

**Words for God's Church: Because He Lives  
I Corinthians 15:12-34**

Last week we heard Paul proclaim to the Church in Corinth the good news that had been handed down to him that *Christ died for our sins..., and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day ... and that he appeared* to many, many different people. That fact was of first importance and yet Paul didn't stop with that proclamation. He wanted them to understand why this fact was central to their life as a community. Paul felt the need to explain this further because there were some in that community who were saying there was *no resurrection of the dead*. They were not convinced that the dead would be raised, and for the most part they were simply following the accepted wisdom of the time, which saw resurrection as a rare and altogether extraordinary event. They didn't doubt that Jesus had been raised from the dead because there were so many who had seen him. They believed he was the one and only Son of God. But they didn't believe that they too would be resurrected.

The idea of bodily resurrection was relatively rare outside of ancient Judaism and even in Jewish circles there were some disputes. Remember how Jesus was questioned by the Sadducees who said "*there was no resurrection.*" Although many in Paul's day believed in the afterlife, most often they imagined the survival of the soul after the death of the body. The more sophisticated Greeks would have thought a belief in a bodily resurrection was quite crude. This was the attitude that Paul was countering in our passage today. And for Paul critical to an understanding of Christ's resurrection and why it matters so deeply for Christ's followers.

Paul began with several *if..then* phrases that present his strong belief that one cannot believe Christ was raised from the dead unless you also believe you will be raised from the dead. First, he said if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. And secondly if Christ has not

been raised from the dead then *“our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”*

Why? Because ultimately if the dead were not raised and thus Christ has not been raised, then they as Christians were providing false and misleading information about God. Because remember their claim was that God had raised Jesus from the dead. This was about God’s power to raise people from the dead. And if there was no resurrection then there would be no hope beyond this present life.

And yet, friends, there is hope. There is hope because Christ lives. He was raised from the dead by God. And that is why this belief is so important. For we proclaim the power of God over death. Barbara Brown Taylor once said: "The power of God is now and has always been the power to raise us from the dead. Period. It is not about us. It is about God."

("Easter Sunday," Christianity Today, April 3, 2000, 72) It is about God’s promise that we will always in this life and in the life to come be with him through Christ’s death and resurrection.

Paul wants to be sure they understand how this is possible and so he states emphatically in verse 20: *But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.* Think about that a moment. The first fruits of those who have died. First fruits are the first of the harvest. That first tomato that appears on the vine. The first cluster of grapes. The first pear or peach that ripens and is ready to pick. And for those who are tending the vine that first produce - that first fruit - is a sign that more is to come. It is a sign that the great harvest has begun. It is what is behind God’s command to offer the first fruits as a gift of thanksgiving. For the first fruits are a promise of the coming harvest that gives the people hope. And that is the connection that Paul was making. Jesus was the first fruit. The first one to be resurrected from the dead. With the sign of the first fruit - with Jesus having been raised from the dead - there is the promise that all those who believe will also be raised from the dead.

And then Paul goes all the way back to Adam. Paul uses Adam and Christ as prototypes. Each founds and forms a great company of people and shapes the character of their living. So just as

Genesis tells of Adam bringing death into the world, through the resurrection Jesus is the one who reverses that curse and brings new life. And it is that new life that gives us hope. It is belief in Christ's resurrection that was at the center of why Paul did everything he did for the community and why he proclaimed the faith even in the midst of danger.

It is this same hope that we cling to today and that has provided hope through the years for Christians in the midst of struggles in life. Back in the late 1960's Bill and Gloria Gaither were young parents who were struggling. The Gaithers had met in the community of Alexandria, Indiana, where Bill and Gloria were teaching high school together. Bill had roots in Southern Gospel music and began the Bill Gaither Trio (joined by his brother Danny and his sister Mary Ann) while he was a student at Anderson College, a Christian college in Anderson, Indiana. Soon after Bill and Gloria met, they began to share ideas about songs. Gloria had been an English major in college so she had a strong command of language and vocabulary. Not long after they were married, Gloria took Mary Ann's place in the trio and, by 1967, Bill was devoting his full-time attention to their career in music.

But the 1960s were a chaotic era in our country and the quantum shift in values was deeply disturbing to Bill and Gloria. They had begun to wonder if God hadn't given up on the world. The external world was in flux and in chaos. The Civil Rights movement was going on, the country was split apart over the Vietnam War and values were changing. Many here today remember those times only too well.

The winter of 1969 was a particularly bleak one for them. Not only had the Indiana winter been a long and hard one but Bill had been stricken with a severe case of mononucleosis and became physically weak. At the same time, Gloria and some other members of their church family encountered some painful false accusations and belittlement. Bill's sister was going through a divorce which was very painful for the entire family for she was in a volatile dangerous situation. It was the first divorce in their family and very hard on everyone. As you can imagine, this was a very difficult trying time for

both Bill and Gloria. And on top of all that they had just discovered that Gloria was expecting their third child.

Gloria said in an interview that she remembers sitting in their living room in agony and fear on New Year's Eve. She was wondering if it was really a wise thing to bring a baby into such a world? And yet Gloria remembers that suddenly and quite unexpectedly she was filled with a gentle, calming peace. Her panic gave way to calmness and an assurance that the future would be just fine, left in God's hands.

One sunny day in the early spring, Bill, Gloria and Bill's father George walked across the paved parking lot at their small A-frame offices. George called Bill and Gloria's attention to a spot they had not noticed. He pointed out a tiny blade of grass that had pushed aside layers of dirt, rock and concrete to reach the sunshine of the world above. It had such a strong will to live; it had overcome all the odds to fulfill its destiny. It was like the first fruits - the promise of what was to come. That blade of grass became a symbol to the Gaithers of God's promises and it inspired Gloria to write a song expressing the hope that was shaped by the resurrection of Jesus, as well as that blade of grass and the birth of her son. That song is the great gospel hymn "*Because He Lives.*"

“God sent His Son, they called Him Jesus;  
He came to love, heal and forgive.  
He lived and died to buy my pardon;  
An empty grave is there to prove my Savior lives  
Because he lives I can face tomorrow  
Because he lives All fear is gone  
Because I know he holds the future  
My life is worth the living just because he lives.  
How sweet to hold A new born baby  
And feel the pride And joy he gives  
But better still The calm assurance  
That child can face uncertain days because he lives

Because he lives I can face tomorrow  
Because he lives All fear is gone  
Because I know he holds the future  
My life is worth the living just because he lives  
And then one day I'll cross the river  
I'll fight life's final war with pain  
And then as death Gives way to victory  
I'll see the lights of glory and I'll know he lives  
Because he lives I can face tomorrow  
Because he lives All fear is gone  
Because I know he holds the future  
My life is worth the living just because he lives.

(<https://worshipleader.com/music/story-behind-the-song-because-he-lives/> & <http://www.oleantimesherald.com/lifestyles/> rev-mcdowell-the-story-behind-the-gaithers-because-he-lives/article\_2d73f288-ccaa-11e3-9d7f-0019bb2963f4.html)

Friends, because Christ lives we too have hope. Because Christ lives we can face tomorrow.  
Because Christ lives all fear is gone. Because Christ lives we know God holds the future in his hands.  
Because Christ lives our lives are worth living. And we are called to live every day confident that  
because Christ lives we too will one day reign in glory with him! Thanks be to God!