkness of forsakenness.

Paul says *God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself.*

Peter wrote, *He bore our sins in his body on the Tree.*

Paul wrote, *God made him to be sin for us who knew no sin...*

I do not pretend to understand the crucifixion, but I do see how the fate of Jesus is a parable of what happens once again in our history. Certainly it is more than that and the life and ministry of Jesus stands by itself. Yet the suffering of the righteous, the triumph of evil and wrong is rejected in every generation.

There, in a once-for-all event, we see One-for-all enduring the suffering of the world's sin, the world represented in Israel.

In that sense, we were there when they crucified our Lord. If we can see that much, then we are prepared to hear the amazing news of Easter, the good news that God made His move after "it was finished."

History crucified him. Nature's verdict was, he is dead.

God's action reversed the flow of history and nature. God raised him up. God gave him life from the dead.

Now in the light of that dramatic reversal, the Good News is that Sin was put away. The Gospel is that now God accepts us in Christ; we are received through Jesus Christ our Lord. His life is our life, His obedience is our obedience, His righteousness our righteousness.

Thus the Apostolic mission is one of reconciliation -

We are ambassadors of Christ – be reconciled to God.

There is no longer a barrier of alienation; now we can simply come home.

Again, I do not pretend to understand the mystery of Good and Evil, or what great cosmic transformation was effected through the crucifixion of Jesus. But I do believe the truth of the Gospel invitation - Come; come to the Father through Jesus, the Son.

There was an ontological shift in Reality through the Cross and Resurrection. The Good News of the Gospel proclaims that it is ontologically impossible to stand as a sinner before God.

Do you hear that? Does that make sense?

That has not been much understood in the Church. We have kept sin very much alive and most of us crawl around with a pretty good load of guilt on our back. We have been conditioned in the Church to keep our sin ever before us and to guard against the pride of self-righteousness.

Well and good. I think the peacock is a magnificent bird but I am put off by its human imitator. A consciousness of sin is a healthy possession, which keeps us mindful of our vulnerability to temptation and our frequent failure to live in love with God and our neighbor.

What we have not made clear, however, what has not really filtered down to the inner recesses of our consciousness is that all our sin and all our guilt has already been removed, taken away, put out of the mind and consciousness of God. We have not reckoned with the ontological shift in reality effected by the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Thus we never really find the freedom to break loose from our past. We never get unshackled from our failure. We are too introspective, too introverted, too self-preoccupied. We take ourselves too seriously. There are Christian churches that place so much stress on inward experience, groaning under sin and unworthiness, despairing over proneness to sin that they never get their eyes off

their own soul's navel to be able to look to God Who has a smile on His face saying, "Why don't you just come here and let me love you?"

Too much fascination with our own sinfulness and unworthiness is not a virtue, but a vice; it is not to be deeply spiritual, but unwholesomely self-centered and it becomes a strange form of human pride. Further, it is a denigration of the Gospel and an affront to the mercy of God as though no power on earth or in heaven could possibly forgive my sins!

Hear the Gospel:

It is ontologically impossible to stand before God as a sinner. He has removed sin and guilt from the world, from His presence, from existence.

I am sure that raises all kinds of questions.

There was a very acute thinker who was a member of this congregation who used to argue with me that there was no place for the Prayer of Confession in Christian worship. All that was possible, he maintained, is a prayer of thanksgiving that our sin has been handled. He had a point.

I carefully phrase the Prayer of Confession that it not become a wallowing in how awful we are, but a consciousness of our failure in the presence of the greater reality of God's grace. Robert Schuller does not use the Prayer of Confession because he believes it reinforces the sin-guilt-negative self-image. He has a point. For the traditional Church and deeply conditioned Christian people, that reinforcement may keep us from grasping the radical message of God's grace – Sin is gone!

*If Christ be not raised - you are still in your old state of sin,
but now is Christ risen; you are free of your sin.*

Forgiveness, freedom, is an amazing reality. Forgiveness - you are forgiven; does that sink in? Does that not make you want to dance and shout and sing? Say it three times, emphasizing a different word each time:

I am forgiven!

I am forgiven!

I am forgiven!

Believe it; live in the freedom of that gracious forgiveness. Trust the ontological shift in Reality. Live in the Ontology of Grace.

There is a third consequence of Jesus' resurrection. If Christ be not risen,

it follows also that those who have died within Christ's fellowship are ultimately lost.

The positive statement of Paul's argument is that Christ being risen, those who die move through death to fullness of life. Here we have to do with the matter of Christian hope and the comfort of those who bury loved ones. Jesus said,

Because I live, you too shall live...

Again, he said,

I am the resurrection and the life. If a person has faith in me, even though he die, he shall come to life; and no one who is alive and has faith shall ever died. John 11: 25-26

Paul counseled concerned believers in Thessalonians about the death of loved ones. He wrote with great sensitivity:

I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, that you sorrow not as those who have no hope...

That is the critical point. Death separates. Death creates loss. Death leaves us with deep grief when one long and dearly loved is taken away. Sorrow is only natural. But it is not sorrow without hope. Hope enables us to transcend the loss in the conviction that those we love have moved into life in a greater dimension than we can conceive of and, furthermore, that we will one day be reunited with all those we love in the brightness of God's Eternal Presence. Death is a conquered foe!

That is the verdict in light of Jesus' resurrection. Hope is grounded in Jesus' resurrection. That hope fastens on a future in which death, the grave, disease, pain and tears will be no more.

Again this is a consequence of the Ontological Shift in Reality. Paul says if we have hope in Christ for this life only we are of all people most to be pitied. Hope in this life is critical, but it is not enough. We need a hope anchored beyond history in the Eternal God. Only then are we free to engage in history's struggle with good courage and sure confidence, only then can we relax and revel in the reality of forgiveness, only then can we bury our dead in the confidence that those we love have fallen asleep in Jesus.

Christ is risen!

This is an Easter world!

Thanks be to God Who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

Alleluia! Amen.