

Resurrection Life
1 Corinthians 15:12-19

Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church was a frustrated letter, dealing with a laundry list of problems in that church. But at the end, in chapter 15, he tries to remind them why they are followers of Christ to begin with. It's all about the resurrection. We read chapter 15, verses 12-19.

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

In Matthew 3, John the Baptist was preaching a baptism of repentance one day when he looked up and saw some religious leaders listening. Angrily, he shouted out, "You brood of vipers! You don't know what repentance is! Show me works worthy of repentance!" You see, for John, repentance was not just feeling sorry about sin; it was taking that repentance to heart and changing the way you live. Repentance that's just a feeling of remorse isn't really repentance. In the book of James, James says the same thing to some people who had misunderstood Paul. Paul was always going on about salvation by faith, not by performing religious duties like getting circumcised or following kosher. Unfortunately, some people had taken that further, suggesting that faith had nothing to do with actions at all, but was just *believing* in Jesus. James had no time for such nonsense. "What good is faith that doesn't lead to works? That's a dead faith! Bet you can't show me what faith without works looks like. I'll show you my faith *by* my works." The consistent message here is that repentance, faith, worship, belief are all supposed to change us – our thoughts, our feelings, our decisions, and our actions. If your belief doesn't change how you live, that's not belief. James says, "You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means."

And here we are on Easter Sunday, the celebration of what is unquestionably the central belief of the Christian faith: that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. This was the core message of every sermon recorded in the book of Acts – the one non-negotiable. As Paul says in our reading

from 1 Corinthians 15, it is the defining belief of followers of Jesus, and everything else builds on that foundation. If Christ didn't rise from the dead, Paul says, we're a bunch of liars and idiots. If Christ didn't rise, then nobody does, and if nobody rises – if this life is all that there is – then we are of all people the most to be pitied. This one belief – that Christ rose from the dead, blazing a trail to eternal life for the rest of us – is the center of Christianity. This we believe.

But, as I've just pointed out, believing something is supposed to be more than just intellectual agreement or a nice warm hopeful feeling. Genuine belief is supposed to transform our decisions and our actions as well. But what does that look like in this case? What, as John the Baptist might put it, are works worthy of resurrection? Or, as James would say, how do we show our belief in resurrection by our works? Let's think about that for a few minutes today.

The first thing I think of, from my years attending members' deathbeds, is the different ways that people face death. Most humans are terrified of death, to the point that we refuse to think about it or even to acknowledge consciously that it is real. Anthropologist Ernest Becker, in his book *The Denial of Death*, argues that this terrified denial is the central motivating force of the human condition, but no matter how hard we deny, how many cryogenic chambers we build, death eventually comes for us, and we *will* have to face it. Over the years, I have been present for many of those encounters. Some, even in the church of resurrection, face it with abject terror – the bogeyman they could no longer deny; for these, apparently, belief in resurrection had been inadequately internalized. But others are quite different. Those whose lives are most dedicated to Christ tend to regard death as something relatively insignificant. Paul himself is an example of this. Paul writes the book of Philippians from prison, expecting to be executed any day, and his musings on that reality are fascinating: "You know, I'm not sure what I prefer," he says in chapter 1. "If I die, I'll be with Christ. That'd be great, for me at least. On the other hand, I bet God's got more stuff for me to do here. Yeah. It's probably not yet. Bugger." And that's really his tone. There's no fear, no denial. That man believes in resurrection with his whole life.

But there's more to a resurrection life than just our attitude toward death. A resurrection life also shows remarkably little interest in the treasures of this world. That makes sense, if you think about it. If you believe that this life, bound by time and space, is only a brief preface to eternal life, then it *would* be hard to get too excited about things confined to this temporary existence. Jesus was insistent on this: "Why are you so anxious about the things of this world?"

The birds don't worry about that stuff, and their lives are shorter than yours. And don't lay up treasures on this earth. Guess what? They rot. Lay up treasures in heaven." So a resurrection life is one that looks beyond this world, regards its comforts and pleasures with only mild interest and its dangers, even death itself, with mild indifference, in favor of living life toward Christ. Sounds good, but does anybody actually do that? More than you might think. Take Aristides de Sousa Mendes, the Roman Catholic Portuguese consul in Bordeaux, France, during World War II. Portugal was neutral, and Mendes's orders were to issue no immigration visas to people fleeing the Nazis. Because his faith gave him different instructions, though, Mendes signed visas for Jewish refugees night and day. He got recall orders from Lisbon. He ignored them and kept on issuing visas. Thousands of them. They finally sent people to remove him forcibly from his office, and he was still signing papers as they dragged him away. In worldly terms, Mendes lost everything because of his actions: position, reputation, possessions. And I suppose that's very sad, but it also seems fairly clear that Mendes lost nothing that he hadn't already decided was worthless. He was living a resurrection life.

Mendes is not that unusual, either. He was one example, chosen at random, from a book called *The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust*, about Christians who sacrificed everything that this world cares about, because the everything that *they* were living for was already secure. There were young women who sacrificed their reputations by having babies out of wedlock that were actually Jewish babies that they took in and pretended they had given birth to. One woman had three of them – two of them only five months apart. Good thing Nazis apparently couldn't count. Or there was the Russian nun, Mother Mary, who helped so many Jews to escape that she ended up in Auschwitz herself. When her turn came to go to the gas chamber, her last living action was to surreptitiously pass her Gentile identification card to another prisoner. She wasn't concerned with her life, only what she could do with it for others. These are resurrection lives.

Now not every resurrection life is that dramatic, and not everyone has to give up everything. In fact, there are people living that quality of life all around us, but we don't usually notice them, because one of the treasures of this world that they find worthless is fame. But if you look more closely, they aren't hard to identify. They are weirdly peaceful (because the things that most people worry about aren't that important to them), unnaturally patient (because fretting about deadlines in this brief life feels a little silly), and they are surpassingly humble.

Let me read a quotation from a resurrection life. This is from Archbishop Óscar Romero of El Salvador, who was assassinated while serving Mass on March 24, 1980, in retaliation for his opposition to the military dictatorship of his nation. He had a weekly radio sermon, listened to all over El Salvador, and he began each sermon by reading aloud the names of those who had been murdered or tortured or “disappeared” by the government and militias that week. So, not subtle. Here is how San Romero describes the resurrection life: “It helps, now and then, to step back and take the long view. The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts: it is beyond our vision. We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is the Lord’s work . . . No sermon says all that should be said. No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession brings perfection. No pastoral visit brings wholeness. No program accomplishes the Church’s mission . . . [This] is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one day will grow. We water seeds already planted knowing they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. We provide yeast that affects far beyond our capabilities. We cannot do everything and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it very, very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord’s grace to enter and do the rest. We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the Master Builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future that is not our own.”

One more thing. When I consider what I’ve been calling the “resurrection life,” I have two reactions. First is a deep sense of rightness: yes, this is who we’re supposed to be. And second is the despairing thought, “Oh, God, I’m so far from that.” But here’s the good news. If resurrection faith is more than just agreeing that Christ rose, that changes the calculus. You see agreement faith is easy, but unforgiving. It’s a yes-or-no proposition, and if you choose wrong, you blew it. But if a genuine resurrection faith is about the values, the priorities, the choices, and the actions of the believer, that’s not an up or down vote but a growing process, and no single choice blows it. This day, perhaps, we act in humility and love and our faith grows. Tomorrow, maybe, we’ll be self-centered and caught up on petty anxieties or grudges, and we’ll slip back down the hill a bit. If so, that’s sad, but don’t beat yourself up about it. This is still the preseason. Real life hasn’t even started yet, and we have time. Remember that: we have time. So much time.

Because Christ is risen. He is risen indeed.

Final word: In the last line in our scripture reading today, Paul says, *If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.* He doesn't actually end that way, though. Let me read the next verse: *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.* Go this week and be a fruit for the resurrection.

Benediction: Christ is Risen. He is risen indeed.