

Easter Sunday: The Resurrection's Promises

1 Corinthians 15:3-58

April 16, 2017

Dan Hoffman

Good morning! Welcome to Easter Sunday. On Sundays like this I like to acknowledge that there are always a few different kinds of people in church. Some of you are the regular attenders and I thank you for being here. But days like this bring out some other people who aren't usually here. So perhaps you are someone who is here because you got a special invitation today, or maybe you just decided that taking in a church service is a good thing to do once in a while. Or perhaps you are here just checking things out and wondering what all this is about – however you got here, you are welcome and we are glad you are here.

This said, if you are in one of the latter categories you are probably a bit skeptical about a lot of what gets talked about in church, and frankly I can't blame you. Our world does a good job of pointing out the scientific impossibility of a lot of Christianity.

Like how could Noah have got a minimum of two of every animal on earth into the ark along with his wife and in-laws and survived for months without Netflix – come on! Or how could the Sea divide so that an entire nation of people could walk across on dry land? Or how could Jesus feed thousands of people with a small boy's lunch.

All these things, and a whole lot more, are the hard-to-believe faith aspects of the Bible. And so because the whole religion of Christianity is built up around the miraculous people have pushed back and worked to come up with theories for what must have actually happened.

And since by far the most important and most impossible miracle in the Bible is the resurrection of Jesus, a lot of energy has been spent on this one. Everything stands or falls on the resurrection. If there was no resurrection then the Christian faith becomes a house of cards with the bottom layer pulled out – everything comes crashing down.

On the other hand, I think you would agree that if the resurrection is true, then there is no miracle in Scripture that couldn't be possible – right? Death is one of those ultimately final things, so if God can bring someone back from the dead three days later, then He can do anything.

...

And today is Easter Sunday, the day Jesus rose 2000 years ago, so I want to spend some time looking at one of the big chapters in scripture that talks about the resurrection. If you've got a Bible on your device it would be good to follow along. So Please open it up to 1 Corinthians chapter 15. If you don't have your own you can use the one in the pew in front of you. You will find 1st Corinthians 15 on page 815.

Let's start in verse 3 where Paul lays out why we should believe the resurrection happened:

[Read 1 Corinthians 15:3-8]

In verse 3 Paul recognizes how critical the resurrection is to our faith. He calls it a matter of “first importance.” If it didn’t happen then nothing else holds water. And then he presents two lines of argument for why, even though resurrection is scientifically impossible, it should be accepted.¹

So first we need to understand that just like today, people in the first century knew that when you died you were dead. Don’t believe for a second that because this happened 2000 years ago people hadn’t figured this out yet. Death is one of those things that has been around for a long time. So yes, butterflies climb out of cocoons. And bears wake up after hibernation. And within a very narrow window people can be have their hearts jolted back to work. But we call that resuscitation not resurrection. And everyone has always know that nothing comes back from the dead. And it is on top of the impossibility of resurrection that Paul tells us that the scriptures foretold this would happen to the Messiah.

If you were here last week we touched on this; hundreds of years prior to Jesus’ birth, the prophets foretold that God’s Messiah – which is the Jewish word for Christ or Saviour – was going to suffer. This was God’s plan from the beginning. But what made the Messiah unique was that He wasn’t just going to suffer and die – lots of people have done that – He was going to come back from the dead, which is a bit rarer.

So for example in roughly 1000 BC King David prophesied that God’s Anointed would not die like a normal person. Speaking as the Messiah he said:

For you will not abandon My soul to Sheol,
or let your Holy One see corruption. (Psalm 16:10)

David says normal people rot when they die, but the Messiah’s body isn’t going to suffer this fate – He’s not going to stay dead. So there is a tradition in Scripture reaching back hundreds of years that foretold the resurrection of the Messiah. And this is Paul’s first argument.

And this argument worked for many. They already revered the Scriptures, so if the Bible says Jesus is going to come back from the dead that’s good enough. But if you are a skeptic this probably isn’t going to work for you, and Paul knows this.

So then in verse 5 he shifts focus and starts appealing to reason and eye witnesses. He says Jesus appeared to Cephas – which is another name for Peter. Then James saw Him too – that would have been Jesus’ half-brother. And then He even appeared to Paul. So Jesus was seen alive by a bunch of people after His crucifixion, and that says something.

...

¹ Outline adapted from Matt Chandler “Resurrection and Return” <http://www.tvresources.net/resource-library/sermons/resurrection-and-return> (Accessed April 13, 2017)

But if you have ever lost someone close to you then you know that people in situations like this are devastated. And devastated people can experience some strange things.

When my grandfather died I was living in South Korea and wasn't able to attend his memorial. I was really broken up about this because I had been close with my grandpa. But about a week after the memorial I had this incredible dream. I was sitting at my dining room table, the sun was streaming in the window, and my grandpa came and sat across from me. It was so real. As we sat there and talked we both knew he was dead – it was part of the conversation – and we both knew that the reason he was there was so that I could say “good-bye.” It was a powerful dream.

So maybe these people were just so broken up that they were having visions of seeing Jesus.

But then in verses 5 and 6 Paul says, oh and by the way, Jesus also appeared to the 12, that's all the disciples, and then there was that time He appeared to 500 of us in one place. Now yes, some of those who saw Him are dead now – they've fallen asleep – but most are still alive. So don't just take my word for this, go and ask them.

And if there is one thing that is just as certain today as it was 2000 years ago that is that there is no such thing as a group hallucination. No two people in history, let alone 500, have ever shared a mental trip. So Paul here appeals to logical evidence that would easily hold up in court. But in spite of how strong this evidence is there is still doubt.

...

I don't know about you, but I've noticed that at Easter and Christmas Jesus makes it into the media.

But while the shows and articles He is featured in are usually high budget, and full of lots of biblical references, the premise is always the same: there is a natural explanation for the mysteries of the Bible. Casting doubt is big business.

So when Jesus blessed the lunch of a little boy and 5000 shared a meal, what had probably happened was that the rest of the crowd was so touched by the generosity of that boy that they all took out their bag lunches to share with each other. And there were 12 baskets full of leftovers in the end – it could have happened right?

And when Israel found themselves trapped between the Red Sea and the approaching Egyptian army it just so happened that they were standing near a sea shelf, and when the wind blew from just the right angle the water just stood up on the other side of the shelf and Israel was able to clamber across. And then when Pharaoh's army was giving chase the wind coincidentally stopped and the water flooded back. Trust shows like National Geographic to provide a natural explanation for everything – that's what they do.

And at Easter the resurrection is the focus.

So this last week I read an article highlighted by FlipDigest titled “What is the historical evidence that Jesus Christ lived and died?” It was a very well written article published by a professor at Cambridge university. And in it he goes through several non-biblical references to Jesus’ life and death. And the article ends with the words:

These abundant historical references leave us with little reasonable doubt that Jesus lived and died. The more interesting question – which goes beyond history and objective fact – is whether Jesus died and lived. (Simon Gathercole)²

And with this conclusion this professor both nails it and casts doubt in the same breath. He identifies that the real question with Jesus is always the resurrection, but the way he words his last sentence implies that even though no one can deny Jesus was a historical person, this doesn’t mean we have to take Him very seriously. After all that stuff about resurrection is beyond history and objective fact.

But the problem with this is that something has to explain the objective historical fact of the birth of the church.

So the church was started by a bunch of cowards – the Bible makes this clear. Which is a bit surprising. I mean if you were writing yourself into a story that was going to start a religion, would you paint yourself as a coward? I would leave that part out.

But the Bible so clearly depicts how just weeks earlier all the disciples were hiding out in the upper room, scarred and depressed. And then all of a sudden something happens – the Bible tells us that what happened was that these men met the resurrected Jesus and were filled with His Spirit – and the result was that an uneducated Peter gets up and boldly preaches to a bunch of Jews, some of whom had been in the crowd yelling “crucify Him!” And Peter tells them:

God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah.... You killed the Author of Life, but God raised Him from the dead. (Acts 2:36; 3:15)

This is Peter 50 days after Jesus was crucified. These are not the kinds of things cowards are quick to utter.

And then when people got over the shock of being called God-murderers, and started striking back, Peter and the other disciples embraced the worst kinds of death. And they did this all the while refusing to renounce their belief in Jesus.

So Peter was crucified upside down because he told everyone he wasn’t worthy to die the same way Jesus did – something has to happen to you in order to push for that.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/14/what-is-the-historical-evidence-that-jesus-christ-lived-and-died> (Accessed April 13, 2017)

And Jesus' half-brother James was thrown from the roof of the temple and broke his legs. But he didn't die, and still wouldn't renounce that his half-brother was God. So the mob pelted him with rocks and bashed his head in with a log. Something has to happen to you in order to be able to endure that without cracking. And the rest of the disciples suffered similar fates, all while refusing to say they made the whole thing up.

...

Or take it from another angle. Think of the impact something had on society. Here's the objective fact: A whole bunch of religious Jews went from worshipping God on Saturday to worshipping Him on Sunday. I mean get your mind around that for a second. If you know anything about church people you know that we aren't very good at change. We get an idea in our heads and we stick with it. So imagine a group of religious people saying "hey, I know Sabbath is a big deal, but let's change the day we worship from Saturday to Sunday." Can you picture that happening easily?

...

And then, over the next two centuries, the church grew from just a few people in Jerusalem to close to 20 million all over the Roman empire. And this was in spite of severe persecution and thousands dying for their faith.

So whatever it was that happened had to be big enough to account for the transformation in the early disciples and the birth of the church and some massive social changes. So what was it? The Bible says it was the resurrection of Jesus. But since only naïve people believe in miracles, historians have worked to present a non-supernatural option.

And so currently the most popular explanation to Jesus' resurrection is known as the swoon theory. The idea is that after Jesus was stripped and flogged to within an inch of His life, and then professionally crucified by the Romans, even having His side pierced by a spear so that blood and water spilled out from the sac around His heart, He passed out. He never actually died, He only appeared to die – He swooned. Then, after being placed in the cool of the tomb He revived.

Now that sounds great until you consider what this means. Think about it: How impressed with His resurrection would His followers have been if Jesus managed to stagger out of the tomb barely alive? It would have been pretty obvious what had happened.

But after the staggering abuse to His body, and the incredible blood loss Jesus didn't just gain consciousness in the cool of the tomb. He managed to push back the thousand-pound stone covering the tomb's entrance, overcome the guards who were stationed there with the express command to make sure no funny business happened. Then He appeared to Mary without looking like a Zombie. And then in the afternoon, He took a 12 KM walk with two of His disciples from Jerusalem to Emmaus. All this before appearing to the 12 and then the 500.

These are the kinds of things you have to hold together with the historically verifiable facts if you refuse to believe in the supernatural. But for Christ-followers it's just a whole lot simpler. Jesus rose. God raised Him from the dead.

And so with that as the background lets jump down to verse 12 and begin looking at the massive implications of the Resurrection.

[Read 1 Corinthians 15:12-22]

There are three things that I want to bring out of the rest of this chapter today. The first is that Jesus' resurrection is the nail in the coffin for sin and death. In Christ, the reign of sin and death is finished.

So if everything happened just the same in Jesus' life. If He did all the miracles He did, and taught everyone about forgiveness and love, and then died, we could still have hope that our sins had been wiped out – but we wouldn't know for sure.

Without the resurrection Jesus could just be a prophet, a man of deep wisdom. But He would ultimately be just a man. And what can just a man promise us about what happens after death?

But with Jesus coming back from the dead this all changes – then His words of forgiveness mean something.

What Jesus' resurrection means for us is that there is no one here who has gone too far or done too much. There is no one who has hurt too many people, or whose past is too broken. There is no one who is too bad to become a daughter or son of God. The resurrection of Jesus is the evidence that all your sin has been paid for in full. And that's yesterday's sins, and today's sins, and tomorrow's sins.

Peter tells us:

For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. (1 Peter 3:18)

So there is only need for one sacrifice for sin. And Jesus made that sacrifice on our behalf. And Jesus made that sacrifice so that sinners could come to God. Jesus took care of all your sin.

So if you are beating yourself up saying "woe is me, I'm too far gone, I'm too bad a sinner," you are out of touch with reality. Your feeling guilty and unworthy doesn't make any sense to God. It would be like calling Visa to pay off your credit card bill and finding out that it had been paid by someone else. But then demanding to pay it again. The guy on the phone is going to think you are crazy!

And in the same way if we try to earn our forgiveness, if we try to stop being bad and start being good so that we can deserve forgiveness, God just shakes His head. We are attempting to do the impossible while at the same time rejecting what He has done on our behalf.

This is the first implication of the resurrection of Christ – you are forgiven. But there is a second implication I want to bring out, and that is that because Jesus came back from the dead we are going to come back from the dead too.

Look at verse 20 again. Paul says:

[Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-22]

In this passage Paul says, it isn't just Jesus who gets resurrected, it is the rest of us too. Everyone who is in Christ is going to get a new body.

But there is some confusion about what this new body is going to be like, and what we are going to do with it. I'm not going to ask for a show of hands, but you have no doubt seen pictures of people turned into cute angels sitting on clouds and playing harps.

I hope you aren't surprised, but this idea comes from a combination of Michelangelo's paintings in the Sistine Chapel and the Medieval Italian poet Dante, not the Bible. There is nothing in the Bible that says anything like this.

Another myth some people believe is that heaven is going to be boring. I remember having a dream as a 10-year-old that I had died and gone to heaven. And I found myself in a church service that was going to last forever. I was so scarred when I woke up I never wanted to go to heaven!

Fortunately the Bible doesn't say anything like this either. Instead what we get is the assurance that life with the Creator is going to be one full of purpose as we partner with Him in ruling the new creation like He designed us to do in Genesis. And it's going to be a life of joy and peace as we find ourselves perfectly living out our Father's will. And other than that there aren't many details in Scripture. But one thing the Bible does clearly say is that there is a physical resurrection coming. So let's look at what this resurrection will be like. A few verses later Paul says:

So it will be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor. It is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (1 Corinthians 15:41-44)

...

I need to stop here for a moment and just let an uncomfortable truth settle in. And that is that you are going to die. And not only that, but death could come at any moment.

Now our culture hates death. We love youth and vitality, and death kind of gets relegated to a back burner. But the reality is that no matter what precautions you take; no matter how much work you put into eating the right foods and getting enough exercise and not doing too many bad things, it's never going to be enough to wipe out the threat of death on your life.

In fact the threat of death is so real it's just around the corner for all of us. All it takes is one car accident, or one cancer cell, or just a jog around the park, or an undiagnosed medical condition. Even just a microscopic virus can do it. Or just the right bacteria in the air or on a doorknob. Even something incredibly small can kill you. And the bad news is even if none of these things get you, then you are going to die of nothing. But rest assured death is coming; the only thing we don't know is when.

Now yes, eat your greens, and avoid GMO's, and get some exercise, and for crying out loud use the sanitizer at the door before shaking my hand – take good care of your body and mine. But there is nothing we can do to stop death.

...

One thing I've learned over the last five years is that tragedy is no respecter of health or age. Death strikes the most unlikely people.

But here is what Paul is saying in verse 42. Our bodies now are weak and fragile. They can be snuffed out in a moment. They are perishable, and dishonourable – there is certainly something dishonourable about death. If you've ever been around it you know that death is ugly. Dead people don't look like themselves. But Paul says things are going to be different with our new bodies. Our new bodies are going to be glorious. They are going to be powerful and spiritual. They aren't going to be susceptible to death.

And we get some of this with Jesus. So after Jesus was resurrected He has a physical body. He lets the disciples touch Him. And He eats food with them. But then He also just appears behind locked doors, and teleports away from the disciples in Emmaus in the blink of an eye. There's something glorious about Him.

So we aren't going to be floating on clouds, we are going to have real bodies. But our bodies are going to be different, and they are going to be better than they are now. They aren't going to grow thirsty or hungry. They aren't going to need coffee just to get out of bed. But at the same time there is a promise that there is going to be feasting and drinking at the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. We are going to get new physical bodies.

...

There is one last implication that Christ's resurrection brings out for us in this chapter. And this has brought me joy as I've meditated on it. And that starts in verse 50:

[Read 1 Corinthians 15:50-57]

So the picture is that there is a moment approaching when Jesus is going to come back. The trumpet is going to sound, and in that moment those who've died are going to be given new bodies, and those who haven't died are going to be given new bodies, and everything in reality is going to be re-created.

And the big thing that is going to be different is that death will have lost its sting. We won't fear death anymore because death won't happen anymore. There won't be any disease, or weakness, or age deterioration. And there won't be any anger or unforgiveness or bitterness. We are going to find ourselves in the midst of a new creation where the old has gone and the new has come.

And the greatest glory of that moment is not that we are going to see old friends, or be rid of our aches and pains, or be young again. The greatest glory will be that we will be with God and worshipping Him. Revelations tells us of that day:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and He will dwell with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. (Revelations 21:3-4)

It's when our eyes behold God that our tears will be wiped away. Friends, heaven's not going to be about us, so it's people who are about God who are going to be there. That's what eternity is about. But for those of us who are about God our hope isn't just for today, our hope is for tomorrow and forever.

...

Paul concludes chapter 15 with these words:

[Read 1 Corinthians 15:58]

Paul says Jesus' resurrection affects the way we live today. So Christ-followers view everything differently. We look at money different than other people because we aren't just living for today. We aren't Eat-drink-and-be-merry people for tomorrow we die. We are people who are storing up treasure in heaven where moth and rust will not destroy because Jesus is coming back, and He is bringing His reward. And so we live putting our trust in that day.

So friends, do we enjoy today? Absolutely! Enjoy your long weekend with your family. Enjoy some good Easter feasting. There are lots of commands in the Bible to party. But do it knowing that today's party is not ultimate. And that's good news, because today is uncertain. There is no promise that we or our loved ones are going to live the rest of the day. But there is a promise that those of us who are in Christ have a bright future with God before us. And this hope is built upon the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Jesus' resurrection changes everything.