

1 Corinthians 15:17-20

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. ²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

What the Resurrection Means

What does it mean to you that Christ has been raised from the dead? I remember first learning about Jesus' resurrection as a young child, and the way I understood it then, God had fixed a great wrong; Jesus was a great man who did a lot of nice things for people, and therefore he didn't deserve to die on the cross. So God raising him from the dead was a way of making things right again, of giving a sad story a happy ending. As I got older I learned that Jesus' resurrection was important because it meant that I could have eternal life, that Jesus had taken away my sins on the cross and that his resurrection meant that I wouldn't have to be punished for all the bad things I did. So if I just believed in Jesus, my soul would live after my body died, and Jesus would take my soul to heaven, where everything was really nice.

Well, that is still what a lot of Christians believe, but it's not how Paul or the first evangelists understood the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. They would say that we are under-appreciating the news of the Resurrection and thus changing the GREAT news of Jesus Christ into something not so great. And as a result of our under-appreciating the good news, we in turn under-appreciate God. It's my belief that the reason the Church in North America is experiencing a decline in recent years has to do with our failure to understand and communicate the full meaning of Jesus' resurrection. And so it is my hope today to give you a full picture of what the resurrection means, and that in turn may inspire you to grow in faith and in witness to God's great saving act in Jesus Christ.

Let me begin by saying that this problem of understatement goes back to the very beginning of Christianity. Paul and most of the earliest evangelists were Jews, and as Jews they were people with a history, a history that already went back over a thousand years before the time of Jesus – I recently attended a Passover Seder sponsored by an interfaith community in Staten Island, and one thing you learn at a Seder is how important history is to the Jewish People and how important GOD is in the history of the Jewish people. We Christians know a lot of that history, because we share it with the Jews; there's the story of Abraham hearing God's call

and leaving his homeland in Mesopotamia to go to a new land where God would make him the father of a great nation. We know the story of Jacob who wrestled with God and prevailed, whose son Joseph saved his family from starvation and brought them to Egypt where they thrived until the Egyptians decided that there were too many Hebrews and made them slaves and started killing their male children. We know the story of Moses who encountered the burning bush and heard God declare that he had seen the suffering of his people and that he was going to do something about it. We know the story of King David, who unified the nation and David's son Solomon who built a Temple for God. We know of the terrible fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and the great Exile that occurred six hundred years before Jesus walked the earth. And we know that the Jews at the time of Jesus were hoping for a Messiah who would bring about God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. This history is re-told during a Passover Seder. This history is taught to Jewish children, and the Passover tradition has been carried on for thousands of years. And the reason I mention this is because the first Christians were all Jews. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul were all Jews. They understood how God had been active in their history, and they believed that God was coming back to establish his kingdom among his people once again, and at that time when God returned to establish his rule that all the faithful people who had died in previous generations would be resurrected and would live forever under God's rule. What they also believed was that Jesus was the Messiah who had come to initiate God's rule on earth as it is in heaven, and that Jesus' resurrection was the proof that the new age of God's kingdom had begun. Jesus had brought God's kingdom to earth, and he would come again to finish what he had started.

But Christians seem to have forgotten this. Other philosophies and religions started influencing the Christian narrative, describing God something strictly *spiritual* and this earth as an evil place from which we must escape. And so the Christian hope was no longer for God to return to earth to establish his kingdom here, but for our souls to go with Jesus after we die to a place called heaven where everything would be fine and dandy. We've forgotten that God, who created the entire universe, declared that it was good, and that humans were *very* good. Why would he give up on the world and just take our souls to some new place to spend eternity? Why wouldn't he come here and restore his kingdom on earth?

Because we don't *want* him to. We've changed the story because we've *wanted* to change the story, and we've wanted to change the story because we would prefer that *we* were in charge of things in this world. We don't want God interfering with our lives. Most Christians think of their faith as something that guarantees them a ticket to heaven at some point in the future. Some Christians look upon faith as

their excuse for living in whatever way best suits them; “It doesn’t matter if I sin against my brother in this life; I have faith in Jesus, so I’m going to heaven when I die.” You see, by removing God’s kingdom from this world, people can go about building their own kingdom here without any interference from God. Then once their life on earth is over, they can pull their faith card out of their wallet and get onboard the train to heaven.

But changing the story changes our whole perception of God. If God only rules in heaven, and his influence here on earth is limited, then how can I expect God to bring change to the world? How can I expect God to help me with my day-to-day struggles? How can I expect God to conquer evil and establish peace and justice?

And when we perceive God as one having limited authority in this world and in our lives, we can justify our decision to give God less of our time, less of our money, less of our attention. And so we have created a vicious cycle that has led to fewer and fewer people in church, and less and less time spent in prayer and thanksgiving to God.

There are more serious consequences of our diminishing God’s power and influence. The less faith we have in God, the more we live in fear. We learn that we can’t make the world run the way we want it to run, and sometimes the world seems to be acting *against* us. And even if we believe that God is loving and just, if God’s power and influence are limited there is no guarantee that we will be delivered from our struggles. More and more people in this country live with a feeling of despair. More and more people suffer from depression. Why? Because they have no faith in a loving and just and all-powerful God who has promised to deliver them from their suffering and restore his rule here on earth.

Christians need to reverse this trend. Christians need to be reminded that this world and everything in it, including you and me, belongs to God. Christians need to be reminded that God’s kingdom is here now for those who gladly choose to belong to his kingdom and who choose to live in Christ and walk in his footsteps. Paul says, “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” You and I will also be raised from the dead, not when we go heaven but when heaven comes to us! God is reconciling the world to himself, reconciling us to himself and us to one another. That was the way the world was intended to be, and now we’re on our way back to that original scenario, to a world where peace and justice and compassion rule the day, where death is no more, and where we live with Christ, joining him in his resurrection. Let us come to appreciate just how good the good news of Jesus Christ really is!