

St. James Lutheran Church
Easter
April 4, 2010
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First Reading: Acts 10:34-43
Second Reading: I Corinthians 15:19-26
Gospel: Luke 24:1-12

Ifs and Buts

“If Christ is risen, then nothing else matters. If Christ is not risen, then nothing else matters.” So wrote theologian and church historian Jaroslov Pelikan.

Resurrection from the dead is an iffy proposition. It is certainly an appealing notion. (It beats the alternative.) Yet science, experience and close observation lend no real support to it. Most of us have attended many funerals – but none of us has witnessed anything like resurrection.

St. Paul understood the “iffiness” that arises when it comes to life after death. He addresses this topic at great length in chapter 15 of 1st Corinthians. In those verses Paul raises many “ifs”, including:

- “if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised” (15:13)
- “if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (15:14)
- “if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (15:17)
- “if the dead are not raised, ‘let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.’” (15:32)

Quite simply, if Christ has not been raised from the dead, then death is the last word for us all. Our life then does begin to resemble “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” We keep busy killing time before time finally kills us. At best, we look for ways to distract our minds from the depressing truth that we are food for worms.

If there is no resurrection, then all those saints out there in the memorial garden will never be more than ashes. And our prospects aren’t any better. St. Paul draws out the implications of the proposition “if Christ is not raised” through the first 19 verses of chapter 15, where we pick it up today in our second reading. “if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” (15:19)

But then Paul can’t bear this mood of skepticism, this existential angst and futility any longer. So he shifts gears abruptly at verse 20. From being “of all people most to be pitied,” Paul leaps to: “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead; the first fruits of those who have died.” Gone is any wavering, uncertain “iffiness”, replaced by the unshakable conviction that Christ truly is risen and alive – it’s a fact. It’s the whole truth – the essential truth. What’s more, Paul refers to the risen Christ as the “first fruits” – indicating that resurrection is in store for us as well. This is just the beginning.

Now, the dead being raised, life after death, the prospect of eternal life, all may seem to rational minds unlikely, unnatural, improbable – even impossible. But this changes everything! We may wonder how – but in fact Christ has been raised!

This is the good news that is the solid foundation for our faith – our sure and certain hope. The resurrection of Jesus changes the whole ballgame, it changes everything. Just when it seemed

that all was lost, that the devil finally had his way, that sin and death had prevailed – God turned the tables in a definitive and lasting way.

After the crucifixion, it was all over – our fate was sealed, BUT FOR GOD.... Paul recognizes the decisiveness of this shift, and so he contradicts all the doubtful and desolate speculations with a resounding: “But in fact Christ has been raised...”

Luke makes the same sharp turn in his gospel narrative. Chapter 23 in Luke ends with Jesus dead and buried, laid to rest in a borrowed tomb, courtesy of Joseph of Arimathea. That could have been the final chapter, the end of the story. However, there is a chapter 24 that follows; and it begins with that significant word “but.” “But on the first day of the week...” “Hold on, we aren’t finished yet...” “Wait a minute, there’s more to tell...”

That little three letter word “but” announces a change – and that word appears six times in the opening twelve verses of chapter 24. All the usual expectations keep getting confounded by God’s great and surprising victory over death:

- * “ **but** when they went in , they did not find the body...” What in the world? What now?? What’s going on here?
- * Luke tells us the women were terrified and perplexed, “...**but** the two men in the dazzling clothes said to them, ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’” Good question! Of course, those women had no idea that Jesus was alive.
- * The heavenly messengers continue: “He is not here, **but** has risen.” He’s not dead, but alive. There’s the first Christian sermon ever preached. The first telling of the good news in all its fullness. It’s short, to the point, and full of promise. “He’s not here, but has risen.”
- * This is news that must be shared. So the women rush to tell the grieving apostles the amazing news – certain that they will be overjoyed. “**But** their words seemed to them an idle tale, and they did not believe them.” Isn’t that just about right? Those thick-headed and slow of heart apostles dismiss the news the women bring. The news of resurrection is too wonderful, too implausible, too good to possibly be true.
- * “**But**, (wait a minute), Peter got up and ran to the tomb...” He had to see for himself. And he finds that the women weren’t making it up. Jesus really isn’t in the tomb! Just as they said.

Karl Barth said: “The gospel is not a natural ‘therefore’ but a miraculous ‘nevertheless.’” That is, Christ’s resurrection is not the expected, logical conclusion to this story – but a dramatic reversal, a confounding contradiction to all we would expect. It’s no surprise those apostles didn’t believe what the women had to share. Who would?

Christ’s resurrection is not like daffodils and tulips bursting into bloom after a long, hard winter. Lovely as they are, they are not unexpected. Even though Jesus had told his followers more than once that this would happen, it simply did not compute.

- It was inconceivable.
- It was more unlikely than pigs flying, or a man breathing under water, or a virgin giving birth.

But it happened.

If Christ is not raised, then nothing really matters. Then we're all doomed – it's only a matter of time. In fact, we'd be wasting our time here this morning.

BUT IF CHRIST IS RAISED, but then nothing else matters nearly as much! Nothing compares to this life changing blessing.

Peter Vardy writes: “Either Christianity is true or it is false. What it cannot be is a little bit true. If it is true, then it demands that everything else take second place to living out our relationship with God. If it is not true, then it is irrelevant.

On this Easter Day, this Resurrection Day, we are filled with hope and joy. The church is full, the flowers are gorgeous, the weather is great, the music is glorious. On such a day it's possible for us to actually believe the good news.

Yet, let's be honest. Not all days are like this. We all know days that are much harder – more like Good Friday.

There are days when being a Christian can feel kind of like being a Cub fan. You know what that's about. Time and again, your hopes are raised, only to be cruelly crushed. The recurring refrain is “wait till next year.” The hoped for triumph never comes. Bart Giamatti: “Baseball is a game designed to break your heart.” But not so our faith!

Yes, Christ died a cruel death – it was awful.

If that were the end, then we truly should all be pitied.

But Christ has been raised – he is alive! We serve a living Savior. And in Christ we shall all be made alive!

Thanks be to God!