

An aerial photograph of a dirt road winding through a dense forest. The road is light brown and shows tire tracks. The surrounding trees are lush green. A semi-transparent dark band is overlaid across the middle of the image, containing the text.

# *What if...?*

1 CORINTHIANS 15:12-19

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Have any of you ever heard of a type of fictional novel writing called “alternate history?” What happens is that a writer will look back across history, identify a key moment or event that seems to have been an important turning point, and change a single detail. The book then re-unfolds history as though that single detail happened in that different way, and the creativity of the writer helps us imagine what our world would be like today if their alternate version had really happened. It’s an interesting slant on historical fiction, although sometimes these books venture further away from our world and into the realm of science fiction instead.

But there are many examples of this type of book that pick up the Second World War, and imagine an alternate outcome where Imperial Japan or Nazi Germany won, or alliances among nations came together differently. Or the American Civil War, and the effect that a small change, like removing a single General from one side or the other might have; even Winston Churchill wrote one of those. Or novels about Napoleon, succeeding in taking over all of Europe in the early 1800s; that’s a good one...going even further back, Elizabeth I of England not taking the throne and thus not there to fend off the Spanish Armada from taking over her kingdom is another.

As these novels spin off into science fiction or fantasy, often there’s a character who knows that something is wrong or that some other, better history is possible, or they move from world to world, seeing all sorts of alternate histories. But some of these novels keep the story in our world, more or less, and offer a political commentary on the present alongside what can often be a fun or fascinating vision of the consequences of one single thing being different, as the author takes us on a journey of creatively imagining the answer to the question what if.

And that was very much what Paul was doing with the Corinthian Christians in this middle section of his great chapter on the resurrection of the body, both Christ’s back then and our own, someday.



The Christians to whom he was writing had some significant doubts about the resurrection of bodies, so Paul followed through for them, writing an alternate history of God and Jesus and our faith. You don't think the resurrection of the dead is possible, replied Paul; okay: what if that is true? What does it mean if you're right?

We've gotten to know our fellow Christians in Corinth, who were muddling along in their life together as Christians, arguing about the details and missing the big picture, but still, to their credit, trying. They were all new to the Christian faith to some extent. A number of them were Jews who had recognized Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah and moved forward in their relationship with God on that basis. But many - perhaps more - of them had no background with our God at all, coming from other religious or philosophical belief systems. Like we do today, these Christians came together into a worshipping community with a lot of different experiences and ideas about power and position, community and culture, life and death.

Disagreements were inevitable; but conflict was not, and Paul dedicated the body of this letter we've been reading to shifting them from a conflict mindset, where everyone's entrenched in their own positions and not listening; to a disagreement mindset, where there is both talking and listening, where reconciliation and a middle ground to stand upon together is the goal.

In this divided church, issues upon which nearly everyone agreed were few; but at last, these Corinthian Christians had found one thing that most of them had the same idea about. Or perhaps they simply decided to disagree with Paul for a change, instead of each other! Either way, the Corinthian Christians were mostly agreed: there is no resurrection of the body - any body, ever, or at least not until the end of the world. And definitely not the resurrection of a man dead three days in his tomb, twenty years ago outside Jerusalem.

I was reading a book about all this, and the author called their disagreement with Paul "the Corinthian Objection," which sounds very legal and official. But I imagine that this was less an intellectual, well-thought out counter-argument to the resurrection of the body, and more of a gut reaction. This skepticism of theirs comes from deeply-held beliefs about the way life and death, reality itself, work.

It'd be like someone saying we all needed to start paying a gravity bill every month, or gravity on the planet would stop, and we and all our possessions would float away, drifting on the wind like balloons, and there was this one guy who this actually happened to back in the nineties...off he went, him and his car, floating along at a couple of thousand feet; someday it'll happen to you too if we don't pay our gravity bills, just you wait for it.

We'd say, no.

We might say no for different reasons, but we'd all say, that's not just impossible, it's weird or silly or insulting to imagine we'd fall for a scam like that. And now here's Paul, giving the Corinthians a hard time about one of the very few things they all agree on. There is no resurrection of the dead.

Last Sunday, Paul reviewed his best evidence for the realness of the resurrection of Jesus. We had eye witness testimony, from reliable sources, like Jesus' disciples and followers who were there, and from a large number of people who all saw Jesus alive again after his death. We had the testimony of the Old Testament and Jewish writings, demonstrating that Jesus' resurrection makes sense within the context of God's plan for creation and for his people in it, and that God had the power to pull it off. And finally, we had personal experiences, especially Paul's own; he believed that he had been dead in every way but breathing and a heart beat, and that Jesus poured new, resurrection life into him, changing the entire path of Paul's life.

From here onwards, Paul delivers his response to the Corinthian objection with the realness of resurrection as an established truth. He's not concerned about what they, or we, believe to be true, but about what is true. And the resurrection of the body is true, one of life's fundamental realities- like gravity - whether anyone believes in it or not.

Paul's purpose now is to explore an alternate history, an alternate reality, to answer the "what if" questions his Corinthian churches have asked. It is not a reality that exists - but we can enter into it imaginatively, guided by Paul, to see what would change for Christians, then in Corinth and here in Sarnia, or wherever you call home.

What if there is no resurrection of the dead? Well, wrote Paul, if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised.

It's interesting what Paul doesn't say next. He doesn't say that our belief system falls apart, or needs some revision. He doesn't say that our church doctrines or statements of faith will need to be re-worded. It runs much, much deeper than that.

Resurrection is not a simple fact that can be accepted or rejected, something that can be argued over, and decided about, for or against; it's a fundamental part of reality. Removing resurrection from reality would be akin to suddenly stopping gravity on planets.

Did you know that if our planet stopped having gravity even for as little as a few seconds, the whole of existence would end as we know it? We wouldn't just float about the place like balloons; the planet would keep spinning, but without gravity, anything not bolted down would hurtle along faster and faster, like fast-moving tumbleweeds. The atmosphere would tear off into space, taking the air we breathe with it, and the sudden disappearance of air pressure and oxygen would cause our inner ears to rupture and then every living cell in every living thing on earth to implode.

Taking away gravity is not a matter of changing our ideas; it's the collapse of our existence. And the same would happen if resurrection wasn't true. Because it's about more than just re-aliving dead bodies. Resurrection is first about who God is and what God is capable of doing.

If God is not - at his very heart and centre - if God is not a God who above all else desires life for every created being and has the power to give and sustain that life - if that is not who God is and not something God is capable of doing, then we are surrounded by a whole lot of nothing.

If God cannot give life, if God cannot act with power and imagination to create literally everything that we see and feel and touch out of nothing...then the foundation of our existence has just been torn out from under us. If there's no resurrection, then there's no redemption of creation, including us; there's nothing of lasting importance, here and now, or in whatever could come after, in an alternate history like this one.

Paul goes on: "If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God..."

So if it's true that the dead aren't raised, then God did not raise Christ, and everything Paul was doing, and the Corinthians, too, when they weren't busy arguing, everything gospel-related was pointless: prayer and worship, the Lord's Supper and baptism, taking care of widows and orphans and the vulnerable, supporting the sick, feeding and clothing the hungry and destitute...all of those good news-proclaiming things: in vain. Their faith, in vain.

And the charge of misrepresenting God, too, by saying that he can give life to the dead; misrepresenting who God is and what God desires for all creation: to use some old-fashioned Ten Commandments language, that's taking God's name in vain by bearing false witness against him.

If God did not raise Jesus, it re-writes the whole story of Scripture into an alternate history, changing the intent behind God's big plan for the creation he envisioned and spoke into being. No longer is God's intent for us, for all creation, good. It can't be, if it ends in death, instead of redemption, renewal, and abundant life. If God doesn't have the power to create life and if God doesn't have the reason to do so, then like Paul wrote, our faith is futile and we are still in our sins. Those who have died in Christ are dead. And if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are indeed, of all people, most to be pitied.

But of course all of this is alternate history. A world we **don't** live in, because that one pivotal event, the resurrection of Jesus, is absolutely, 100%, without question, true. And we know its power very well.

Immediately after the part of his letter we read today, Paul ends his alternate history by declaring that in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. There's a deep Scriptural meaning to first fruits, but just the plain meaning will do for us today. We know what a first fruit is: it's that first delicious vine-ripened tomato after months of bland imported ones; the first salad from your own homegrown greens. Or for the less garden-minded among us, it's that first basket of ripe Ontario peaches in the grocery store; the first and finest peach gets eaten standing over the kitchen sink when you get home, and then it's peach pie for dessert as soon as the rest of the basket's ready.

First-fruits of the harvest always feel like an especially rich gift of creation, especially after months of bleak winter and hard-working spring and careful tending during the summer. Christ's resurrection interrupting the flow of human history is a sign, symbol and promise of the full harvest that's coming, and it's a harvest of new life.

The promise of restoration by God of creation, this earth and all the life that lives upon it, is an idea that Scripture builds us up to recognizing. Always God has acted to restore God's people, no matter how far off into sin they've wandered, no matter how many times they broke God's heart by rejecting him. And in the end, God promises that in Christ, he is making all things new; the hope of resurrection, that God will renew and redeem and re-live all creation physically and spiritually, is an ancient hope. Paul's experience of seeing the resurrected Christ on the road to Damascus did not introduce a new belief, but it did change Paul's mind about when and how God would restore creation.

The restoration of creation, or put in a more familiar way, the coming of the kingdom of God, because of Christ's resurrection, is no longer a distant future event. God's life-giving, life-restoring power has invaded reality already, and the signs of new life are everywhere around us. We can see the reality of the resurrection now in the reality of changed lives: famous examples like Paul and other more public figures. But also and perhaps more meaningfully in the lives of our friends, our fellow Christians, and in our own lives, too.

And that change is not just in a one-time moment of conversion, but also in the persistent growth and gradual transformation that flows out of the on-going grace of God at work in us, and spilling out of us into the lives of those around us: new life for us and signs of the new life that's coming, of the fuller, all-encompassing redemption and restoration of all creation.

I don't know how many of you had the opportunity to read the quote on this morning's before-worship slides. It was from theologian N.T. Wright, whose course on the New Testament some of us did together a couple of years ago now. He makes the point that what we are doing in the present is living as resurrection people in between the first Easter and the final day. Our Christian life, each of us and all of us together, is like a sign pointing always back to Easter and a glimpse, a taste of the first-fruits, if you like, of that final restoration and making-all-things-new that we are waiting for.

It is not possible to proclaim that there is no resurrection of the dead when we see the same life-giving work made visible in people around us and in us, too, when our actions bear witness to God's life-giving power. We don't need to make ourselves believe it, or try to convince others - it speaks for itself all around us and among us. We know that there are no "what if's" when it comes to resurrection: God's live-creating, life-renewing power simply *is*. Thanks be to God! Amen.