

1 Cor 15:1–10, “Of First Importance,” Easter 2012

Psalm 35:27, “May those who delight in salvation shout for joy!”
Psalm 47:1, “Clap your hands all you people, shout unto God with a voice of triumph!”

- Summit, could we, right all across the Triangle, at all of our campuses, clap our hands, and lift our voices for what this day means for us: Christ is risen!

This is it! This is everything. Here’s what I’m going to do this weekend. There’s a section in *U.S. News & World Report* called “News You Can Use.” That’s what I am going to try and do for you: give you news you can use. Not going to beat around the bush.

- I know that some of you, your Easter tradition is to fall asleep in church. I’m not going to let you to do that. I want to get straight to the point.
- BTW, around the Summit we teach that drowsiness in church is a sign of demon-possession... so, be careful doing that, you may wake up with the people around you doing weird stuff to you.
- I had a strategy when I was kid for falling asleep in church. If I’d catch myself fallen asleep I’d say, “In Jesus’ name, Amen.” My parents would say, “Oh, he’s praying. My kid’s so spiritual.” That’s a little tip from Uncle J.D.

I’m going to look at a passage of Scripture (1 Cor 15) where Paul talks about the significance of the resurrection. I am going to show you what we believe happened, why it happened, and what the profound meaning is for us. And at the end, I’m going to give you a chance to respond to it if you never have.

- Every Easter we do baptisms in our service. Baptism is the public symbol that you are believing in Jesus and receiving His work as your own. It’s the public declaration that you are His follower.

We have some people already lined up... but there are some of you in here whom God has been working on, or He’s going to be working on you in the next few minutes, and you have never been baptized. Today, you will have a chance to take that step.

- ***You say, “Well, I wasn’t planning on getting baptized today. I’m unprepared.”*** We’ve thought about everything. We’ve got shorts and t-shirts and hair products and hair dryers and feminine products. We’re ready for you.
- ***You say, “Aren’t you supposed to take a long time to prepare for this?”*** Well, you shouldn’t do it before you are ready, that’s for sure, but in Acts 2, when Peter preached his first gospel sermon, it says that the people who heard and believed were baptized immediately. Some 3000 on that one day. So that’s how we roll around here.
- ***Don’t postpone another day the life that God wants to begin in you today.***

OK, so here’s Paul. **1 Corinthians 15:1:**

“Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, [2] and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”

[3] For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, [4] that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures,

[5] and that he appeared to Cephas (that was Peter’s nickname), then to the twelve. [6] Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. [7] Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

[8] Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. [9] For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.

[10] (But now) by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." (1 Corinthians 15:1-10 ESV)

First, just notice what Paul says is of first important (vs. 3): the resurrection

- In vs. 19, Paul will say that if the resurrection did not happen, everything else Christianity teaches is worthless.
- At its core, the gospel is not primarily about a **new moral code**, or a **new life philosophy**, or a way of **bringing life together**. (It's not about a **new political alignment**—have a fish on your car swallowing up the little Darwin fish with legs and little fish following behind your big fish representing your home-schooled kids) the gospel is news about something that God has done.
- That's what makes Christianity different from all other religions. Other religions teach ways of behaving, relating to God. But Christianity, at its core, is not a list of things we are to for God; it's news about what God is done for us.
- I've pointed out to you that the word "gospel," in Jesus' day was not even a religious word. It was an announcement... Greek general.
- Now, in response to that announcement, you change. But the change of what you do comes in response to, or flows out of, what He has done.
- Other religions tell you if you obey and act a certain way, you will be accepted. The gospel is that God has accepted you on the basis of what Christ has done, and in response to that we obey.
- Paul would say down in vs. 19 that if Christ is not raised, everything else Jesus taught was worthless.

Second, I want you to notice that, in his mind, he's talking about a real resurrection.

- Sometimes people today will say things like, "Che lives!" and what they mean by that is "the spirit of Che lives in his followers." But that's not what Paul means here.
- He gives you details. Jesus' corpse was laid into a grave with no pulse and no breath where it stayed there for 3 days. And then, He came back to life, again, of His own accord.
- Paul brings forward 3 pieces of evidence for this claim in these verses (**1. an empty tomb; 2. eyewitness account; 3. fulfilled prophecy**). Let me spend just a brief moment on each of them.
 1. **Empty Tomb (vs. 4)**: The easiest way for Jesus' enemies to put this whole thing to rest would have been to produce a body. "He's not dead. Here's his body." And they easily could have done that. Jesus' enemies controlled all the property and government and media. They certainly would have produced the body, had there been one. In fact, they had stationed an entire Roman garrison in front of the tomb after Jesus died to keep the disciples from stealing the body. You say, "Well, if they were there, how did Jesus get out?" If you can rise from the dead, a few soldiers in **skirts and sandals with slingshots** are not any problem.
 2. **Eyewitness Accounts (vv. 5-8)**: Paul here names a slew of people; many of whom he points out are still alive at the time of his writing.
 - You say, 'Well, maybe they were lying.' Big group conspiracy. Well, OK, **what would their motive have been?** A student told me the other day, "Easy. To get people to act the way they wanted them to. You want them to act a certain way so you make up miracle stories to coerce everyone into obedience." My question back to him was "**why would they have wanted people to act a certain way?**" The answer is "power." If you can get people to act a certain way and to follow your way of living, then that gives you a lot of power and prestige. Social leaders have often used

religion to consolidate power. **OK, is that what the Apostles got?** Did they get power and prestige in this life? Is that what they'd thought they'd get? ***Read their letters.***

- 1 Peter. Peter says, "Like Jesus died, that's what's going to happen to me, and probably to you. But don't fight back. Don't seek power over your enemies. Be confident that like Jesus was raised, you will be raised one day, too!"
- Paul says, 2 Corinthians, "God has appointed we Apostles to be the lowest of the low, to have the least "power" in society, to be the most despised, *so that we can demonstrate our hope is not in this life but in the resurrection from the dead.*
 - Does that sound like a group of people seeking earthly power or prestige, and influence? ***No, it sounds like a group of people that really believe Jesus rose from the dead.***
 - In fact, one of the reasons, Paul says, God made the Apostles the poorest, most persecuted people on earth was so that we would know they were telling the truth! We can look at their lives and see that their motivation could not have been power; they never sought it and never got it! It was about a hope they had in something beyond the grave.
- Plus, I'll just throw in here that you can't maintain a lie that was that costly for that long.
 - The "David Thompson" cult.

- "But lots of people have died for a lie." Not for something they knew to be a lie.
- Chuck Colson
- People say, "**Well, OK, maybe they were not lying. Maybe they were just confused.** Had a Jesus dream they mistook for the real thing. Saw another guy in sandals and a toga and thought it was Jesus. They hallucinated."
 - OK, but do you see (vs. 6) where he refers to 500 people who saw him at once? 500 people don't hallucinate at once.
 - It's said that a lot of soldiers, due to fear and lack of sleep, will hallucinate during battle. "My dead friend came and visited me in a foxhole." But then the other soldiers in the foxhole are like "no."
- You say, "**Well, maybe they weren't lying or weren't mistaken, it's just that these supernatural claims about Jesus were added in later.** The real Jesus was kind of a left-leaning do-gooder who wore Tom's shoes and listened to Classic Rock, and it was the power-hungry church added all the stuff in later about Him claiming to be God, walking on water and stuff to beef up their claims to authority."
 - No. This is among the earliest Christian writings; dates back to about 50 a.d.; this is one of the books that no scholar doubts was written by Paul in the early days.¹
 - And Paul says that at the time of the writing of this, there were 500 people still alive who could accommodate it. That's

¹ Bruce, F.F. *The History of New Testament Study*, Marshall, I. Howard, (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Methods*, 1977, Carlisle: The Paternoster Press, 23.

not the kind of thing you say if it's not true.

- **To postulate that the Apostles lied; or that they were mistaken; or that this stuff was added in later is just not compelling.** Something happened.

3. Fulfilled prophecy (vv. 3–4)

- See that recurring phrase in vv. 3 & 4, “*According to the Scriptures?*” Jesus and the Apostles kept saying, “Don’t even take our word for it, look back at the prophecies.”
 - 300 prophecies with clarity. The odds.
 - You begin to see how every story finds its resolution in Christ.

Paul is not talking about “keeping a dream alive” or “letting Jesus live on in our hearts.” He’s talking a real resurrection. Something happened made cowardly people brave; something that made skeptical people believe; something that transformed haters of Jesus into His worshippers. something that gave guilty people hope; something made mothers and children bravely face death in the lions’ den together with joy;

Something actually happened. People do not want to deal with this type of religion. They prefer to think of religion as preference. Paul would say before a Roman court where he’s on trial for his life, “Uh, excuse me, this has nothing to do with preference. Jesus was not my preference. I didn’t want to believe in Jesus’ resurrection. It went against everything that I had previously thought. It shattered my worldview. Embracing it destroyed my prospects for the future; it meant that I had to start all over again. But I did all because it happened.

“The evidence for Jesus’ resurrection is so strong that nobody would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”—Wolfhart Pannenberg, German scholar at Tubingen

- **Unusual event.** People says, “Well, I just don’t believe that people actually rise from the dead.” Paul would say, “Well now you are doing philosophy; I am doing history.”
- **“If you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live.”** A lot of people don’t want to acknowledge it because, if it’s true, it changes everything:
 - It means that He is Lord; that He’s the boss, not you.
 - It means that that collection of toys you’ve been working on is not that important. His kingdom matters and if He tells you to give away all your toys for Him you do it with joy.
- So, be honest with yourself. Are you even open to believing it? If there is an openness to believing it, the evidence is there, I assure you.

Something actually happened 2000 years that changed everything: JESUS ROSE FROM THE DEAD. And here we are, 2012, and intelligent people all around the world have come to celebrate it. This weekend the charismatics are in their places shouting about it, the Pentecostals are in the aisles dancing over it; the Baptists are still amening it; the Presbyterians are still studying it and writing stuff down about it; the Episcopalians are still toasting it; and the liberals are still confused by it.

So, that’s the news. Here’s how you can use it. Why it is of first importance. 3 things (A, B, and C).

A. “My sins can be forgiven.”² (15:3, 10)

- Paul says in 1 Cor 15:3, “*Christ died for our sins*” and vs. 10, “by the grace of God I am what I am.”
- Christ had a purpose for coming to earth, and it was to free you from your sins. He was doing for you what you could not do for yourself. He was living a perfect life, a life that deserved no penalty or condemnation, and then suffering your penalty and condemnation in your place.

² I was inspired by both Rick Warren and John Stott from messages they have preached on this same passage, available at PreachingToday.com, Spring 2012.

- Every sin, you see, has penalties and consequences. There are earthly consequences for our sins, but the greatest consequences are heavenly ones. I was talking to a friend who is dealing with some pretty severe earthly consequences for some devastatingly stupid decisions he has made—his marriage is probably permanently messed up; he’s got a scarred relationship with his children; it will never be the same—but realizes that those earthly consequences remind him of the ultimate consequence for his sin that he has escaped: eternal death that Jesus took for us.
- Now, for some of us, the obstacle here is getting to a point that you would realize you need a Savior. Most people I know don’t mind admitting that sometimes they mess up and they’re not perfect, but to go on and say that they are fundamentally bad people who deserve hell and their only hope was the be saved by someone else?
 - You ever hear politicians who get caught doing something wrong and they like to talk about it as a “mistake” or a “lapse of judgment” or an “indiscretion”? What they are trying to say is, “I made a mistake, but I still am a good, decent, valuable person.”
 - Paul thought the opposite. **1 Tim 1:15: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.”** Translation. In my mind, nobody, ever, has been as bad as me. Not, “I made some mistakes but I’m still a good person.” But, “I’m a sinner.” He says it again in 1 Cor 15:8? I am not worthy to be called a Christian, much less on Apostle of His.
 - King David would say after his “indiscretion” (Psalm 51), “*I was born in sin. It’s been a part of my heart from birth.*” Not, I’m not a good person who made a few bad decisions.
- The greatest description of “the good person” in the Bible is the 10 Commandments. Do you ever consider how well you stack up next to them?
 - **Commandment 1: Loved God** with all your heart, soul and mind, always given him first place?
 - **Commandment 4: Remember the Sabbath.** Always given God His due, money or time?
 - **Commandment 5:** Honor your parents. Always responded to authority
 - **Commandment 9:** Don’t lie: 100% truthful, all the time
 - Some of you are like, “Get to murder.” Jesus took that away in Matthew 5.
 - Don’t know where you went to college, but when you’re 0 for 10 on the final, that’s hard to recover from.
- On your very best day you are in desperate need of God’s grace. I’m not talking about on your bad days you need God’s grace, but on your very best ones: when you’ve read *My Utmost for His Highest* and are learning to play the acoustic guitar.
- The gospel is that Jesus absorbed your penalty by dying in your place. **His resurrection** means that God accepted Jesus’ sacrifice as payment for your sins, if you will receive it.
- Some of you stumble there. You think, “Well, I’ve just been too bad. I’m a bad person and God could never love me.” That’s not what the resurrection says. The resurrection says that Jesus died a gruesome death for your terribleness, putting away the bad terrible you forever, and has been resurrected so that He could make you, in Him, a new person.

Which leads me to my 2nd statement:

B. “My present can be transformed.” (15:10)

- There's a fundamental question a lot of people ask. I hear this on talk shows, Oprah: "Can people really change? Can cruel people ever really be made kind; can selfish people made loving? Can cheating people become honest? Can abusive people ever become tender? Can cheaters ever become faithful fathers or husbands?"
- Paul had no doubts about the answer to that, from his own personal experience. **Vs. 10**, "*by the grace of God I am what I am. I was formerly one thing... I was hateful, racist, and abusive. That's not what I am anymore.*"
- Sometimes Christians talk about salvation as if it's just forgiveness, or "turning over a new leaf" or making some new resolutions about life to be better you. No... you are trivializing the power of the resurrection that can absolutely transform someone's heart. Jesus' salvation is not just turning over a new leaf or making a few superficial changes, it is a radical change of life.
 - And **radical** is the right word, because radical is from the Latin word "radix," which means from the root. Your spiritual root was dead; Christ makes it alive, and that changes everything.
 - He gives you a **new heart that loves God**; one that **delights in righteousness** rather than sin; one that **loves showing mercy** to others rather than exploiting them.
- And believe me, my friend, when the power of the resurrection goes to work in you, it will transform your present. You want to know why? Because it gives you that identity and peace you've been craving for from everything else.
 - One of my favorite Gospel stories is the woman who was taken in adultery... (John 8:11). ***God's acceptance of us is the power that liberates us from sin, not the reward for having liberated ourselves.***
 - The girl who has lost her virginity; the guy hooked on porn.
- The resurrection gives you in God everything you've been looking for. And that heals you. It makes you a whole

person who is able to love, and forgive, and trust people again.

- I was listening to a **Ted Talk** the other day... I love it when someone who is not a Christian stumbles onto something the Bible teaches, and doesn't know quite how to explain it... fascinating. This very accomplished businesswoman was talking about one of the keys to success... The ability to be vulnerable. Trust is necessary to succeed, to and to be vulnerable, you've got to be willing to trust others. Well, to do that, you have to not be captive to what everyone thinks, because only then will you open up to people to let them see your faults. For about 16 minutes of this 18 minute talk, she gives an absolutely brilliant diagnosis of the problem. In her last 2 minutes she gives the solution... she says, 'So how do you develop the ability to be vulnerable? You have to know that you believe in yourself. You have to look at yourself in the mirror sometimes and say, 'If no one else believes in you, I believe in you!' I thought, "How terrible of an answer!" What happens when you look in the mirror and you say "I don't believe in you! You've messed everything up!"
- I can look in the mirror and say, "Christ believes in me because he took into Himself my shame and was raised with power to make all things new in my life!" I have His approval and power and so I don't have to supply a bunch of my own.

C. "My future is secure"

- Death is the inevitable end for every life. Nothing pulls the rug out from life like death. We all face it.
 - I often tell our church... when the day comes that you go into surgery... Unless you have a hope beyond the grave, all alone.
- Bertrand Russell, who wrote *Why I am not a Christian*, said that death for him was entering into darkness. As he neared death, he said, the darkness that I have always feared is finally

overtaking me. *“There is no splendor, no vastness anywhere, only triviality for a moment, and then nothing.”*

- Contrast with Joni Eareckson Tada. Diving accident, paralyzed. God used this to bring her to Himself. She writes, “Been thinking about what I’ll do first in heaven. The first thing I’ll do with my new legs is drop to glorified knees and worship Jesus who saved my life from the pit by paralyzing me in this life.”³
- But you say, “Well, isn’t that just wishful thinking? Isn’t that just what Christians say to themselves to keep their spirits up? Is there any evidence for this fantastic assertion that the universe is going to be reborn and resurrected along with us?”⁴ Great question! There is evidence. The evidence is the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

What if the cross and resurrection showed you the future? Sin will die; Christ will live. What would that mean for what you were teaching your children now?

- Wouldn’t rearranging your life to follow Jesus be worth whatever earthly “inconvenience” it cost you? What would you hold onto that would be worth your eternity, or your kids’ eternity?
- I understand that following Christ can be inconvenient now... but if I understand the Bible rightly, the real inconvenience comes later if you don’t follow Christ!

For me, every year I get more and more thankful.

- **Imagine that you were on a railroad track... car stalled.** Couldn’t get out. At last minute an SUV comes up behind you and nudges you off the tracks, but in so doing, his car is in your place and he get obliterated. You are looking at this, wondering at the grace of this man who took your place on the tracks. Then you hear something banging around in your trunk and you realize that one of your kids had gotten stuck in there. They were playing hide and seek and you

³ My paraphrase, but substance of quote is accurate.

⁴ Again, question posed by John Stott.

drove off not knowing... and then you realize this guy not only saved your life, but the life of those you love.

So there comes a point of decision for you. Will you receive it, or will you ignore it, or harden your heart and reject it? One last word from the text, go back to the beginning...

“[1] Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, [2] and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.”

We have a very decision-oriented Christianity! Decide for Jesus! Lots of people come and make decisions at Easter. But see what it says? We must hold it fast to the end, or it is in vain. It begins at a point, but the proof that you made it is the position you are in now. I often think of it like a **CHAIR...**

Baptism is the symbol that you’ve made the decision (explain)

- Many of you have never been baptized. You say, “Well, what’s the big deal? It’s a big deal because it’s a command of Jesus.” Who are we to decide which of Jesus’ commands we want to marginalize?
- Any excuse you’ll come up with, I have an answer for:
 - I rode with people (they’ll wait, I promise.)
 - No clothes. (Yola- story—I hope this is OK to tell. If y’all want African American girls to get baptized, you need some product.)
- You say, “I was baptized as a baby”
 - Scripture always presents baptism is supposed to be a confession of your faith. Every single baptism we see in the NT, every one, happened to an adult. It was a profession of their faith.
 - If you were baptized as a baby, whose faith was that a symbol of? Theirs. You need to make one of your own.
- “I’m not ready to switch denominations.” I’m not asking you to switch denominations. **You don’t ever get baptized in**

the name of a denomination. You get baptized in the name of Jesus. Not “I baptize you as a Southern Baptist,” but in name of the F, S, and HS. We are not going to baptize you as a Baptist, or a Presbyterian, or as a Catholic, but as a follower of Jesus.

So, some of you need to come, talk with one of our prayer counselors, trust Christ today, and then show it through baptism.

Others of you in here have already trusted Christ (at a previous time), but you’ve never taken the step of being Scripturally baptized! Today is your day. It’s time for you to take that step.

Bow your heads

- (salvation prayer... “I believe in the resurrection, that means that you are Lord and you are in charge. You call the shots. I believe that you died in my place and I receive right now your gift of forgiveness.)
- If you’ve never been baptized, tell God that if he’ll give you the courage, you’re ready to take that step now. If you have been baptized, and you’re with somebody who you think needs to, pray for them right now...

TURN IT OVER TO CAMPUS PASTORS AND WORSHIP LEADERS