

EASTER SUNDAY

March 31st, 2013

Theme: "What Easter Means"

1 Corinthians 15:12-22

"Grace and peace to you from God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit who has brought us together". Amen

The Word of God through which the Holy Spirit guides our hearts and minds today is recorded in the Epistle of 1 Corinthians ch. 15, which was read before. Let us pray: "Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, Oh Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer." Amen

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He is risen! He is risen indeed! Easter certainly is a day all right, but it is a day almost 2,000 years ago. It was a real day when Jesus Christ really did physically rise from the dead; when He really did make a victory speech to the devil and those damned in hell; when He really did show Himself alive to His disciples; and when He really did seal forever His work of saving us from our sins. The Easter we celebrate every year is a commemoration of that real, original Easter.

Almost as many years ago as the first Easter, a great apostle wrote to a not so great congregation. And he wrote for pretty much the same reasons Christian pastors talk to their congregations on Easter today. He was trying to keep them from tearing off the real meaning of Easter from their daily lives like a calendar page. In the process, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, St. Paul wrote some of the most compelling words on the resurrection to be found anywhere in Scripture. Let us hear verses 12 to 22 from 1 Corinthians ch.15.

"¹² Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. ¹⁵ We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about 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, not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. ²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive."

Preaching has fallen on hard times. You might say it is hurting from both ends. It is hurting from the giving end and it is hurting from the receiving end. Preaching is hurting from the giving end because of preachers who have forgotten what Easter means. They are weak men who have wandered off into how to save society instead of how to save souls. They are preaching personal achievement instead of a salvation in a risen Christ. They are giving into the short-sighted demands of their people who want to know how to squeeze the most out of the here and now instead of preparing for the there and then. As long as the TSX, and the DOW, and the NASDAQ, and their own fortunes rise they do not care whether or not Jesus did.

Preaching is also hurting from the hearing end. People do not listen. It is a rare thing to find a Christian who really does read the Bible or participate in Bible Studies. The empty pews on Sunday show how fickle and sporadic worship-habits are. And when we do come, so often the devil steals the seed of the Word right out of our hearts. We go home without any change in our own hearts and lives and maybe even blame the church for being ineffective in the process.

But perhaps the greatest indication of all that preaching is falling on hard times is the fact that those who are preached to do not do any preaching of their own. They come to hear fifty-plus sermons a year, but when someone asks them to give a reason for the hope that is in them, they cave in and say, - "I'm no preacher!" "I do not like to talk about religion." Paul said: "If Christ is not raised, our preaching is useless."

When preaching becomes useless it is because in the minds of some Christ has not been raised. If there is no risen Christ, everything we are saying about the Lord our God is a lie. If there is no risen Christ then we are wasting our time and should throw away our Bibles and never hear another sermon, pack up the church and go home. If there is no risen Christ then being a Sunday School teacher, a church officer or elder, a member of any committees of this congregation is a waste of time! If Christ has not been raised, then supporting the work of this church, or to maintain the seminaries to train future pastors and teachers, or sending out of missionaries means nothing!

But St. Paul declares: "Christ has indeed been raised." The resurrection puts the heart and soul into preaching. The resurrection of Jesus proves that He is our Lord and our God and that His teachings are true. He fulfilled all the Old Testament promises about Himself. He did crush the head of the devil just as Moses said He would. The Redeemer lives just as Job said He would. He entered His glory just as Isaiah prophesied He would. And Jesus kept His own promises, promises to rise again, and to build the temple again in three days. Contrary to what many think, every word, every sentence, every paragraph, every chapter in the Bible is true!

That is what Easter means. It means that the Bible is true and that all the promises of our risen Lord can be trusted. When you and I live on those promises, it means this Lamb who was sacrificed to save us is also going to be the shepherd who lives to lead us. His goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life and we will be able to do all things through this risen Jesus who gives us His strength!

Easter means my preaching is not useless. It means I can speak with authority when I base what I say upon what Jesus said. It means I do not waste my time when I read my Bible every day and share it with my family and others. It means that I do not have to apologize to those who want to play fast and loose with God and foolishly believe they can be friends of the resurrected Lord while at the same time despise His Word.

Easter means that preaching is not only for preachers. Telling others about Jesus is for all of you who come to the tomb and find it empty and know He is risen. That is what Easter means!

When the resurrected Jesus appeared to His disciples, He said: "Peace be with you." That is the gift of our Saviour for us today. In this world there are a lot of things that destroy our peace. Our sins have caused many weeds to grow in our fields. There is trial, trouble, sickness, suffering, and lots of tears. The devil and our world have mingled a number of false ways to find peace without the risen Saviour. One way might be like that of the Pharisees; trying to make up for your sins by doing good. You busy yourself with your work, your family, your community, maybe even your church as an escape from real worries.

Always in the back of your mind is that tempting suggestion that if I do enough good things in my life God will overlook the bad things. But always in the conscience is that nagging reminder that maybe I have not done enough. And there is no peace.

St. Paul wrote: "If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile, you are still in your sins." Without a resurrected Saviour, no matter what we try to do, there is no peace. If Jesus is still dead, we are not forgiven. It is as simple as that. On Good Friday we saw how angry God was with sin; so angry that He let His One and only Son bleed and suffers and even be abandoned by His own Father.

If Christ has not been raised then that must mean Jesus did not pay the full price for our sins. If Christ has not been raised then that must mean God is still angry for all the times we lipped off at our parents, all the times we lost our tempers, all the times we were lazy, selfish, or worry-warts. That means every time I stand in this church and say "I forgive you all your sins," that these words would be just a waste of breath because there would not be any forgiveness to announce.

Every time you and I would come to the altar and hear, "given for you and shed for you for the forgiveness of all your sins," it would only be wishful thinking. If Christ has not been raised, then God is still angry with us and we will be damned in hell because of sin! So, pay attention to this, listen up! But, on the third day He rose again from the dead.

There is no doubt about it. Our sins are completely forgiven! The risen Jesus can come into our hearts, our homes, and our church with His Word and say: "Peace be with you." You do not have to work yourself to death to pay for your sins. You do not have to pretend there is no sin. You do not have to compare yourself to others to find peace. For there is real, lasting, true peace. And it is free. Free from the risen Lord who says to us all: "Be of good cheer, your sins are forgiven." He is risen! That's what Easter is all about! "Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep."

"First fruits" Paul calls Jesus. In the Old Testament when an Israelite harvested his crop, the Lord asked him to bring the first stocks of grain to the altar and to wave it high over his head as an offering to God. This first fruits offering was a way to express confidence that the rest of the crop would soon ripen as well.

Paul says that Jesus is the "first fruits of those who have fallen asleep." Yes, Jesus was the first one to come out of the grave alive, never to die again. All of us will follow. "I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me will live, even though he dies. In Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive.

He will change our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body." That means our graves are going to burst open one day. That means we do not say "good-bye," but "see you later" to our dear ones we leave at the cemeteries. We will be reunited with all those we loved, who died before us, who fell asleep in Jesus. They will be awakened and glorified, to live again, to live with us, to live with Jesus. "So shall we ever be with the Lord." That is what Easter means to me. And that is also what I hope Easter means to you! He is risen! He is risen indeed! Amen.