

Easter and Resurrection

Easter, April 12, 2020

Normally we do not have Bible Study on Easter. We all have things to do, often with our families. There are Easter egg hunts or dinner with friends and family. Cindy and I are often away; this is when we would drive to Virginia to be with my parents and the rest of our family, so we would usually not be here at Easter. Well, things change. Especially this year. We find ourselves under siege by the corona virus that is plaguing the world directly. Also, as Christians, by a hostile world and culture. We find ourselves beleaguered, holed up in our homes, wondering about our futures both individual and as a community. We need hope. What better reason for hope than the gospel message! Especially on Easter, the day when, many years ago, Jesus rose from the dead as a sure sign of God's redeeming and saving love for us all! So, I write this to you in hopes that you are safe, and can join with us all in this source of encouragement.

As for earlier Bible Study writings in this series, I am following scripture readings given in our lesson book. (*The Present Word*; Justice and the Prophets, Spring 2020, Geneva Press). The book assumes we've read Mark 16, the resurrection story told by the evangelist John Mark, who was at one time a fellow missionary with Paul, and a comfort to him late in his ministry in Rome. It is worth reading all of the resurrection stories in the four gospels. That is the central message of Easter: "He is Risen!" To which we can but reply, "He is Risen, Indeed!"

The lesson book instead uses Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 15, as its main text. Paul addresses the meaning of the Resurrection, but also addresses a very important question: "Was there really indeed a Resurrection?" This is an important question that the world, individuals and the leaders of society, continue to ask. The lesson book explores some of these issues. I do not intend here to repeat what is in the book, but to supplement it with some additional details, depth, and some thoughts on these things.

First, a little about Corinth, the church there, and Paul's letter. Corinth in that day was comparable to New York City, Chicago, or Atlanta in the United States. It was not a center of political power the way Rome was then or Washington D.C is now. It wasn't a center of religious authority like Jerusalem was for Jews. It wasn't an intellectual capital either; that would be Athens or Alexandria. Rather, it

was a commercial city, at an extremely important intersection. Ships traveling east and west in Roman times would be literally rolled across the isthmus between the Aegean Sea and the gulf of Corinth, allowing them to avoid the longer and more hazardous around the Peloponnesian peninsula. Like New York City, people came to Corinth from all over the world – from Egypt, from Asia minor, from Italy, and, yes, from Judea and Gallilee. They brought with them their customs and religions. In a sense, Corinth in Paul’s day was a lot like the United States in our day – something between “melting pot” and “crazy mixed-up stew,” with ideas, structures, authorities in constant turmoil. Roman law attempted to keep a lid on things, for the sake of the common good as well as to maintain Rome’s control.

The church in Corinth reflected this polyglot setting. Conflicts arose within the fellowship of the church. Paul wrote to address these conflicts. There were issues of leadership: who to follow? Behavior: how should Christians behave? Paul discusses the particulars and culminates this with his glorious chapter about the unifying power of God’s love through us as a first principle of Christian life in Chapter 13. In Chapter 14, he then explains how this applies to issues of prophesy, tongues, and spiritual gifts in general. Which brings us to Chapter 15.

What I see Paul doing in Chapter 15 is putting the whole thing, all those petty arguments, issues, and disagreements of chapters 1-12, into perspective. The central issue in Christianity, the heart of the Good News, is “He is Risen!” This proclamation is extraordinary. The dead do not normally live again, not on this earth. Death is final. That’s normal human experience. Paul feels that he needs to address this issue. Very likely, among the Corinthians, there were some who asked, “Was Jesus really raised from the dead?” Perhaps even some who saw in Jesus an ideal to follow, but could not bring themselves to believe in the Resurrection.

The same is true in our day. The Resurrection defies what modern science tells us about biology. Perhaps someone can say he is a Christian, but look on Jesus as just a prophet who lived a worthy life and taught good principles. To do that, you have to prune out of the gospels anything supernatural, and the Resurrection in particular. There are many in our day who would do just that. So, the issue Paul addresses isn’t just of importance to the Corinthians, but also to us today.

Paul starts out by reminding the Corinthian Christians of what he had preached to them. This gospel did not originate with him. Paul says in verse 3, “For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: ...” Paul

did not get this from Jesus himself. What Paul received directly from Jesus was a calling on the road to Damascus. Paul had to then figure out what that calling meant, and what to do about it. He went to Jerusalem and talked to witnesses, to Peter and others. He received particulars that he would ultimately relate to the Corinthians and others in his missionary journeys and letters. Paul would also think and meditate on all of this, and come to understandings through the Holy Spirit that would shape his writings and the early Christian church, and the church to our day.

Paul received: “That Christ dies for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas [Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all of the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” I Cor.15:3-8

Paul, though not a direct witness to the life and ministry of Jesus, received this testimony directly from those who were witnesses. That testimony was validated to Paul through his direct experience of the living Jesus. Paul’s letter of about 55 A.D. is perhaps the first, certainly among the earliest, of Christian writings that we have. It predates the earliest gospel, Mark. What Paul has related has consistency with the four gospels. Notice he said that Jesus was buried. That would be unusual for a criminal, especially death on a cross. This is an important consistency with John, who tells of Joseph of Arimathea donating his tomb for Jesus. That was important to demonstrating that Jesus had indeed risen. The stone was rolled away and the tomb was empty that Easter morning, as related in all of the gospels. Paul says Jesus first appeared to Peter, which is not consistent with the first appearance to Mary in the garden, but is consistent with Luke 24: 34, what was told to the travelers to Emmaus when they got back to Jerusalem. We never read of an appearance by Jesus to 500 men and women at the same time. Paul mentions it as something he was told, before Jesus appeared to the apostles. (Collectively? Individually? We don’t know.) Nothing in the four gospels tells us about an appearance to James. During Jesus’s earthly ministry, his own family were doubters. An appearance by Jesus to his brother James would logically explain why and how James came to lead the early church in Jerusalem. Paul never mentions an “ascension” as described in Acts 1; he takes Jesus’s appearance to him as yet another Resurrection appearance, as if somewhat like the others.

A couple of interesting nuances: In verse 3, "... that Christ died for our sins..." translates to English "for" a word that means "on behalf of" rather than "instead of." It's an important distinction. Jesus is not said to be sacrificed instead of us. That idea is often heard in Christian discourse – that Jesus died because God's wrath over sin had to be satisfied, and that in so dying Jesus was a substitute for us. It's called "Substitutionary Atonement." The idea is taken from the Jewish sacrificial system of temple worship. The "on behalf of" translation is less specific – the way it actually works is left undefined. Christians have interpreted this in different ways, ranging from "substitutionary atonement," to Jesus dying for the purpose of demonstrating God's love, so that we might truly believe, a demonstration rather than a legal satisfaction of a sentence. Paul's message is consistent with the role of a Messiah who is also the "Suffering Servant of the Lord," from Isaiah. That prophesy was mentioned in last week's lesson. It was an important prophesy for understanding what the suffering, death, and Resurrection might mean. What Paul writes is fully consistent with Isaiah.

In verse 12 Paul gets to the question: "Is the Resurrection in particular, and Christianity in general, a great fraud?" If there is no Resurrection of Jesus, Christianity is pathetic. It is a vain hope. All who die as Christians do so in futility.

Then, in verse 20, Paul asserts, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." "First fruits" were the earliest crops to be harvested. Jews were expected to give an offering of this produce. Similarly, "first fruits" can also mean a first son born was dedicated to God (as was Samuel), and who could be "bought back," in a sense, with an appropriate sacrifice, as Joseph and Mary did for Jesus (Luke 2 22-24). The First Fruits are a sign of more to come. Sacrifice of "First Fruits" is an act of faith. Paul uses this analogy to say that Jesus's resurrection is a sign that we will similarly be resurrected. Paul expects this to happen soon. Especially in his early writing, he does not see the sense in starting marriage or children; Jesus will come any day, and the time will be short.

He then goes on to tell us the order in which things are expected to happen. Jesus will come. The word is Greek "Parousia." It means simply "to come" Not second coming. Then, all will be subjected to Christ, even death, as Jesus fulfils the mission anticipated within Judaism for the Messiah (v. 25). Then is the End, as all is handed over to The Father (v. 24). Paul goes on to discuss this a bit longer, then the side issue of baptizing (for) the dead (v. 29 ff.) before returning in verses 35-41 to the question, "How can this be?" That is, "How does it happen?" Paul doesn't

describe a mechanism. Instead, he describes the difference between the “earthly” body we inhabit prior to death, and the “heavenly” body we shall have after resurrection. Paul has heard descriptions of the risen Christ, some of which we can read in our Bible. He witnessed the risen Christ himself. He is assured that we will rise also to have a heavenly body like Christ.

Paul can’t explain the mechanism by which this occurs. Neither can we do so today, even for all the things science can explain that could not be explained in Paul’s day. The resurrection body, as witnessed by the disciples, was no less miraculous than the Resurrection itself. So, science that says a dead human (mortal) body cannot be raised from the dead cannot explain what Jesus was after the Resurrection either. There remain plenty of other questions science cannot answer as well, such as the nature of the very fabric of the Universe.

If something is inexplicable, how can we know that it happened? Witnesses. Paul describes such witnesses, and the Corinthians have heard from some others besides Paul, notably Peter (Cephas) himself. In addition, for a Jew to confess, “Jesus is Lord,” especially after the experience of the exile, is likewise inexplicable. (See John 21:28.) That is, had Jesus died and not actually risen. Jews wouldn’t even, under duress, say “Caesar is Lord.” If Christianity had been founded on fraud, it would have disappeared. It is still with us 2000 years after Jesus walked the earth as a mortal man. Changing, yes, but still vibrant and alive, and the Holy Spirit faithfully continues to nurture the Church.

In verses 51 and following, Paul tells us what he can of this mystery. These are familiar words. “Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: ‘Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?’ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.” I Cor. 51-

How can that be put any better?

The concluding prayer in our lesson book: *“In the midst of our Easter joy, O God, stir our minds and hearts to a deeper consideration of the meaning of resurrection. Amen.”*