

A Big “If”

A sermon by the Very Reverend Timothy Jones
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1 Corinthians 15:12-20 / Luke 6:17-26

If Christ is raised from the dead,
everything changes.

If I had to summarize our morning’s first reading
from the Letter to the Corinthians,
that line would do it.

*If Christ is really raised from the dead,
everything is different.*

Now, if I had to summarize *both* New Testament
readings, Corinthians and Luke, I’d say,
If Christ is raised from the dead,
not only does everything change,
some *particular* things change.
If Christ was raised from death,
we will see differences in the ways we live and
move and have our being,
and especially in ways we relate to others.

For the resurrection is not only an eternal promise,
but an everyday reality—a power in us.

Now “if Christ was raised from the dead ...”
is a pretty big statement.

And that is a significant “if” at the beginning.
That “if” appears seven times in our reading.

As Paul put it, in one,
“*If* Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile,
and you are still in your sins.”

Let me tell you one way that “if”
played out in my own life.

When I was a young person, in high school,
my faith, which had been mostly a matter of not-
very-excited obligation, had come alive.

I wanted to grow deeper, though.
Someone recommended to me a book to help me
with some of the questions I had.
Questions like, “Did Jesus actually
rise from the dead?”

The book was simply titled, *Basic Christianity*,
written by a Church of England
priest and scholar, John Stott.

Stott explored, in one chapter, some of the ways
people discount the resurrection's drama,
its amazingness.

Some argue, he said, for instance, that Jesus didn't
really die in the first place.

We are told in the Gospels that Joseph of
Arimathea and Nicodemus took his body down
from the Cross, wrapped it in strips of linen and
laid it in a tomb. And maybe Jesus wasn't really
dead, the theory goes.

But, asks Stott, "are we then seriously to believe
that Jesus had just temporarily lost consciousness?
That after the rigors and pains of trial, mockery,
flogging and crucifixion he could survive thirty-
six hours in a stone tomb with neither warmth nor
food nor medical care? ... That then, weak and
sickly and hungry, he could appear to the disciples

in such a way as to give them the impression that
he had vanquished death?”

Or Stott takes on the argument that either the
Roman or religious authorities “had heard that
Jesus had talked about being raised from the dead,
and were afraid that someone would pretend it
had happened. So, in order to forestall trickery,
they took the precaution
of confiscating the corpse.”

But Christians were proclaiming the good news of
Christ’s resurrection, and the news spread rapidly.
The religious leaders were anxious about people
converting, the Romans about people rebelling.

If they *had* it, why wouldn’t
the authorities not simply produce the corpse,
disproving the disciples’ claim,
so central in their proclamation?

No, Stott goes on, “We are told [rather] of ten
separate appearances of the risen Lord ... he
appeared to Mary Magdalene, to the women

returning from the tomb, to Peter, to two disciples on the road to Emmaus, to the ten gathered in the upper room, to the eleven including Thomas a week later, to ‘more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time’, ... to James, to some disciples including Peter, Thomas, Nathanael, James and John by the side of Lake Galilee. ... and Paul adds himself at the end of his list of those who saw the risen Jesus in 1 Corinthians 15,” as we heard in today’s reading.

Throughout the New Testament, I began to see, you get that certain sense again and again: The body was gone. The women come to dress the body and prepare it for burial, and the tomb is empty. Astonishingly empty.

Jesus was out and about and alive. And *something* turned the disciples from discouraged, disappointed band of followers into a vibrant movement.

So, Paul, as we heard today, said something has happened. Really: Jesus was buried and then raised from the dead.

Paul isn't interested in inspirational principles or spiritual lessons.

For Paul this is not wishfully pious sentiment, but a certainty on which to base a life.

Now Paul was talking to a church that prided themselves on their supposed spirituality.

They were hyper-spiritual, though, so much that they preferred lofty spiritual musings over a faith rooted in an earthly body and the realities of life.

Some apparently taught that Jesus' immortal soul just somehow drifted up to heaven.

Or, they said, it's the spirit of the resurrection that matters, the beautiful idea of it.

It's inspirational but not actual reality.

But after the gut-punch of the crucifixion to the women and disciples,

I don't see a mere devotional thought doing it--
changing them. Empowering them. Paul is saying,

Jesus was raised. Bet your life on it.

Bet your everlasting life on it.

But as I said earlier,

I have both passages in mind today:

Luke and 1 Corinthians.

You can argue for a historical resurrection and
miss the point.

Because if it happened, Jesus' actual resurrection
has relevance not just for the life to come,
but also for how we live with others.

For our faith is a risen Christ
has concreteness to it. It looks a certain way.

Whether the resurrection happened or not matters.
But whether it happens in your actual life matters,
too. In the way you live and relate, it matters.

So it's not enough to declare Jesus' resurrection;

if it's true, if you believe it's true,
that reality will change how you live.

And if, there's that word again, *if*, if true,
we are talking not just about a resurrection belief,
but a resurrection life.

Not just eternal truths but daily realities.
The risen Jesus will not only bring joy to your
heart, it will shape how you live with others.

Which is where the Gospel comes in.
In Luke's Gospel Jesus promises joy to those who
are poor, who live with humility even when
persecuted. In next week's reading, he goes on to
talk about loving your enemies.

Matthew's version of the beatitudes (statements
that begin with "blessed ...") has to do even more
with qualities of kind relating.

Like when Matthew reports Jesus saying,

“Blessed are the meek” or “Blessed are the peacemakers,” for example.

This past week I had an experience I won't forget. I was invited, along with seven other large-church deans and rectors, to a dinner with our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, at his residence at 815 Second Avenue, our denominational headquarters.

I was honored and excited.

At Bishop Michael's dining room table, I found him to have all the charm and humor in person that he exhibited during his Royal Wedding sermon last year, broadcast around the world to an estimated one billion viewers.

He's got a ready laugh and exudes joy from his faith in Jesus. Our conversation turned serious, and we all talked about challenges facing the church, and the divides in our church, especially so-called liberal/conservative tensions.

We all acknowledged how the conversations get heated and passionate, and sometimes deteriorate into each side characterizing the other either as unfaithful or narrow.

There's lots of moral indignation rather than respectful dialogue.

There's a temptation to try to shame the other person, to scoff at those on the other side.

I understand that temptation.

Well, Curry said, we in the Episcopal Church "have to grow deeper." When there are deep disagreements, he said, "We have to see the soul of the person, not just the position that person holds; we have to look deeper into the soul."

And then he talked about Martin Luther King, Jr. how for all King's fervent speeches, King talked of showing courtesy to all.

And, Bishop Michael reminded us, King said that the goal of the work of racial reconciliation goes deeper than winning.

No, King stressed, our goal in fighting for justice is “not just victory but reconciliation.”

Not making sure your position prevails at all costs, but that you show reverence to the person in front of you.

That’s hard. We want to insist on our way.

But I come back to the resurrection, and the difference it makes in us, the transforming power it brings to the table.

I noticed something this week reading Luke that underscores that, how Luke sets up Jesus’ teaching about the promise of blessing to those who live by Jesus’ way in a striking way.

For, Luke tells us, the people had come not just to hear Jesus teaching, but also “to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.”

The people sensed so much life and power in Jesus that they “were trying to touch him, for power came out from him.”

That's the setting for Jesus talking about a new,
more radically kind way of living together.

In our brokenness and pride, we need that help.

In our collect earlier we prayed, "Mercifully
accept our prayers; because in our weakness we
can do nothing good without you."

Luke points to the source of power in us to live
like Jesus calls us to live.

It's a big if, if Jesus was raised from the dead.

But if he was, I should say, rather,
because he was, there's a world of hope for us.

Paul wrote, after all those ifs, *in fact*.

"But in fact, Christ has
been raised from the dead."

It's astonishing to say,
but the risen Jesus is here, alive, at work.
How glad I am that he will empower us to be the
people he calls us to be.