

IF, THEN
FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, GREENVILLE, SC
1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-19 (NRSV)
28 APRIL 2024

Hear these words from Paul's first letter the Church in Corinth, chapter 15, verses 12-19.

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

*The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

I've been thinking recently about numbers. That phrase alone should make y'all nervous. Trust me when I tell you that you do not pay me to think about numbers — after all I found finite math at Presbyterian College so ... well let's say "nice," that I was absolutely required to take it twice.

Still, I've been thinking about numbers.
Not the logic of them —
but the theology of them.

Now I'm not telling you that every number in Scripture has a hidden meaning. That's *The DaVinci Code!* With that warning in mind, I think ought to acknowledge that there are certain numbers and certain periods of time that convey meaning beyond numerals.

12 tribes of Israel, 12 disciples.
Seven days in the first creation story.
A God who is one-in-three.

While deep in my numbers era, I was also teaching in our adult Sunday school series exploring Christ's resurrection appearances. Over the course of four weeks, I noticed something interesting.

In all of Jesus' passion predictions — those moments when Jesus talks about facing his own death — there is a repeated refrain about the third day.

In Matthew the religious elite stand before Pilate and remind the governor that Jesus told gathered crowds he would be raised “after three days.” In Luke the women at the tomb are reminded that while he was in Galilee Jesus announced “that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners, and be crucified, and on the third day rise again.”

The “third day” is repeated again and again in Jesus' teaching ministry and in the moments leading up to Easter Sunday. The phrase is, of course, a marker of time between the horror of the crucifixion and the hope of victory on Easter. In fact, the phrase “the third day” was ubiquitous enough that the church under Constantine codified it in our creeds.

Jesus was “crucified, dead, and buried.” descending to hell. He was, as my Southern grandmother may say, “done gone.” And then what?

Y'all know it...

“On the third day he rose again.”

There it is again, the third day.

The gospel writers anticipate and build towards the third day — marking time by the moments of terror, forsakeness, and pain on the cross.

But then, come the third day, their language shifts.

In Matthew 28, the writer sets the scene for Easter. The women approach the tomb “as the *first* day of the week was dawning.” Luke and John echo Matthew. In Mark the morning light has broken through but pains are taken to note that it is the *first* day.

Now those of you who succeeded in finite math the first time around will be quick to remind me that “the first day” signifies nothing other than what it is — Sunday, the first day of the week. And perhaps you're not wrong.

But given how interested Gospel writers of the earliest church were in anticipating “the third day,” and the pains that they took to note the accuracy of Jesus' predictions, it is remarkable that each of them, recalling the moment the women witnessed the empty tomb, speak in *firsts* —

Easter is not the third day *since*,
it is the first day *of*.

Almost as if, in this Easter confrontation, we bear witness to the dawn, the genesis of an entirely new creation. The first day of Easter is the victory of God over the forces of Empire, over the forces of sin, over the forces of violence and oppression.

It is the first day, the first Easter, but on this, yet another Easter Sunday, we are reminded by the earliest Christians that it is not the last.

I'm not great at numbers. We've established that.
But I'll stake my claim. The *firstness* of Easter morning —
matters more than just about anything else we proclaim.

Way back at the beginning God separated light from darkness and called the separation good. The gospels guide us to a similar place — gazing tentatively into an impossibly empty tomb. Light is dawning and, from the depth of that tomb, life emerges from the dust. It is good indeed.

Easter is the *first* day. Christ has been raised. The resurrection is a miraculous act of a miraculous God. And that matters. It matters not simply because it is an article of our faith, but, critically for we disciples of the risen Lord, because the empty tomb is the guiding principle of our lives.

We are in the midst of a sermon series that asks us what we can learn from the early church. By my estimation there is no lesson more important than what we hear in Paul and the gospels, those first theologians of Christianity:

the first day presses on us and calls us,
it is as real today as it was that first Easter.
The tomb is empty,
Christ has been raised,
and that single fact — forcefully proclaimed by Paul —
changes everything.

“Christ is risen” is a singular and all-encompassing truth claim. In its proclamation we do not mean to say that some people are in and some are out — *just the opposite, in fact*

— only that Easter Sunday is the fundamental truth of a Christian’s being, and the way we know the world to be ordered. Easter Sunday is our defining identity. Before we establish political, gender, and familial identities, indeed before any other thing we are defined *first* by the empty tomb. The *first day* matters for how we live, where we place our hope, what we believe about God, and just about every thing else.

That is why Paul forcefully notes in today’s text that “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

If the first day did not dawn,
if the Father did not overcome the powers of sin and death that drove Christ to his cross,
if Jesus still rests in a Palestinian tomb,
then all of my preaching is in vain,
and all of our faith —
every bit of it...love your neighbor, turn the other cheek, give generously —
is in vain. We are to be pitied for it.

Now I know that sounds harsh — Paul is not known for his subtlety.
Perhaps there’s a better way at it.

Back when I was in seminary I had to take an intensive Hebrew class over the course of the Summer. I was learning roots, tenses, and patterns — but it was all I could do to remember that a Hebrew text is read from right to left. As I sat for the final exam I began to feel desperate. But then I got to the extra credit question.

For 20 points — that was the kind of test it was — we had to translate a random text plucked from the Hebrew Scriptures. Across five lines of text I recognized four words:

elohem,
leket,
hesed,
and *mispāt*

I grew up in a little neighborhood Presbyterian church that talked a lot about good theology but didn’t require much bible memorization. We didn’t have a Bible bowl like we do at Westminster or Bible tests like so many of my dear Baptist friends. All that to say I knew about Scripture, but I couldn’t recite more than four or five passages.

This one, though, I knew. I'd heard it time and again. All I needed were those four words to call the full text forward:

the Lord,
justice,
lovingkindness,
and *walk.*

Can y'all figure out my extra credit passage? If not I'm a bit concerned — we read it 12 minutes ago, just before Paul's warning to the Corinthians:

“It was told to you, man, what is good and what the Lord demands of you — only doing justice and loving kindness and walking humbly with your God.”

If you asked me back in seminary what I believed Christianity was about, I'd start with Micah: God's demand that the covenant people act ethically, fulfilling Torah obedience: welcoming the stranger, caring for the orphans, providing for the poor, forgiving debts, and moving always toward freedom. On the back end of all that, to round out my answer, I'd tell you that Christianity had to do with the cross, too, that moment in which the sin of the earth was taken into the heart of God.

Listening to the early church in Corinth changes that for me — or at least adds an important clarification.

You see the God we serve is not just the author of a fine moral code — a good set of ideas for daily living. Read apart from the Torah and, for Christians, apart from the empty tomb, Micah 6:8 can mean anything the reader wants it to. Who is *this* God? What does following *this* God mean? What exactly is *this* God's justice?

To understand what the demand of Micah means for Christian living we have to understand Paul's admonition to the Corinthians, which is to say that we have to understand the particular character of the God who creates life where there is none, life in our tombs and in that tomb, we have to understand the odd reality of the God of firsts, the God who so loved the world that he did not leave it to its demise, but instead, through Christ, took on humanity, suffered, died, and was buried — rising on the *first* day to new life.

Which is why it is not enough for Christians to “do justice,” if it is not the justice of the God who raised Christ, the God who in Christ was dead and raised, the God who secures our future and defeats all of our death-dealing ways, the God who calls for protection of foreigners in our land, for justice for disadvantaged women and widows, for protecting the poor in a society that values performing religion over living it. The God for whom how we treat one another matters, because we will see one another again.

It is not enough to “love kindness” if it is not the kindness that seeks a right world, an Easter world, a loving kindness that calls out evil and life-denying ways of being. It is not enough to walk humbly with God if we are always trying to outwit God and get around the demands of discipleship.

Any other god, a god who makes few demands on our living, who justifies our worst instincts, who keeps us insular from one another and prefers one nation, one people, one way of being over the way of the Kingdom is nothing more than a mirror of our worst selves, a god in our image — not the God of the empty tomb.

It is not enough to proclaim Easter faith as a dogma
if we do not live as Easter people,
sure of the God who is bending the world toward his kingdom,
changing our hearts,
and making everything new.

As he was preparing to die in a German prison, charged by the Reich with conspiring to rescue the Jews, misusing intelligence to support the Confessing Church, and, later, plotting to kill Hitler, pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer found himself reflecting on the meaning of Easter. It had been his Easter faith, after all, that drove him to establish a seminary to train pastors who refused to swear allegiance to the Reich or any other national government, his Easter faith that demanded he work to save Jewish lives, his Easter faith that denounced white nationalism and the cycles of violence supremacy wrought. Before he died, knowing full well what was ahead of him, Bonhoeffer wrote this:

“Not from the art of dying but from the resurrection of Christ can a new, purifying wind blow into the present world. If a few human beings would really believe this and would let themselves be moved by this in their earthly behavior, much would change. To live from resurrection—that indeed is the meaning of Easter.”

— — — — “To live from resurrection—that indeed is the meaning of Easter.”

Did you know that today is Easter Sunday?

I know, I know, we aren't all in our fine linens and seersuckers, I'm not wearing my Easter dress, and there are no donuts (soon!).

Still, we Christians proclaim that every Sunday is Easter Sunday. That's why Sundays in Lent don't count toward the forty days. Because having heard the good news of the empty tomb (the news of the *first* day), we cannot live in a Friday world — we cannot live as if Christ has not been raised.

The tomb is empty and it changes everything! Every Sunday is Easter Sunday, every day is an Easter day. We are first and fundamentally an Easter people!

Now I'll grant you that Easter is difficult to find these days. Our society is soaked in violence, division, and hatred. We are selfish and self-obsessed, we too often seek after our own good and the good of people who look and think like us over the good of our neighbor. And Lord knows, the Christian Church, called to be a light, is all too often is a black hole: mirroring the culture's self-serving idolatry, propagating division in the name of holiness, excluding those whom God calls, and promoting a rhetoric that denies God's good image in all humans.

That is a Good Friday church and a Good Friday culture. **We** are an Easter people, living into the promise of that *first* day, certain in the promise of the empty tomb, certain that the God of firsts is still up ahead of us calling us on, certain that in this life and in life everlasting we *belong* to God.

This can be heady stuff so I want to offer you a practical plan.

Perhaps this week when you interact with your family

or with colleagues and strangers,

while at the grocery store or watching TV,

you can consider this question:

is my life, my hope, my attitude, my spending, my voting,

reflecting the first day,

proclaiming the empty tomb?

If we learn anything from the early church, from Paul and later Bonhoeffer, it's this: resurrection is not only a promise for the future, it is a demand on our daily living.

If the tomb is empty
then everything changes.

The challenge now is to live that way.

—Leigh Stuckey