

**"If Christ has not been raised ..."** - 1 Corinthians 15:14,20

Reading: 1 Corinthians 15:12 - 22

### **Introduction**

Of all the religions in the world the Christian religion is unique in believing in a risen Saviour.

### **The necessity of Christ's resurrection**

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul sets straight those church members who doubt the resurrection of the body. Paul knows that this denial hits at the heart of the Christian faith. He says,  
*(1 Cor 15:13) If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.*

The Easter story is so totally awesome and startling that many people, including friends and those who accompanied him during his ministry, had trouble believing it. Mary Magdalene, for instance, said:  
*(John 20:2b) "They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don't know where they have put him!"*  
When the disciples were told by Mary and the other women that Jesus has arisen, they did not believe them because their words seemed to them like nonsense (Lk 24:11).

Nothing under sun is new! Even today we find those who ridicule the resurrection of the body and dismiss it as nonsense. As in Corinth, some of them are to be found within the church. Some liberals say that we will not on the Day of the Lord physically rise from the grave and that Christ didn't really arise too. Some do not even believe in a "Day of the Lord anymore!) All kinds of explanations are made up to rationalise the story of his resurrection. Some say that his disciples stole his body and then lied that he rose again. Others say that Christ didn't really die and that it only looked like he did and that the cool air of the tomb revived him and brought him back to life again.

I found the following on the Internet. In one of those regular features where you may write in to a knowledgeable person, here called "Disciple", the following correspondence took place:

The reader wrote:

*Dear Disciple:*

*On Easter our preacher said that Jesus just fainted on the cross and that the disciples nursed him back to health. What do you think?*

*Sincerely,*

*Bewildered*

Disciple answered:

*Dear Bewildered:*

*Beat your preacher 39 times with a heavy whip; nail him to a cross; hang him in the sun for 6 hours; run a spear through his heart; embalm him; put him in an airless tomb for 36 hours and see what happens.*

*Sincerely,*

*Disciple*

If we say Christ has not been raised from the grave, what is the result and what are the consequences? According to Paul (in verses 12-19), if Christ has not been raised:

-our preaching is useless and so is your faith; we are then found to be false witnesses about God; your faith is futile; you are still in your sins; then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost; we are to be pitied more than all men.

How would Paul have made these statements today? He might have said:

If Christ has not been raised:

-faith, going to church and preaching the gospel are useless activities

-we have nothing to gain and everything to lose by living decent and pure lives;

-there is no comfort for anybody standing beside a fresh grave;

-the parents of disabled children have nothing to look forward to (their children enjoying normal physical activities in God's new heaven and earth);

-The Christian martyrs died in vain;

-and missionaries are wasting their time and our money.

In our text Paul uses one word that sticks out in all of this: useless. If Christ has not been raised, everything is useless. The Greek word is "kenos." It means empty, vain. It means that accomplishments, labours, testimonies, being Christ's church and his followers all result in nothing, are wasted effort without effect. This Greek word can also be translated as "futile" and as "vanity". Without the resurrection of Christ, all our Christian endeavours are futile.

"Futile" means emptiness, a handful of wind and a pocketful of nothing. It means to do yourself in for years on end in order to pay off the mortgage on a house you cannot really afford - and then die on the day you make the last payment. It means working hard and running fast and getting nowhere. It is like a politician's speech that has no explanations of things gone wrong and offers no real solutions to burning issues and therefore is absolutely of no use at all. The concept of "futile" is nothing more than the hope that there is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

If Christ has not been raised and we are not raised, it means there is no purpose and no meaning to life. Wisdom and silliness, hard work and lethargy, laughter and tears, and everything else is useless, futile and mere vanity if it leads nowhere and has no purpose or meaning and reaches no goal.

"Futile" is a word that sums up so much of today's culture. There is so much purposelessness, meaninglessness and emptiness today. Too few people are not able to answer the question, "What is the meaning or purpose of your life?" In modern culture people try to avoid to seek for the purpose of their existence resulting in an approach to life that says - lets drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die and we will not exist ever again! Emptiness and uselessness are seen all around us today.

As we look at 1 Corinthians 15, we see that the Apostle Paul hangs the meaning and purpose of our lives and our faith on the resurrection of Christ and our subsequent resurrection! If Christ did not rise, he teaches, all is useless and all is futile. But if Christ has arisen, then life and death, work and ministry, godliness and faith, have purpose, meaning and eternal value.

### **What then is of first importance?**

Christianity stands on the resurrection of Christ.

At the beginning of the chapter Paul tells us what is "of first importance":

*(1 Cor 15:3-5) For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve.*

The death and the resurrection, the cross and the grave, are both of first importance. They both lie at the very centre, at the core of what we believe. What every Christian should believe is that Christ died and Christ arose and that we received eternal life through him.

Too many Christians only talk about the cross and the suffering of Christ. But the cross means nothing apart from the empty grave. If Christ did not rise, then his death was in vain and he did not conquer our vilest enemies: our weak human nature, godless society, death and evil.

We cannot mention the cross of Christ without also mentioning the empty grave of Christ. Christ died and Christ arose. We believe in an empty cross and we believe in an empty grave. This is the reason why we celebrate Easter. At Easter we celebrate that Christ has both died and risen - and therefore was also glorified and received all the authority in heaven and earth.

Imagine for a moment that we only celebrated Good Friday and not Easter Sunday. Then we would celebrate only half a salvation, which really is no salvation at all. Paul also wrote:

*(Rom 4:25) He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.* Christ died and Christ arose. In the theology and teaching of the church both ought to be of "first importance.

Even though the cross is vitally important because of the redemption Jesus accomplished for us there, we can not emphasize his death to the exclusion of his resurrection victory. Both are "of first importance."

### **Christ's resurrection is the first fruits of those who died**

If Christ has not been raised the consequences are too terrible to contemplate. But he has been raised. He was seen by Mary, Peter, the Twelve, James, and Paul too (vs 3-8). Says Paul in our text: *(1 Cor 15:20) But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

Paul uses the word "first fruits." This image comes from the law of Moses. At the start of harvest the Israelites were required to bring the best of the first fruits of the soil to the Lord: the first of the grain and the first bread made from the grain (Ex 23:19; Lev 23:10,17). The first fruits was a promise of more to come and that God would bless his people with an adequate harvest to feed the nation.

The resurrected Christ is the first fruits, meaning that he is the promise of much more to come and of everything we need. Because he has risen from the dead we will also rise from the dead. His resurrection is the guarantee of our own future resurrection from the dead. Christ died once, never to die again; and he rose to eternal life. We are therefore for ever redeemed from death. We may enjoy being alive in Christ, even now!

Christ is the first fruits of those raised from the dead. He is the promise of more to come. Someday, the dead who are in Christ will be made alive; and they - like Christ - will rise, never to die again, to live for evermore! This teaching gives us comfort in all our needs here and now, and takes away our fear for the grave.

### **Conclusion:**

What is it that gives a widow courage as she stands beside a fresh grave? What is the ultimate hope of the cripple, the amputee, the abused? How can the parents of physically disabled children keep from living their entire lives totally and completely depressed? Why would anyone who is blind or deaf or paralysed be encouraged when they think of the life beyond? How can we see past the martyrdom of some helpless hostage or persecuted missionary? Where do the thoughts of a young couple go as they grieve the loss of their baby? When a family receives the tragic news that a little kidnapped daughter was found dead or their dad was violently killed, what single truth becomes their whole focus? What is the final answer to pain, mourning, senility, insanity, terminal diseases and pandemics, sudden calamities, and fatal accidents?

*You know the answer. It is the hope and the promise of the resurrection that gives us comfort and strength.* And as we face death we know we have nothing to fear. Christ has conquered death.

This is the message of Easter. As Paul says, "*Where, O death, is your sting?*" (1 Cor 15:55b). We do not need to be afraid of death anymore. Christ faced death for us and conquered it once and for all. Christ brought meaning and purpose into a world plagued by depressing pain and suffering.

He has risen!

He has conquered all our fears!

This is the Word of God!

Amen.