

YOUR FAITH IS BUILT ON FACTS**1 COR. 15:1-8, 17; ACTS 3:15, 10:39-43**

Do you have a favorite Easter hymn or song? There's some good ones out there: "Christ the Lord is Risen Today," "Christ Arose," "Because He Lives." How about "He Lives"? Great, old song, to be sure. But I've got one problem with it. It's in the last two lines of the chorus: "You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart!" That's a good answer, but it's not the best answer. It's great to feel personally in the depths of your being the reality of Jesus being alive. But the answer, "He lives within my heart," isn't going to be acceptable to most skeptics. They'll roll their eyes if that's your answer. And let's be fair about it. If we ask a Muslim why he or she believes the prophet Muhammad performed miracles and the answer comes back, "I know it's true, because I feel it in my heart," we'd roll our eyes, too. If we ask a Hindu why he or she believes truth is found in Krishna or one of the other many gods of Hinduism and we get back the answer, "Because Krishna lives in my heart," we'd roll our eyes, too. You ask me how I know Jesus lives? Here's my answer. It's the best and only satisfying explanation to which all the historical facts and evidence point. I know it's not as pithy and stirring as "He lives within my heart," but it's a better answer!

Today is the first Sunday of Lent, when Christians all over the world begin a forty day period of time leading up to Holy Week when we focus again on the significance of Jesus' death and resurrection. This year I invite you to think with me about the eternal significance of Jesus' resurrection. Let's see how Scripture makes very clear to us that what happened on the first Easter Day is the great essential of your faith and mine. Well-known pastor and author, Tim Keller, put it succinctly, "If Jesus rose from the dead, you have to accept all he said. If he didn't rise from the dead, then why worry about anything he said? If Jesus rose from the dead, it changes everything." That's not an overstatement at all. It's spot on. Over the next seven Sundays, we're going to see why Jesus' resurrection is indeed the great essential. Today, the answer is that because of it, your faith and mine is built on rock, solid fact. I want to ask and answer three questions today as we start this new message series. Here the first one:

WHY DOESN'T THE RESURRECTION GET THE EMPHASIS IT DESERVES?

I think there's at least four answers to that question. First, the resurrection can be unintentionally eclipsed by the prominence of the cross. Obviously, Jesus' death on the cross is of critical importance because it's why our sins can be forgiven and the guilt of our sin paid in full. While it will always be good and appropriate to "survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died," what Jesus accomplished on it would be null and void without the resurrection three days later. The cross by itself apart from the resurrection would have no power to benefit you or me. Second, the resurrection doesn't get proportional treatment in Scripture itself. In other words, while Scripture clearly says it's the great essential, you don't find chapters upon chapters in the Bible focused on the resurrection of Jesus. That's brings up an interesting point about interpreting the Bible. The amount of information on a specific subject doesn't necessarily establish its value. For example, the Bible tells us more about Hell than it

does Heaven, more about money than it does forgiveness, more about kings in the Old Testament than the virgin birth of Jesus. Does that make Heaven, forgiveness, or the virgin birth less important? Obviously not!

Third, the resurrection has escaped many of the doctrinal battles fought over the cross and its significance. Over the last 2,000 years, there have been countless theories presented concerning what Jesus' death on the cross meant for you and me, but relatively few about what the resurrection means for you and me. It's a variation of the old saying, "The squeaky wheel gets the grease." The cross, not the resurrection, has been the doctrinal squeaky wheel over the centuries, to be sure. Why doesn't the resurrection get the emphasis it deserves? Fourth, the lack of emphasis on the resurrection might well be a satanic strategy. True, sometimes our great enemy attacks us through an all-out assault on biblical truth. But at other times, he encourages us to neglect great truths by getting us to assume them without really understanding their importance. Most Christians assume Jesus' resurrection, but fewer of us understand why it's so central and so essential to our faith. Here's a second question:

IS THE RESURRECTION'S AUTHENTICITY VALID?

1 Corinthians is one chapter in the Bible that is all about resurrection – both Jesus' resurrection and our resurrection. We're going to be in this chapter frequently over the next seven Sundays. Let's read now the first eight verses as well as v. 17. Most Bible scholars believe verses 3-5 is the earliest creed or doctrinal statement that exists about the central beliefs of Christianity. First, Jesus died for our sins. Second, Jesus was buried. Third, Jesus was raised from the dead after three days and there were eyewitnesses to that fact. Paul made it clear he didn't create or make this up. This early creed probably came into existence among Christians just 2-3 years after Jesus went back to Heaven. It was given to Paul. He believed it and passed it on the Corinthians. They received it as well. And because they had put their faith in Jesus as the result of believing this good news, they had experienced God's saving grace, too.

Notice how important it was to Paul that there was a multitude of eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection. The risen Jesus appeared to Cephas, which was the Aramaic version of Peter's name. He appeared to the Twelve - the title given to the group of men who followed Jesus during His ministry. Jesus appeared to another 500 believers at one, single event some of whom were still alive when Paul wrote this letter and who could be consulted for verification, if necessary. The risen Jesus appeared to James, the half-brother of Jesus and pastor of the church in Jerusalem at that time, whose letter we just finished studying last week. Jesus appeared to the apostles which was apparently a larger but defined group of men and women who had seen the risen Jesus alive and well. Last but not least, the risen Jesus appeared to Paul himself on the road to Damascus. At the time, Paul was the archenemy of Jesus and was busy persecuting and killing His followers. What Paul saw that day was far more than a vision. It was a literal, physical appearance of the resurrected Jesus. Nothing less would have changed

this dedicated, zealous follower of Judaism full of violent hatred for anything Christian into the greatest champion for Jesus the world has ever known.

This emphasis on eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus runs through the New Testament. On one occasion, Peter said this to a group of people in Jerusalem, “You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. And we are witnesses of this fact!” (Acts 3:15 NLT) On another occasion, Peter told another group, “And we apostles are witnesses of all he did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day. Then God allowed him to appear, not to the general public, but to us whom God had chosen in advance to be his witnesses. We were those who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.” (Acts 10:39-43 NLT)

Why was it important to have eyewitnesses to the risen Jesus back then? Why should it be important to us today? The bodily, physical, literal resurrection of Jesus on the third day after His death on the cross is the foundation of our faith in Jesus. Only if Jesus’ resurrection is an objective, historical fact is your faith and mine worth anything. Paul told the Corinthians and he told us, “If Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins.” (1 Cor. 15:17 NLT) The first Christian leaders didn’t see a ghost. They didn’t have an hallucination. They didn’t see a vision. If they were asked, “You ask me how I know He lives?” they would not have said, “He lives within my heart.” No, they saw the real risen Lord Jesus Christ. They touched Him. They even ate and drank with the risen Jesus. Because the risen Jesus appeared to over 500 people on repeated occasions, you and I are invited to put our faith in who He is and what He accomplished.

I don’t have time today to review all the different objections to the resurrection of Jesus or the answers provided to refute them. But it’s fascinating to read about them. I encourage you to check out the numerous books that have been written on the subject. It will strengthen your faith and give you a better answer than, “He lives within my heart.” But I did want to point out the importance of Jesus’ burial and His appearances in establishing the fact of Jesus’ resurrection because both are specifically mentioned there in v. 3-4 of 1 Corinthians 15. They work together in a convincing way to establish the fact Jesus was truly dead, truly buried in a borrowed tomb, and truly raised from the dead. No credible historian today doubts the existence of Jesus or the fact that He was crucified. Nothing else explains the existence and influence of the Christian faith for the last 2,000 years. But some historians doubt the burial of Jesus’ body in a tomb and many more doubt His resurrection from the dead. What’s our response to their objections? “He lives within my heart”? We need to do better than that!

On the one hand, if all the first Christians heard about was the empty tomb, but there were no resurrection appearances of Jesus to eyewitnesses, it would be very hard to conclude Jesus had been raised from the dead. Other explanations would abound. In

fact, the Jewish leaders who killed Jesus said His disciples stole Jesus' dead body. That lie never stuck because you don't just steal a body from a tomb guarded by several Roman soldiers. Nor do you die willingly as a martyr for what you know isn't true. History tells us many of those eyewitnesses to Jesus' resurrection gladly died proclaiming the fact of Jesus' resurrection. On the other hand, if the risen Jesus appeared to eyewitnesses, but His body was still very much in a tomb, the natural explanation would be people were seeing a ghost or having an hallucination. By themselves, neither an empty tomb nor resurrection appearances are conclusive, but when you put them together they become more than a sufficient reason for the belief of those first Christians – that very good news that's been passed down to us.

So, why do so many people all over the world dismiss the resurrection of Jesus as a fable, a myth, or a fantasy? The reason everyone doesn't accept the resurrection of Jesus as an historical fact is the sinful blindness of human beings. Instinctively, many people realize that if you admit Jesus rose from the dead, it changes everything. There really is a God. This God holds us accountable for our lives. My sin is real and it demanded the radical solution of Jesus dying on a cross. This Jesus now has every right to demand my allegiance and expect my worship. He has every right to ask me to live my life His way. Because by nature we don't want to acknowledge, obey and serve God, we resist the fact of the resurrection. It's just easier to believe it's all a myth.

But, don't you have to exercise faith to become a Christian? Of course, you do. To persuade your mind to believe in what certainly doesn't happen every day – the literal, actual resurrection of a dead body – requires not only rational arguments, but a gift of faith from God. But Christianity is a reasonable faith. I suggest it's the only reasonable faith on the planet. Faith isn't a blind, irrational leap into a fantasy world. Genuine faith is built upon, supported by, and reinforced by historical evidence. You ask me how I know Jesus lives? He lives within my heart? No, because it's the best and only satisfying explanation to which all the historical facts and evidence point.

Think of it this way. Jesus' resurrection is like a river that parts a road into two sections. People are on the road approaching the river. Arriving at the river of the resurrection, you look across it to where the road continues and see quite a few cars over there. In your doubt, you can't imagine how people got to the other side of the river. How did they get across? How can rational people come to the belief that Jesus died and rose from the dead? Faith is the unnoticed ferry, lying hidden near the bank of the river, which can take us from the riverbank of doubt to the other side of belief in the resurrection. But it's not blind, irrational faith. You don't cross by closing your eyes and wishing Jesus' resurrection was true. No. You cross with your eyes wide open. This is an informed, reasonable faith, faith in a historically plausible resurrection, attested by hundreds of witnesses, one proven to be worth believing. A final question....

WHY IS THE RESURRECTION ESSENTIAL TO MY FAITH?

The big issue Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 15 wasn't Jesus' resurrection. Instead, some teachers or leaders in the Corinthian church were denying the future physical

resurrection of Jesus' followers. They were likely followers of a philosophical movement popular back then known as Gnosticism. It taught that everything physical – including the human body – was evil, worthless and unimportant. Paul went to great lengths to point out such a belief was a denial of an even more important, foundational truth: Jesus being bodily raised from the dead. If dead Christians are never raised from the dead, then Jesus was never raised from the dead. If Jesus was never raised from the dead, the Christian faith is destroyed. Jesus' resurrection is central to everything. If Jesus didn't get up on Easter Sunday, shake off His grave clothes, walk out of that tomb, and then appear to over 500 of His followers before He went back to Heaven, your faith, my faith, everyone's faith is a sham. A colossal waste of time. Useless. Worthless. If Christians are not raised from the dead, Jesus was not raised. And if Jesus wasn't raised, then everything about the Christian faith is a lie.

Let me point out eight powerful results of Jesus' resurrection. Most of these we're going to address more fully over the next seven weeks, but here's just a sample of why the resurrection of Jesus is essential. One, because Jesus rose from the dead, He is proved to be absolutely unique and His claims about Himself validated. The Bible says, "The Good News is about his Son.... He was shown to be the Son of God when he was raised from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. He is Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. 1:3-4 NLT) Two, because Jesus rose from the dead, what He accomplished at the cross is now available to one and all. The Bible says, "He was handed over to die because of our sins, and he was raised to life to make us right with God." (Rom. 4:25 NLT) It also says, "For since our friendship with God was restored by the death of his Son while we were still his enemies, we will certainly be saved through the life of his Son." (Rom. 5:10 NLT) Without the resurrection, there would be no gospel at all.

Three, because Jesus rose from the dead, He can be known today simply because He is truly alive. He is fully available to people to meet spiritually, know, follow, and love. The Bible says, "But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died." (1 Cor. 15:20 NLT) Four, because Jesus rose from the dead, those who follow Him will receive eternal life including a new, resurrected body. "If you openly declare that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." (Rom 10:9 NLT) It also says, "For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies." (1 Cor. 15:52 NLT) Five, because Jesus rose from the dead, death itself has been defeated and it will be destroyed. The Bible says, "But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 15:57 NLT)

Six, because Jesus rose from the dead, we can experience personal and eternal transformation. The Bible says, "I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand." (Eph. 1:19-20 NLT). Jesus' resurrection not only removed the penalty of our sins, but it also gives us the power to defeat sin's power in our lives today. Seven, because Jesus rose from the dead, His second coming is guaranteed. Dead people don't come back a

second time. Because He's alive, Jesus is coming back. The Bible says, "For he has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man he has appointed, and he proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead." (Acts 17:31 NLT). Finally, because Jesus rose from the dead, we now have every reason to help accomplish His mission by proclaiming His salvation to lost people, loving and serving humanity in His name, and working for justice and the establishment of His Kingdom. The Bible says, "So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless." (1 Cor. 15:58 NLT) If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, it would be useless. But He did rise, so anything and everything you do for Jesus matters. It has eternal consequences.

The late Charles Colson who was convicted for his involvement in the Watergate scandal as an assistant to President Richard Nixon, had an interesting response to people who challenged his belief in Jesus' resurrection. His answer was always that the disciples and 500 others gave eyewitness accounts of seeing Jesus risen from the tomb. But then Colson was often asked, "How do you know they were telling the truth? Maybe they were perpetrating a hoax." His answer to that was unusual: Watergate. Watergate involved a conspiracy perpetuated by the closest aides to the President of the United States—the most powerful men in America. They were intensely loyal to Nixon. But one of them, John Dean, turned state's evidence, that is, he testified against Nixon, as he put it, "to save his own skin"—and he did so only two weeks after informing the president about what was really going on. Two weeks! The cover-up, the lie, could only be held together for two weeks, and then everybody else jumped ship in order to save themselves. Now, the fact is that all those around the President were facing was embarrassment, maybe prison. Nobody's life was at stake.

But what about the disciples? Eleven powerless men. They were facing not just embarrassment, but beatings, stonings, and execution. Every single one of the disciples insisted, to their dying breaths, that they'd physically seen Jesus bodily raised from the dead. Don't you think that one of those men would have cracked before being beheaded or stoned? That one of them would have made a deal with the authorities? None did. Those first Christians who were eyewitnesses of the risen Jesus could not deny Jesus, because they had seen Him face to face, and they knew He had risen from the dead. Men and women will give their lives for something they believe to be true; they will never give their lives for something they know to be false.

So take it from an expert in cover-ups—someone who lived through Watergate. Nothing less than a resurrected Jesus could have caused those men to maintain Jesus is alive and is Lord. Two thousand years later, nothing less than the power of the risen Christ can inspire Christians around the world to remain faithful—despite skepticism, ridicule - and in some countries - prison, torture, and death. Jesus is Lord: That's the thrilling message of the resurrection. It's the great essential. And it's an historic fact, one convincingly established by the evidence—and one you can bet your life upon. Your faith is built on fact.