

## THE CORE STORY

***If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. I Corinthians 15:19-20***

Starting last September, we have been working our way through what we titled the core stories of the Bible. These have been selected because they are the most fundamental stories about God's relationship with human kind.

On Easter Sunday we come to what I would call the core story of the faith. It is the story that gives meaning and sense to all the other stories. John Irving has written many best-selling novels such as the ***World According to Garp***. In one of his later novels ***A Prayer for Owen Meany***, Irving probed the depth of religious experience. Walking home from worship on Palm Sunday, the narrator reflects on the meaning of Holy Week and remembers Owen Meany's profound faith in the resurrection in these words:

**I find that Holy Week is draining; no matter how many times I have lived through his crucifixion, my anxiety about his resurrection is undiminished – I am terrified that, this year, it won't happen; that, that year, it didn't. Anyone can be sentimental about the Nativity; any fool can feel like a Christian at Christmas. But Easter is the main event; if you don't believe in the resurrection, you're not a believer.**

Our text from the fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians reminds us that the resurrection of Jesus is the core story of our faith. All of the Christian faith is based on the ancient cry of the Church, "The tomb is empty, Christ is Risen, He is Risen Indeed." We Christians do not worship on Saturday which is the ancient Sabbath observed by Jews. We worship on Sunday because it is the day of Resurrection. Our worship each week is in part a celebration of the core story.

We read in Mark's account that three women, two Marys and Salome make their way to Jesus' tomb on that first Easter morning. They had come to complete the normal rituals associated with burials in the first century. When they arrived, they were surprised to find that the body was gone. They are told by a young man in a white robe, "**Do not be alarmed; you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.**" This is the core story of the faith.

The Christmas story is beautiful and teaches us a lot about the incarnation. Yet if Matthew and Luke had not written their Gospels or if these two Gospels had been lost through the years we would not have the story which we remember each December. The rest of the New Testament is silent on Joseph and Mary's journey to Bethlehem.

Not being able to tell the story of Jesus' birth in the manger would be a loss,  
we would miss seeing the children dressed up as angels, wisemen  
and shepherds  
we would miss the lighted candles and singing Silent Night.  
But it would not significantly change the message  
or teaching of the Christian Church.

If the writers of the Gospels had chosen not to record one of the parables of Jesus such as the story of the Good Samaritan or the prodigal son or if the Sermon on the Mount had been mislaid we would have lost precious teachings, but again it would not significantly change our preaching, worship or our understanding of the faith.

It is different with the Resurrection. It is the very heart of our faith on which everything else is based. More than fifty years ago a book was published called ***The Passover Plot***. This book tried to prove that the followers of Jesus made up the whole story of Jesus' resurrection. This book struck at the very foundation of the Christian faith.

Had the body of Jesus been found the Church would disappear.  
Our faith would have no meaning.  
Our worship would be empty.

This truth is expressed by Paul in his words: **If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.**

Paul is reminding us that without the resurrection our whole structure of belief comes tumbling down. The whole meaning of the Christian life is tied up with our faith in Jesus being raised from the dead. Paul emphasizes this point by saying that if the resurrection is false then Christians are to be pitied more than other people. We would have made sacrifices all in vain.

Why would we say this? Almost every teaching of the Christian faith is tied to the resurrection of Christ and our hope of eternity.

For example, the Christian understanding of forgiveness only makes sense in light of eternity.

Corrie Ten Boom and her sister Betsie were arrested by the Nazi's for hiding Jews in their house in the city of Haarlem in the Netherlands. They were taken to live in a concentration camp in Germany. In a book about their experiences entitled ***The Hiding Place*** we find these words:

**One day they were forced to stand naked in a courtyard watching as a concentration camp matron was beating a prisoner. "Oh, the poor woman," Corrie cried. "Yes, May God forgive her," her sister Betsie replied. And again, Corrie realized that it was for the souls of the brutal Nazi guards that her sister prayed.**

This understanding of the need to pray for forgiveness for those who do evil is grounded in the belief that we shall be judged in eternity for what we do in this life. Our actions only have significance if they have an eternal reference. If there were no eternity one would not pray that someone who did evil would be forgiven. If all that we experience were this life then we would merely seek to avoid the evil others do, not pray for them to change.

The Christian understanding of spiritual growth is also rooted in our understanding about the nature of reality. We Christians believe that we have an eternal destiny. We believe that Jesus' resurrection means that we are going to spend eternity with God. Thus, our life in this world is in part a preparation for the world to come. We are seeking to allow God to shape our character, to mold who we are that we might become fit citizens of heaven.

One aspect of spiritual growth is learning to say no to our own desires. Christians have entered into spiritual disciplines such as prayer and fasting in order to control our earthly desires. This only makes sense if we are being shaped for heaven.

The story is told of a wild living young man who once encountered a monk who spent his time in fasting, prayer and doing acts of mercy to the poor and outcast. The young man said, "Father what a miserable condition is yours if there is not another world after this." The Monk replied, "That is true my son, but what will be your state if there is?"

That is the crux of the whole question.

If Christ was not raised then there is no hope for you and me.

All of our struggles to be better men and women would make no sense at all.

All our Bible reading,

Our prayers,

Our service to others,

Our giving to mission to care for people,

Our kindly service to others,

All of it would make no sense.

As Paul says we would of all humankind be the most pitied. We would have wasted our lives, for if Christ were not raised then we should eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we all will be dead and gone. We should live to please ourselves.

Paul reminds us of the great truth that but **in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.**

The central message that the Apostles' shared across the Roman world was that Christ had been raised from the dead. In fact, the original meaning of the term Apostle of Jesus Christ included the fact that one had experienced the Risen Christ. The disciples were not inspired to risk death and rejection to merely share Jesus' teachings. They did not go to tell the Christmas story, or the story of Jesus' Baptism. The disciples served as witnesses to the fact that Jesus had been nailed to a cross and left to die. Then three days later he had been brought back to life. The Risen Christ as Paul said appeared to Peter then to the twelve and then to more than five hundred brethren.

Anthony Bloom was born to Russian parents who were forced to live in exile following the revolution. Bloom became a medical doctor and a Bishop in the Orthodox Church. He tells us how he came to faith in Christ. He was part of a Russian youth organization that had a priest come and talk to them. At the time he did not believe in God. The priest talk made him indignant. He tells us:

**I heard a vision of Christ and Christianity that was profoundly repulsive to me. When the lecture was over I hurried home in order to check the truth of what he had been saying. I asked my mother whether she had a book of the Gospel, because I wanted to know whether the Gospel would support the monstrous impression I had derived from his talk. I expected nothing good from my reading, so I counted the chapters of the four Gospels to make sure I read the shortest, so as not to waste time unnecessarily. I started to read St. Mark's Gospel.**

**While reading the beginning of St. Mark's Gospel, before I reached the third chapter, I suddenly became aware that on the other side of my desk there was a presence. And the certainty was so strong that it was Christ standing there that it has never left me. This was a real turning point. Because Christ was alive and I had been in his presence I could say with certainty that what the Gospel said about the crucifixion of the prophet of Galilee was true and the centurion was right when he said, "truly this was the Son of God." It was in the light of the Resurrection that I could read with certainty the story of the Gospel, knowing that everything was true in it because the impossible event of the Resurrection was to me more certain than any event in history.**

Friends, we can know this truth today. While we cannot see Jesus in bodily form, for he has ascended to the Father, we can know the Risen Christ today.

We can experience his presence,  
know his forgiveness,  
follow his guidance  
and feel his love.

Christ has Risen and is with us still today.

You and I are meant for eternity. Jesus is the first fruit, and we are to follow. Our lives in this world have meaning and purpose in light of eternity. Our actions, our sacrifices, our love are day-by-day shaping our character that will enable us to take our place in God's eternal kingdom.

This is the fact on which our faith is built.  
It is the truth that we claim with all our heart.  
It is the hope that we cling to in times of despair.  
It is the promise that we trust in times of doubt.

Love is stronger than hate,  
truth is more powerful than lies,  
good is stronger than evil  
and life will overcome death.

The Resurrection of Jesus shapes our whole understanding of life.

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