



1 Corinthians 15:1-11

“WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH CONFESSED”

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“Following Christ at City Center!”

I. SERMON TEXT

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 (RSV)

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast - unless you believed in vain.

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

II. SCRIPTURE SHEET AND SERMON

I CORINTHIANS 15:1-11 "WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH CONFESSED"

First Delivered 51-52AD, Ultimate Importance

1) vv.1-2 INTRODUCTION: IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL: PRESENT & FUTURE..

General Resurrection Still Future; Jesus' Resurrection = Preview

- 1 Now I would remind you brethren (i.e. brothers and sisters), //12:3, Paul's Objective: Church Needs Reminders!
in what terms **I PREACHED** to you "the gospel" (good news), 2:2, Recalls Founding Of The Church, Basics
Gospel Through Persons, //Formula Of 11:23
- a which you received, Past Reception Acts 18:1-23, At Conversion/Baptism
b in which you stand, Present Position Positive Assessment By Paul
2 c by which you are saved (lit. evangelized) Future Hope Ultimate Kingdom
b' if you hold it fast- Present Challenge Condition: If Persevere
a' unless you **BELIEVED** **IN VAIN.** Past Possibility Risk & Warning //vv.58, If A Sham//vv.12-19
Common Ground, Full Of Great Possibilities, Peril

2) vv.3-9 TRADITION/CREED CONCERNING DEATH, RESURRECTION, APPEARANCES.

vv.3b-5 Originally In Aramaic, What Is The Good News? Jesus' History!

a) v.3a Jewish Rabbinic Formula For The Passing On Important Oral Traditions Exactly.

Within 3-5 Years Of Jesus' Death (33-35AD), Common In Early Church

Gospel Has Content & Context, Faithfully Passed On //11:23

Nothing More Important! How Paul Evaluated This Creed

Appeal To Tradition, Received From Eye-Witnesses, Early 30's

Not Something Paul Created; Values Faithfulness, Not Novelty

b) vv.3b-9 An Early Creed: The Tradition Concerning Christ. **FOUR ACTION VERBS**

2 Longer Statements (3 parts), 2 Shorter (1 part), Islam Rejects The Death

Good Friday 1 that Christ died/ for our sins/ according to the scriptures, Innocent, True(Tacitus) **(1) DIED (Atonement)**

Is. 53:5-6, 8-9, 11-12 (LXX), Zech. 12:10, Buried (Judges 8:32, Acts 2:29)

4 2 that he was buried, Tomb Was Filled With Body, Then Emptied! **(2) WAS BURIED**

He Was Raised And Continues So = Perfect Passive Tense

Easter 1' that he was raised/ on the third day/ according to the scriptures, **(3) WAS RAISED (Father Thru Spirit)**

Hos. 6:2(LXX), Jonah 1:7, Mk. 8:31, Rom. 1:1-4, Ps. 16:9b-10, Acts 2:26b-27

5 2a' then he appeared to Cephas (Aramaic for Peter); (Lk. 24:34, 36) **(4a) APPEARED (List No 1)**

b then to "the twelve"; Jn. 21:19, Now Only Eleven, (Mt. 28:9-10, 16ff.)

6a c **then** he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, Not In Gospels

b (most of whom are alive, v.6b = Paul's Footnote, Check It Out!

40 Days though some have fallen asleep [i.e. died]). Seeing Risen Lord Not Prevent Death

Appeared = Was Allowed To Be Seen, Clear Sequence

7 A Skeptic a' Then he appeared to James (i.e. Jesus' brother); Unbelief: Jn.7:2-9 **(4b) APPEARED (List No. 2)**

b' then to all the apostles; Commissioned Ambassadors, Mt. 28:16-20, Acts 1:6-11

8 An Enemy c' (Last of all, as to "the one untimely born," he appeared to me.

9 For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, Testimony

because I persecuted the church of God." Phil. 3:4-5, Acts 8:1-3, Gal. 1:11-19

Paul's Appearance Is Equivalent, Gal. 1:18-2:10

1') vv.10-11 CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS OF THE GOSPEL: PRESENT WORK OF GRACE.

God Was Gracious To Paul! To Corinthians Above = New Life

10 a By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not **IN VAIN.** 3:10, Grace To Me Not Useless

b On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, Effort (not earning!) As A Response To Grace

b' though it was not I, Grace Bridges The Gap, Negation Of Pride

a' but the grace of God which is with me. Divine Synergy, Grace's Energy Within Me Was Effective

Not Many Gospels But One! Paul On Par With Apostles

11 Whether it was I or they, What Happened To One Is The Key For All

so **WE PREACH** and so you **BELIEVED.** Key Idea = Witnesses All Agree On Basic Message, vs. 15:12

SUMMARY OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN CREED (vv.3b-9).

Resurrection, His And Ours, Is Not Optional But Central

1) THE WHAT: Christ (Israel's Messiah) died

Resurrection At End Solves Theodicy Problem

THE WHY: For our sins, in our place

Not Immortality Of Soul But Resurrection Of The Dead

THE WHO: In accordance with the Scriptures (i.e. God's revealed will, not an accident)

HOW DO WE KNOW HE DIED? He was buried.

2) THE WHAT: He was raised (Passive tense = by the Father and thru the Holy Spirit)

THE WHEN: On the third day the empty tomb was discovered and the appearances began

THE WHO: In accordance with the Scriptures (i.e. God's revealed will)

HOW DO WE KNOW HE WAS RAISED? He appeared, the empty tomb is implied and assumed.

WHAT THE EARLY CHURCH CONFESSED

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received.”

Paul was not a slave of novelty but a servant of faithfulness.

1 C O R I N T H I A N S 1 5 : 3

It never happened before. Demi-Lee Brennan, at the time age fifteen and living in Australia, needed a new liver. In January ‘08 word got out she was the first known transplant patient to change blood types: O negative to O positive. She took on her donor’s immune system. Doctors assumed a mistake in the lab. Blood types can’t change; they’re like fingerprints- once yours, always yours. They now call her the *one-in-six-billion miracle*. What happened was that stem cells in Brennan's new liver invaded her marrow-taking over her immune system. She now has an entirely different kind of blood that welcomes life rather than carries death. "It's like my second chance at life," says Brennan.¹

This medical oddity is an image for the great possibility that lies at the heart of our faith, that the life of Jesus can be transplanted into us with surprising effects. What no one thought could change now changes: drunks become sober; adulterers faithful, the greedy find joy in giving, unbelievers come to love God, gossips guard the reputation of others, the self-absorbed find joy in serving. Brennan was right, “It’s like my second chance at life!” which is precisely why Jesus used the vivid image *born again* or *born from above* to describe the new life God gives.² When Jesus takes up residence through the presence of the Holy Spirit, a soul is raised from the dead, a candle is lit in a dark room. Our relationship with God begins to be healed. We enter a new world whose ways are learned from those who dwelt here before us; we call them the saints, and they are in every church as well as strung across history. There’s now new life within- life stronger than death that gives us a fresh start now and the promise of resurrection later on, as the end of the Nicene Creed announces with eager anticipation, “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”³

¹ PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 15:1-11.

² See John 3:1-21.

³ *The United Methodist Hymnal*, No. 880.

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I do not know how to understand my history apart from the presence of the risen Lord. The seed of new life was first planted in my young soul on Easter 1954 when at nine months old I was baptized- the certificate of which will soon hang in my office as a reminder who made the first move in this relationship: not me but him. That life was nurtured in the church; it weakened for a while due to neglect and distraction, then erupted again in a late adolescent conversion when- on July 5, 1972- I wandered into Saint David's Episcopal Church in Cheraw, S.C. about 11:00pm and surrendered the mess of my life. Forty years ago this coming Thursday! It had all the fireworks of a conversion, but it was- in hindsight, only a delayed repentance- like stretching a rubber band, then letting it snap back with a loud pop.

It is my passion to see people come to know and trust Jesus Christ as his followers, to have their bondages broken, their sins and guilt blotted out, and to enjoy his guidance and presence of his Spirit in the fellowship of the church so that one day- on that great day- they may not be raised to a judgment of condemnation but to life eternal and the enjoyment of the new creation.⁴ Like Paul I want to pass on faithfully what was given me, which is this potent message of new life in Christ as carried across the ages in the bosom of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church and displayed in all the various means of grace, one of which is Holy Scripture, to which we return again and again to hear from God together.⁵

The text I've chosen for our first Sunday is- by my reading- the most important passage in the New Testament. It's the earliest written report we have of the resurrection- which is the linchpin of our entire faith, because if Jesus is not alive with the life of God and available for interaction, the whole of Christian faith is a colossal fraud and we need to find a better use for Sunday mornings.⁶ The issue of inactive church members- those who used to be with us but are not longer- may be addressed here: they somehow missed how alive and relevant Christ is, and they quit because of boredom! If its just about rules and duties it's exhausting; but what if I could walk with Christ now? What is he could make me new?

Imbedded at the center of our passage is the earliest Christian creed in four lines and an extended footnote. It was not a statement Paul wrote but one he received shortly after his

⁴ U.M. doctrine teaches both in our Confession of Faith, "Article XII- The Judgment and the Future State. We believe all men stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; *the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation,*" thus two destinies.

⁵ On the means of grace as an organic whole with therapeutic intent, see William Abraham, *Canonical Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). On Scripture, see his new book *The Bible: Beyond The Impasse* (Dallas, TX: Highland Loch Press, 2012).

⁶ A point Paul makes later in 1 Cor. 15:13ff.

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conversion. The composition of this creed goes back to the early-to-mid-30's in the Jerusalem Church and may well have been written in Aramaic- the mother tongue of Jesus, before being translated into Greek. Paul quotes a formulation composed by those who knew Jesus in the flesh: Peter, James, the rest of the apostles. He received it as a sacred trust; he then passed it on to the Corinthians as part of his initial preaching. In a world where most could not read, the church needed a brief summary that could be memorized so everyone stayed on message. Same with the later Apostles' and Nicene Creeds which are expansions of the same core affirmations. So go back with me now into the mid-fifties of the first century as Paul reminds his converts of the essentials.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

1) vv.1-2 A Much-Needed Reminder.

When we think of sin we normally think of actions that violate God's law. But one of the greatest effects of the disease of sin is *amnesia*; we forget what's important. Sin is like AIDS: it leaves us open to deadly infections of evil; sin is also like the cruel creep of Alzheimers: we forget what was once compelling. Sin is not only a weakness or a wrong act but an eraser. This is why one of the most powerful forms of learning is to see again what we already know, "Yes, I remember that now. How could I have forgotten?" This is what Paul does in verse 1. He asks his spiritual children to remember their beginnings, "Now *I would remind you* brothers and sisters, in what terms I (first) preached to you the good news." Before he reviews the content, Paul pauses to remind them of its implications- which is another powerful learning strategy. Tell people why it matters- what are the benefits and risks- and this Paul does this in five phrases: It is "the good news:

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------|------------------|
| 1) | which you received, | (in the past) |
| 2) | in which you stand, | (in the present) |
| 3) | by which you are saved, | (in the future) |
| 2') | if you hold it fast- | (in the present) |
| 1') | unless you believed in vain." | (in the past) |

In the past we received the gospel; in the present we stand within its borders; in the future we reach our destination, but only if we hold fast and do not give up. Paul's sweep across time is impressive. This is a *big* gospel with dynamic power to link us to God forever!

Did you notice the interplay in verse 1 and 2 between feet and hands? The gospel is a secure place "in which you stand." It's why we sing hymns like *Standing on the Promises*, so we will know where to place our feet and *take our stand*. But the gospel is not just a firm place to plant our feet; it's something we must actively grasp. "If you hold it fast," said Paul. Our feet stand; our hands hold on, which- when you think of it, is a lot like water skiing.

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You must stand, and you must hold on. Quit standing and you fall down. Quit holding on and you disconnect from the power source and sink. But if you stand on the gospel and hold on, the power God supplies will carry you through the whole of life and into the kingdom. We cannot save ourselves, just as we cannot ski on our own, but God saves no one without their consent and full participation. Paul was not a once-saved-always-saved-no-matter-what-you-do-Baptist. Neither was he a predestined-from-before-time-without-any-choice-in-the-matter Presbyterian. Paul was a Methodist! No one is saved without active consent and lifelong participation. You can say *No* to God, even if you once said *Yes*. The power of grace is there to pull us forward; the skis of the gospel supply the lift, but we must hold on with the many helps God supplies. Why else would Paul give them the downside as well? “...if you hold fast- in the present, *unless* you believed in vain- in the past.”

Jesus will never let go of you, but you might let go of him to take someone else’s hand. Judas did; he walked into the darkness after three years.⁷ We must, by the power of grace, choose Christ at every intersection. I’m glad you were once baptized, glad you trusted Christ as a teenager, glad you went forward at a revival, glad you had a touch of the Spirit, but what about now? Are you still skiing, or have you dropped the rope? Christ is faithful; he gives strength to hold on, but he will not coerce us. Grace is persuasive; it is not irresistible.⁸ Jesus is meant to be actively followed, not merely admired. “Remember,” said Paul to the church at Corinth, “and let me remind you of the promise and peril of this message.” On Sundays we set life in its most ultimate categories. This stuff really matters!

2) vv.3-9 The Sacred Tradition Paul Received And Passed On.

Paul’s second move is to remind his hearers this is not a faith he invented but one he received after he was abruptly apprehended by the risen Lord on the road to Damascus: verse 3: “For *I delivered to you* as of first importance *what I also received....*” Paul the persecutor became Paul the proclaimer because of a resurrection appearance; he was last of all, but worthy to be added to the list of witnesses.⁹ The Jesus he initially thought was a Jewish false prophet turned out to be the one who sent Isaiah and Jeremiah and whose glory followed Israel out of Egypt. Jesus is Israel’s Messiah, and in him God has returned to his people as king,

⁷ John 13.

⁸ For a hard critique of Calvinism in favor of Arminianism, see Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2011).

⁹ See Acts 9:1-31 for Paul’s conversion story, 1 Cor. 9:1 for its significance.

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though not in the way they expected.¹⁰ Peter and James were Paul's teachers; they told him the history of the one who blinded him with the light of divine revelation.

I am proud to say I have absolutely nothing new to give you during my tenure; all I have to say is already in the Scripture, in the Creeds, in our Doctrines and Hymnal. If you want something trendy, start our own religion. Find some demon to help you launch a new cult. Appeal to the afternoon TV crowd; talk about self-esteem and finding the God within; promise success and you will have plenty of followers. Copy one of the feel-good preachers; you know- the ones with *big-hair* wives! But if you want old and proven and as fresh as each new day, stick with the received faith. I want nothing other than the classic Trinitarian faith of the church.¹¹ I was not ordained to major in my experience or some new thing that tickles peoples ears; I was set apart to preach the church's faith- even contrary to my experience: *the old, old story of Jesus and his love*. Self-help is no gospel at all; I need a Savior!

Paul's third move was to quote the earliest Christian creed.¹² The gospels were not yet written, though the stories that compose them were alive through the storytelling of the disciples. So how do we keep the core message clear and straight? Answer: with a simple four line creed, structured in parallel for easy memorization. So if someone asks you what Christians believe, quote the Apostle's Creed, then use each line as a topic for dialog. It's all there: from creation to consummation, from day one to the last day. It's how the church did evangelism from the beginning. They agreed on the message and made it memorable.

One of the things Paul received early on was a brief, highly structured summary of the message. How do we know this? Because he says as much in verse 3, "For I *delivered to you* as of first importance *what I also received*." This is a formula for the passing on of

¹⁰ For the larger story, see N.T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story Of The Gospels* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2012).

¹¹ See Thomas Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper, 1989), ix-xv.

¹² The literature on 15:1-11 is vast. A good approach is to consult recent commentaries for a summary of the technical work. I recommend Charles Talbert, *Reading Corinthians* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002); Craig Keener, *1-2 Corinthians* (Cambridge, England.: Cambridge Press, 2005); Ben Witherington, *Conflict & Community In Corinth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1995); Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2000); Richard Hayes, *First Corinthians* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1997); also N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2003).

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tradition.¹³ This is registered mail in which the content has been memorized by the carrier.

Why make so much of this? For reasons of evidence. Our faith is grounded in historical events, not myths and legends. I Corinthians was written in the mid 50's of the first century, and in that letter Paul quotes a tradition he received twenty years earlier. It was formulated by eye-witnesses who'd known Jesus in the flesh.¹⁴ Here there are four facts: Jesus died, was buried, was raised and appeared. There is also the weighty meaning of those facts. The cross was "for our sins" and "according to the scriptures." What happened in Jesus was God's doing because we needed it! He was enabled to appear again because he was bodily raised and sent back to confirm his new status. This is not the whole of the faith, but it is the minimum. Our faith is about Jesus, the one who reveals God in all his life. Gordon Fee summarizes the meaning of this mini-creed in these words: "God loves sinners and has made provisions through Christ's death and resurrection to overcome their alienation, so that they too may know divine forgiveness and have a sure hope for the future."¹⁵ In Jesus God takes responsibility for what's wrong with us and our world by coming to the rescue!

So where do we begin? With the conviction Good Friday was no accident. It was the will of God the Messiah be crucified, both *by our sins* in an act of judicial and religious violence and *for them* as an atonement. Line one is that the unexpected has happened: *The Messiah died/ for our sins/ according to the Scriptures*. Whatever your theory of the atonement- how God removes the blockage of our sins and crimes, here is displayed the lengths to which God will go to offer us a way back and a way home. The barriers are removed because God takes responsibility for our mess in Jesus, who sucks the poison out of the snakebite and dies in our place. Jesus does not change the heart of God regarding forgiveness; he displays its final cost. And because God personally paid the price, you don't have to because you can't. Someone else carried your burden and mine.

Line two then verifies line one. How do we know Jesus died? Because *he was buried*. This is easy to overlook until you realize that if the death was not real, then neither was the resurrection. Jesus did not live to a ripe old age in Egypt or India. This is one reason

¹³ For a thorough discussion see Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 101-105.

¹⁴ See Gary Habermas, *Did Jesus Rise From The Dead?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987), 15-32 for a summary of the above historical reconstruction.

¹⁵ *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1987), 737.

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the fourth paragraph of the Koran teaches that Jesus did not really die on the cross.¹⁶ He only appeared to or else was replaced by someone who looked like him but was not him in fact. The Koran teaches Allah took Jesus to heaven alive in an exaltation, not in a bodily resurrection after a real death.¹⁷ This leaves the door open for Muhammed to come along six centuries later as the last, greatest prophet. But the death of Jesus is not just Christian teaching; it is verified by independent Roman and Jewish sources.¹⁸ And, if the blooded and pierced Jesus had somehow revived and walked out of the tomb, no Jew would have ever called it *resurrection* or told stories of multiple appearances in which he stepped in and out of space and time, six of which Paul lists. What happened to Jesus was not resuscitation back to this life but resurrection after death into the kingdom with a new body.

We would never have had the first two lines of the creed about Good Friday if we did not first have lines three and four about Easter. It is the resurrection that throws light back across his death and makes it more than the execution of a political criminal. It tells us who was crucified by answering the question, What did God think of him and his obedience? Line three hints at the discovery of the empty tomb on the first day of the week, "...that he was raised/ on the third day/ according to the Scriptures..." Early Christians would never have used the word *resurrection* had there still been a body in the tomb; *vision* perhaps, but not *resurrection*- which is something which happens to a corpse. In line with classic Christianity our United Methodist *Articles of Religion* are clear on this point:

"Christ did truly rise again from the dead, *and took again his body*, with all things appertaining to the perfection of man's nature, wherewith he ascended into heaven, and there sitteth until he return to judge all men at the last day."¹⁹

¹⁶ Sura 4: 157-158, "And for claiming that they killed the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, the messenger of GOD. In fact, *they never killed him, they never crucified him* - they were made to think that they did. All factions who are disputing in this matter are full of doubt concerning this issue. They possess no knowledge; they only conjecture. *For certain, they never killed him.* Instead, GOD raised him to Him; GOD is Almighty, Most Wise" (Italics mine).

¹⁷ For a debate between Paul and Muhammed, see Michael Licona, *Paul Meets Muhammed: A Christian - Muslim Debate On The Resurrection* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006). Here apologetics meets theater!

¹⁸ Tacitus, Josephus, Lucian, Mara ben Serapion: none of whom were believers.

¹⁹ *The United Methodist Book of Discipline, 2008*, 60. For a treatment of the Article on the resurrection we share with the Anglicans, see Bishop John Rogers, *Essential Truths For Christians: A Commentary on the Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles*

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The tomb that was filled with a corpse is now emptied of the same.²⁰ But that alone is not enough. Could it be there were grave robbers, or else they went to the wrong tomb? No. Because *then he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve*, and on and on in a cascade of official appearances to which Paul adds his own as the final oddity. A real death, a real burial, an empty tomb, then the evidence from which they drew the proper inference of resurrection, “then he appeared,” not just once, but many times. And not just to his supposed friends but to a skeptical brother- James, and to a sworn enemy- Paul.

The resurrection means Jesus is alive with the life of God and a new body with surprising powers. He has inherited the same kingdom he announced. He is the window into the future. He is Lord and God. His every word and deed is revelation from God, which is why reading the gospels through the lens of resurrection is the way we learn to know the one we follow. To join his movement is to be aligned with the deepest grain of the universe. He hears our prayers and weaves them into his will. The cross was a necessity, but not the end of his work. Jesus now reigns at God’s right hand, prays for us, and is patiently bending all history in his direction. Our faithful dead are safe; our children can have a future. His Spirit is with us. Our sins are forgiven. One day we will have an amazing new *trans-physical* body like his. This is what you offer when you speak of Jesus; it is nothing less than the entire remaking of human life and all creation. And when the spark of faith leaps from your life to theirs, one more person is recruited from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. German theologian Wolfhart Pannenburg put it bluntly, “The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”²¹

Attacks on Christian faith will always end up as attacks on the person of Jesus, and in this they are right on target. You know the catalog: it’s a myth, a lie, a big church coverup; the gospels are forgeries; Judas was quite a nice fellow; Jesus had a lover and children; it’s a grand conspiracy; the church got it all wrong, and on and on they go because behind them is the biggest Liar of all. This is an intellectually and morally demanding faith, simple perhaps, but not easy, and we must be prepared to answer the challengers.

So what, Pastor Phil? So God rescued Jesus, what’s it mean for me? It means, first of all, that God who made it all is as Jesus portrayed him. If Jesus was raised, not only does

(Blue Bell, PA: Classical Anglican Press, 2011); Gerald Bray, *The Faith We Confess: An Exposition of the Thirty-Nine Articles* (London, England: Latimer Trust, 2009).

²⁰ On philosophical issues, see Robert Stewart, editor, *The Resurrection of Jesus: John Dominic Crossan and N.T. Wright in Dialog* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 2006).

²¹ PreachingToday.com search under 1 Cor. 15:1-11.

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God exist but is the kind of God who is interested in rescuing us from sin, death, and the devil. God is *our Father in heaven whose kingdom is on the way and on display*. It means the world is not a closed cause-and-effect machine; the unusual happens. It means Jesus is the God-approved outlet for divine revelation. Resurrection is the ultimate seal of approval. Jesus is God with a human face. So pursue him; seek him out! The church- for all its faults- is the people entrusted with the truth about the Triune God. Dr. Michael Green writes:

"There is... much to admire, much to learn in other religions, as well as much that is cruel and disgusting.... But world religions do not contain anything good and true which cannot be found in Christianity. And none of them will tell you about a God who loves you enough to die for you, to rise from the grave as a pledge of your future, and be willing here and now to come and share your life with you.... Islam has ninety-nine names for God, but none of them is Father. Hinduism can offer you no power of forgiveness to break the iron grip of karma. The Maharishi cannot come and indwell his disciples."²²

Resurrection means one day we will stand before this Jesus for a true accounting of our lives and receive a resurrection body like that of Jesus with marvelous new powers. Just as God transformed the corpse of Jesus, God will transform the entire broken, bedraggled cosmos into the new heavens and the new earth. Easter is a glimpse in time of what's ahead at the end, and it makes us permanently a people of hope. In Jesus the future is brought into the present as preview. Today- our first day together- it means the Living One wants to do business with us. Christ is alive and available; he's still messin' with people like us and offering his churches a new future. We are not a memorial society for a dead hero; we are followers of a living Lord who has plans for us. Discovering just what those are through prayer and discernment and faith and risk is a big part of our future.

1') vv.10-11 With Energy That Comes From God.

When I was a pastor at Columbia I prayed with five men in the church kitchen on Tuesday mornings. One morning Jim Baker prayed, "Lord, we thank you for Pastor Phil. He has so much energy; why, he's almost radioactive!"

I laughed out loud- *the nuclear pastor!* Some of this energy is no doubt *Type A* personality or *first-born-son* syndrome; some may be neurotic and over-caffeinated, but much of it- I believe, is the energy of God's grace at work. We are not saved by works but by grace, but this loving energy from God- once received- gives passion and vision.

Paul and I are brothers. He came to terms with his own peculiar history and affirmed,

²² *The Empty Cross of Jesus* (Downer's Grove, ILL: Inter-Varsity, 1984), 129.

1 Corinthians 15:1-11 13

"But by the grace God I am what I am...." Me too! He also knew that the grace of God was the power which flowed from God's generating station to light him up like a light bulb, "and his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary," brags Paul, "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me." Whether you are ten or fifty or ninety, the grace of God will energize you with faith and hope and work in the kingdom. This is what the love of this great God does to us; it does not leave us passive.

No guilt trip, only a question: What work has Christ called you to? Have you asked him? Jesus' resurrection is not a fairy tale. It's a disturbing fact with implications for every life. Jesus Christ is alive, and he's still recruiting men and women and boys and girls to become his followers and receive a piece of his work. Don't get to the end of your life and say, "Why didn't I?" Respond. Open to the tug of his presence and be prepared to receive a commission in his army. This is the good news "which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, but *only* if you hold it fast- unless you believed in vain." How sad!

CONCLUSION

A woman once wrote the radio preacher J. Vernon McGee: "Our preacher said Jesus just swooned on the cross and that the disciples nursed him back to health. What do you think?"

McGee replied: "Dear Sister, beat your preacher with a leather whip for thirty-nine heavy strokes. Nail him to a cross. Hang him in the sun for six hours. Run a spear through his heart. Embalm him. Put him in an airless tomb for three days. Then see what happens."²³

I'm betting on two things. That Jesus died and rose, and that the church got the story right. It was the only medicine strong enough to heal me forty years ago, and it's the only cure I have to offer, now and at your death. The hope of this church is not the new preacher and not some new, snazzy program- though there is a place for leadership and new options. Our hope for a turn-around and a long burning spiritual fire is that we turn to the risen Jesus, read his stories for insight, seek him with all our hearts, repent of whatever he identifies as individual and corporate sin, and give him the radical worship and obedience he richly deserves. And if you want something trendier or more easily digested, they may have sent you the wrong preacher, and we are stuck with each other for a while! I come here as his forty-year follower with all the lumps and bumps from the ride, and- hopefully- after a season among you of being checked out and examined, Googled and interrogated, as a pastor worth following. We have important work to do, the most important of which is to remember that life is high stakes and that Jesus is truly alive and always near.

Phil Thrailkill, Main Street UMC, July 1, 2012

²³ Idem.

III. STUDY QUESTIONS

vv.1-2

1. Note how in vv.1-11 the words *preached*, *believed*, and *in vain* open and close the paragraph (vv.1-2//vv.10-11). Why is preaching necessary for believing?
2. How is *the good news from the apostles* the key to our present and to our future?

vv.3-9

3. Many in our day see *Creeds* as boring words from long ago. What's exciting and engaging about the creed Paul recites? What would change about life if you entered the meaning of its words about Jesus being alive and available to his people?
4. Why is it important to have a brief summary of the faith that's easily memorized? Why is it important that the church agree on the basics?
5. What does it mean to confess, "Christ died for *my* sins and was raised"
6. Why is it important that there were resurrection appearances to various audiences?

vv.10-11

7. How is v.10 a statement of deep self-acceptance and hope?
 8. What new energies and dreams has Jesus Christ stirred in your heart?
 9. Francis of Assisi is quoted as saying, "Preach always, and- when necessary- use words." What is true about this saying? What is false?
 10. Why does Paul say *we* instead of *I* in v.11? How is the gospel a community affair?
 11. What questions do you have about the bodily resurrection of Jesus and its implications for faithful discipleship in our day?
 12. Has there been a time when you were vividly aware of Jesus' presence? When? Who have you shared it with? How might it be a bridge for them?
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IV. WHAT NOW? POSSIBLE ACTION STEPS

1. Order the N.T. Wright book *Surprised By Hope* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008) and read it carefully, then call me for a discussion. It's a game changer!
2. If a visual learner, Go to YouTube "Tom Wright Resurrection" for a 10 minute video.
3. Find a place to be quiet. Put your hands in your lap, palms up in a gesture of openness to God. Pray, "Risen Jesus, come near that I may follow you." Then note what comes to mind, and if it requires a risky act of love, do it! Bring me a report!
4. Read John's resurrection accounts in chapters 20-21. You will find Jesus playfully dealing with Mary Magdalene, the disciples and Thomas. Why so playful?

V. A RESURRECTION PRAYER

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**Almighty God, our heavenly Father,
you are our light, our beauty, and our life.
In the resurrection of Jesus your new creation is already begun.
Death has been marked for final destruction,
and the kingdom of evil and darkness has been defeated.
You have served the world notice that Jesus is Lord of all
by raising him from the dead and vindicating all that he was.
What you began in him, continue in us your church,
that empowered by the Holy Spirit
we may bear witness to the freedom of sins forgiven,
to the joy of a life of love and service,
and to the ultimate re-creation of all that you have made,
now and in the age to come.
Make of us an outpost of hope and a colony of your kingdom.
In the mighty name of Jesus Christ, the risen Lord, we pray.
Amen.**
