First Importance

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
1 Corinthians 15:1-8

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It was my freshman year of college. I was 19 at the time. I awakened one Sunday morning in my dorm room at Welch Hall. I don’t recall if I had been partying hard the previous evening but I wouldn’t bet against it.

I made the spur-of-the-moment decision to go to church. It was Easter Sunday. I hadn’t been to church since Christmas and had the sudden urge to go. The William Street Methodist Church was only a few blocks from campus, so a friend and I found a seat at their 11:00 service. I remember the exact pew where we were sitting. I can still see the sunlight filtering through the stained glass windows. We sang the familiar Easter hymns and listened to a nice sermon even though I don’t remember a single word that was said. I remember wanting to believe the Easter message. Try as I might, I couldn’t quite connect the dots.

I was a graduate of confirmation class some years previous. Somehow I managed to complete a rigorous two-year confirmation process without assimilating a single word of it. Oh, I could tell you that Jesus died for my sins and rose from the dead, but the message never really got inside of me. I hadn’t a clue what difference it made to my self-absorbed, collegiate life.

That summer, I began the quest to answer the question, “Who is God and why should I care?” I dusted off my confirmation Bible and started reading. I talked with Jesus-followers and tried my hand at praying. Sometime that summer, I became a Christ-follower, a decision that continues to change the trajectory of my life.

This sermon is intended for any of you who don’t really know what to make of Easter. You might have heard that Jesus died for your sins and rose from the dead, but you aren’t sure how this story relates to your everyday life.

I read a portion of the earliest record of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It’s recorded in Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. It’s written no more than 20 years after Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. Paul writes in this 15th chapter about things “of first importance.” He identifies four propositions as absolutely foundational: Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ was raised and Christ appeared to many witnesses.
Paul’s first proposition is the straightforward declaration, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (15:4). It may seem simple enough, but what does Paul really mean when he says that Christ died for our sins?

Sin has become synonymous in our day with vacation hot spots like Las Vegas and decadent desserts. Sin is far more substantial! I recall a PBS special some years ago, in which panelists from various religious backgrounds were tiptoeing around the problem of sin in Genesis. A novelist, Mary Gordon, cut to the chase when she blurted out, “People just aren’t right. There is something fundamentally wrong with us that we cannot fix ourselves.” It may be the best definition of sin I’ve ever heard.

Christ died for our sins. The preposition for conveys the idea of dying “in the place of” or “instead of” someone else. Christ died a substitutionary death. He died in our place. John Calvin called Christ’s substitutionary death “the wonderful exchange.” Christ substitutes his righteousness for our sin and his death for our life.

Why does God go to all this trouble? Why doesn’t God simply declare us forgiven and forego the messy cross? It’s the same reason loving parents take the trouble to discipline their children. Parents who fail to discipline don’t really love their children. Loving parents discipline, not in spite of love, but because of love.

Justice and love meet at the cross. At the cross, God judges our sins while extending mercy to sinners. Like a good prosecuting attorney, God insists on a penalty for sin, yet steps around in our defense to pay the penalty for us. Remember: Jesus Christ is God in human form. When Paul declares Christ died for our sins, it’s God’s way of holding us accountable for our sins while at the same time offering pardon.

In elementary school I lived for recess. The playground was my first love. If only I could have been graded on recess! Tag and kickball were my AP courses.

My elementary school became so crowded that school administrators moved all 6th grade classes to a Presbyterian Church down the street, the
one where my family worshipped. One day, I was so enthusiastic about recess that I broke the door that led to the playground. I hit the crash bar with such force that I broke the hydraulic hinge off the door.

Someone had to bear the cost of fixing the door. The cost had to be covered by someone. As a 12-year-old, I didn’t have the resources to fix the door. So, my parents paid the expense for me. Actually, my dad paid for the parts and we installed the new door together. So embarrassing!

My dad did for me what I couldn’t do for myself. He bore the cost of the repair. Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He covers the cost. He pays our penalty. He substitutes his righteousness for our sins and his death for our life.

Paul’s second proposition of first importance is the three simple words, “Christ was buried” (15:4). This phrase is intended to debunk the theory that Jesus didn’t really die. He was crucified on a cross and laid in a tomb. You can’t get any deader than that!

Paul’s third proposition is that “Christ was raised from the dead on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:5). While the first two propositions, Christ died and Christ was buried, are written in past tense, this third proposition, “Christ was raised” is expressed in perfect tense. Perfect tense correlates to something that happened in the past but continues into the present. Christ’s resurrection occurred in the past but continues today. He was raised and still is alive today.

The resurrection of a single individual was inconceivable to people back in the day. The Greco-Roman world ascribed to belief in the immortality of the soul. The idea that someone would rise in bodily form seemed ludicrous to Greeks. The only resurrection to which the Jews ascribed was the restoration of the nation Israel. The thought of a single resurrection
was unimaginable to Hebrews. Even the disciples found it inconceivable that Jesus could be raised to life again.

Paul’s fourth proposition is the assertion, “Christ appeared to many witnesses.” Paul provides a sampling of people who witnessed his resurrection. The 12 Apostles hardly surprise us, but there are skeptics on the list like Jesus’ brother James, and Paul himself. Paul reports that Jesus also “appeared to 500 brothers, most of whom are still alive, although some have fallen asleep” (15:6). If you doubt what I’m saying, Paul suggests, you can check with the eyewitnesses. They are still around for questioning.

So what? So what difference does this sermon make in my life? Let’s return to the earlier question: who is God and why should I care? Paul declares, in so many words, if Jesus has been raised from the dead, his resurrection changes everything. His resurrection can have profound implications for our life—past, present and future.

If Christ has been raised, my past can be forgiven. I don’t have to lament my past. I don’t have to grovel over my failures. Not when God offers me full pardon.

People often tell me, “I know I am forgiven by God, but I can’t forgive myself.” The prophet Hosea declares, “God hurls all our sins into the depths of the sea” (7:19). The prophet Isaiah prays, “You have put all my sins behind your back” (38:17). Isn’t it a delicious thought that our sins are no longer accessible to God?

What does Jesus say to a woman caught in sin whose accusers Jesus has driven away? “Woman, where are your accusers? Has no one condemned you?” She answers, “No one, sir.” “Then neither do I condemn you,” Jesus says (John 8:10-11).

We can let go of painful memories of the past. We don’t need to nurse old hurts or carry failures around with us like a ball and chain. We are forgiven!
If Christ has been raised, my future is secure. Christ has disabled death. Christ has taken the sting out of death. Paul’s tone becomes mocking at the end of chapter 15: “O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?” (15:55).

As I researched this verse about the sting of death, I became fascinated with honey bees. I learned that male honey bees, called drones, don’t have stingers. They also don’t contribute anything to the honey-making process. All they do is hang around the hive and try to mate with the queen. This may explain everything!

“O death, where is your sting?” Christ has taken the sting out of death!

If Christ has been raised, my present life can be more rewarding. This means Jesus is not only a figure of history, but can assume the role of becoming our living Lord.

When I was young, I used to play hide and seek with my grandfather. I couldn’t understand why he hid in such obvious places. Doesn’t he know how the game is meant to be played? Later, I came to understand. Grandpa wanted to be found.

God is not playing hide and seek games with us. Scripture declares that God rewards those who diligently seek him (Hebrews 11:6). God wants to be found.

Maybe some of us don’t really want to be found. C.S. Lewis tells the story in Mere Christianity of a school boy who was asked what he thought God was like. He replied, as far as he could tell, God was “the sort of person who is always snooping around to see if anyone is enjoying himself and then trying to stop it.”

I could have been that school boy before I began my quest. I thought God was some sort of killjoy. Now, I know better. God has our best interests at heart. Our past can be forgiven. Our future can be secure. Our present life can be more rewarding.