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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
The Resurrection of Our Lord, Series B+
Easter Vigil, Saturday, April 3rd, 2021
Easter Sunday, April 4th, 2021

Sermon: First Importance

Texts: Mark 16:1-8; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Focus: Jesus Christ rose bodily from the grave.

Function: That they would live boldly by faith in Christ's resurrection.

Structure: Story-Applied

Locus: "...Just as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity" (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. Alleluia! Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* In our epistle today, St. Paul writes: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." (1 Cor.15:3-4, ESV).¹ The apostle tells us that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, are matters of first importance. The cross and empty tomb are central to our faith. Indeed, "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins... But in fact, Christ *has* been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (vv. 17, 20).

You cannot be a Christian unless you believe that Jesus died and rose again bodily from the grave—not just as a spirit or ghost, but in a body, with flesh and blood, breath and bone. So how many people believe that Jesus really rose from the dead? According to a study last year by Lifeway Research, 98% of Evangelical Christians in America believe that Jesus rose from the dead. That is an astounding number! And, quite remarkably, more than two-thirds of Americans

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

generally believe in Christ's resurrection.² It is interesting that many of those same people who believe in Christ's resurrection abound in heretical beliefs about the Trinity and Christ's divinity. Nevertheless, 66% of Americans "believe the biblical accounts of Jesus' bodily resurrection are completely accurate."³

The death and resurrection of the Son of God is the most significant event in the history of the world. No other reality matters by comparison. No other event is even a close second. Jesus really did rise from the dead. The women really did find the tomb empty. An angel really told them, "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here... just as he told you" (Mark 16:6-7). It is no wonder that the women fled in fear and trembling, for nothing like this had ever happened before—until it happened on that Sunday morning. Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

Yet no matter what we *say* took place on that first Easter, most of us *live* as though Jesus is still dead and buried. For if we truly believe that Christ is risen, as we shouted in our Easter acclamation, then we would live our lives much differently than we do. For example, we would treasure and esteem his Word so highly we'd never blow off public worship. We also wouldn't keep quiet about our faith. Instead, urgency would compel us to tell people about our Savior before it's too late. And, more than any of that, we would not allow worry, doubt, or fear to control our lives.

The death and resurrection of Jesus are of "first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3). So, if we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead "in accordance with the Scriptures" (1 Cor. 15:4), then the following postulates must be true:

1. We can believe and trust Jesus' Word.

² <https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/09/16/which-americans-are-least-likely-to-believe-in-jesus-resurrection/>
³ <https://lifewayresearch.com/2020/09/08/americans-hold-complex-conflicting-religious-beliefs-according-to-latest-state-of-theology-study/>

2. We must obey Jesus' Word.
3. We must tell others his Word.

First, if we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then we can **believe and trust** his Word. We'd have no doubts about Jesus' promises that our loving, heavenly Father will take care of our every need and protect us from evil and danger. We would understand that God gives us daily bread, and every good thing comes from him as a gift, not a reward that we must win or merit.

We'd also believe the wonderful words of forgiveness Jesus speaks in the Gospels, such as his promise of living water to the woman by the well (John 4), or the promise of eternal life to Nicodemus (John 3). We would not question how bread and wine can be Jesus' body and blood, when Christ himself tells us, "Take, eat; this is my body... Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:26-28). Nor would we question how water can wash away our sins, when Jesus declares, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved..." (Mark 16:16).

If we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then we would not question if God is kind and good or powerful. We would trust him at his Word and believe that he can do all things for those who love him.

Second, if we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then we would **obey** his Word. We wouldn't try to ignore, dismiss, or explain away what he says in his Word. We'd realize that he's the most important person who ever lived and that he speaks with the authority of God because he is the divine Son. As Jesus says in the Great Commission, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me..." (Matt. 28:19a). Jesus has *all* authority. His resurrection is his vindication—the proof that he is who he says he is and that we must do what he asks us to do. We cannot pick and choose which parts of the Bible we want to believe, or discard the

commandments we regard as strange or inconvenient. (*Aside: Nowadays, it seems like we are quick to disregard anything the Bible says about what we ought to do and not do in our bedrooms.*)

There is no area of your life that does not come under Jesus' thumb, including your politics, your money, your marriage, your job, your friendships, or your sexuality. If we believe that Christ has risen, then we must submit to him in every area of our lives. We must give the full 10% tithe, as he commands to the Pharisees (Matt. 23:23). We must keep the marriage bed holy and save it only for a man and his wife, as Jesus says: "But from the beginning of creation, 'God made them male and female' ... What, therefore, God has joined, let not man separate" (Mark 10:6, 9)? If we really believe that Jesus rose from the dead, then we must help the poor and needy, pray for our enemies, and love those who persecute us, as Jesus enjoins in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-6). And if the culture, our friends, our political parties, or even our church were to tell us to believe or say or do something contrary to God's Word, then we must reply, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). *All* authority was given to Jesus. So we must hear and obey.

Finally, if we really believe that Jesus is alive, then we will not keep silent about our Christian faith. We cannot keep the Gospel to ourselves because it is a matter of life and death to our family, friends, and neighbors. If we really believe that Jesus is alive, then we should be more afraid of our unbelieving family and friends going to hell than we are of them rejecting us or refusing our friendship because of our faith in Christ. Their salvation must matter more to us than our friendship. If we truly love and care about them, then we must take the risk of offending them by telling them that Jesus Christ is the only way to eternal life, and his forgiveness is the only solution to their sins. No one comes to the Father except through *him*

(John 14:6). And if we love the glory of man more than the glory of God, we are not worthy to be called his disciples. Jesus says, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me” (Matt. 10:37).

So what if your family or friends reject you because you are a Christian? So what if they unfriend you on Facebook or disinherit you? So what if they hand you over to be put in prison or be put to death. Jesus suffered all that and worse for you and your salvation. And we must seek to please God instead of man (cf. Gal. 1:10). “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore, whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4).

Don’t be afraid to speak the name of Jesus. The first Christians were beaten for preaching his name. Yet even they declared, “We cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Besides, Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will give you the words to say (Mark 13:11)—*if you really believe that Jesus is alive.*

Alleluia! Christ is risen! *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!*

On this Easter we remember: Jesus died and rose again in order to forgive all the fair weather faithful. He suffered and died on the cross because he knew that we would be quiet and lazy in our faith. He knew that we would reject his Word and go our own way. He knew that we would choose friendship with the world over friendship with him.

Yet knowing all of that, Jesus prayed from the cross, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). And having interceded for us, Jesus breathed his last and died. Then, after he rose from the dead and appeared to his disciples, he bid them, “Peace be with you” (John 20:21a). Jesus even singled out Peter for a special mercy. Peter denied Jesus three times before the rooster crowed. By all counts, he should have been dropped from the

disciples' rolls. But at the empty tomb, the angel told the women, "But go, tell his disciples **and Peter**"—and Peter!—"that he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you" (Mark 16:7). (*Aside:* You can read the dramatic, moving account of Peter's reinstatement after Christ forgave him in John 21).

Because Jesus lives, he forgives our sins and gives us new life. He has mercy on those who doubt. He does not condemn the sinner who repents and comes home. He gives us courage to speak his name before kings, emperors, presidents, and governors. Because he lives, everything is different, everything is changed—and everything will be made new. Jesus died, was buried, and rose again. That is of "first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3). Alleluia! Christ is risen. *He is risen indeed. Alleluia!* In the name of Jesus. Amen.