



A T A L E O F T W O  
*RESURRECTIONS*

1 C O R I N T H I A N S 1 5 : 1 - 1 1

# *A TALE OF TWO RESURRECTIONS*

1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-11

Scottish theologian William Barclay once wrote that 1 Corinthians 15 is “one of the greatest and most difficult chapters in the New Testament.” So in the spirit of accepting his challenge, we’ll be taking a deep dive into that very chapter over the next three Sundays. We’ve already spent considerable time in Paul’s first letter to the churches in Corinth, exploring what he had to teach us about how diverse individuals, each uniquely gifted by the Spirit, can be held as one in the Body of Christ, infused by God’s love. Paul also had a lot to teach us about how to deal with disagreements within the Church, and the bulk of this letter picks apart the various issues and conflicts dividing the Christian community at Corinth.

But now, Paul switches gears and moves from answering questions and sorting out relational conflicts to explaining one of the most important truths of Christian faith. The entire tone of the letter changes now; no longer does Paul try to create room for discussion and common ground between the two poles of many of these conflicts; no longer does he suggest that there is wiggle room on the precise practice of Christian life together, especially if it means steadying the faith of a shakier brother or sister in Christ.

1 Corinthians 15 contains more concentrated teaching about Jesus’ resurrection than any other part of Scripture, and for Paul, the resurrection and the cross are the two uncompromisable truths of the Christian faith. There is no “erring on the side of love” here; and yet, the Christian faith would have been way more appealing to the citizens of Corinth, and the new members of its churches, if this whole resurrection business was quietly dropped.

Imagine that you are a believer in one of the house churches in Corinth; that’s how people met for worship and prayer and fellowship, back then, in one another’s homes. Church buildings like ours would not appear for some time. So imagine that you are one of these new Christians. You have not grown up as a Christian, because no one has at that time; you didn’t inherit the vocabulary of church and faith from your parents or other family members, because they are as new to this as you are or even lived before the time of Jesus. The church has not written itself into the history of nations yet, nor compiled the Bible as we know it today, nor inscribed itself onto the cityscapes and countrysides of the world with missions and schools, hospitals and churches.

Every church member's testimony is recent, because whether he or she had been Jewish or some variety of pagan, every story of the moment each person believed is fresh and new in their minds, and the collective memory of the Christian community is short because it has only existed at all in the world for ten or fifteen years at most.

Corinth was a city where the dominant family background was Greek. The Greeks did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. This is why some of those who listened to Paul's preaching in Athens about the unknown god laughed at him or got seriously confused when he taught about the resurrection of Jesus. Some of them might have thought that resurrection or some form of life after death could occur, but only as a disembodied soul. Like many cultures, the Greeks feared death and did think a great deal about what would happen to us after we die. For them, though, any hope for an afterlife lay in getting rid of the physical body, shedding it like an unpleasant garment, and becoming purely a soul.

On the other side of things, a group of Jews called the Sadducees did not believe in any kind of life after death, and some Christians in Corinth might have come from a Sadducean Jewish background. The Old Testament, which would have been part of the scriptures that Paul refers to, the Old Testament doesn't have much to say about life after death, either, beyond references to the pit or Sheol or the grave, usually as places to suffer in or disappear into, away from God. Still other Jewish sects believed in resurrection, but not until the end of the world came. The resurrection of the body, for any person, even a god, was unthinkable and undesirable to everyone.

So it's no surprise that these Corinthian Christians with their diverse backgrounds would struggle with the concept of resurrection.

What a time for Paul to suddenly become uncompromising! And yet, he absolutely insists on the realness of Jesus' resurrection: that it had happened in the middle of history, just a few years' prior, and that it happened with his physical body.

Paul seems to want them to unlearn their old ideas about what's possible and good, and about how reality itself works. For Paul, the realness of Jesus' resurrection is the only way he, Paul, can be in Christ, and to be in Christ is absolutely essential to a living faith that has the power to change people.

But the Christians at Corinth were doubting and disagreeing about the resurrection: whether it happened, and how it could matter if it did.

I wonder if we don't have our own unlearning of old ideas to do today, too. Ideas about what's possible and about how reality works, that are taken-for-granted, unquestioned; ideas that we've picked up from our own society and culture that take on the weight of truth for us even when they conflict with the truth we learn from Jesus. We have a different set of competing ideas than the Christians at Corinth, but they are still there in our minds, and they have the potential to affect how we think and speak about God, and what we think about Jesus' resurrection. Did you know that back in the earliest days of the church, Christians were accused of being atheists, because they only believed in just one God, not in whole families and pantheons of them, like the Romans did. Now, of course, even believing in one God receives a lot of pushback from our society. And that pushback is complex, too: not only the realness of God, but the goodness of God, are questioned and with better reason, so is the legacy of the Christian church through history, both good done and harm caused, intended or not.

As a way of knowing - of making sense of what happens in the world, understanding why creation and humanity exist at all - faith as a way of knowing is less valued than science. But - take it from a retired scientist - science is not all incompatible with faith-knowledge, even if nowadays some people claim it is.

So like a Christian in Corinth, a Christian today might easily have a skeptical little voice in their head, speaking of the biological impossibility of something like Jesus' resurrection, or finding it distastefully messy or ridiculous, or too strange to appeal to and win over new converts, or not as necessary to being Christian as trying to follow Jesus' teachings for a better kind of living is. The weird, supernatural, awkward bits of our faith...surely those could quietly be dropped.

As we age, or when we're ill, or as we near the end of lives, our bodies can become a burden to us: painful, limiting. Why on earth would we want to keep anything like it, even a divinely tuned-up version after we die? Jesus' body on the Cross must have become an awful, painful burden to him at the end. Why resurrect bodies? Why not simply free souls and let them fly into the presence of God, to be in Christ that way?

When I'm helping families after the death of a loved one, it's remarkable how much that idea appears, of one's soul coming free of the body and drifting off into unity with some version of God as a final destination.

That's not a Christian belief, by the way; it's neoplatonism, an outgrowth of Greek ideas about life and death from a man named Plato that got popular in the first thousand years after Jesus. And because it's unsettling or confusing or we're not sure how it works, we may well wonder if the resurrection really matters; if it has any real-life impact now, or if it isn't a life insurance policy type of belief that'll take effect once we've died. The resurrection of Jesus and by extension, our own resurrections, surely aren't something that affects us day to day. Let's focus on the more appealing path of discipleship and social justice, of imitating Jesus' life, leaving aside his death and the strange and unlikely stories of what came after.

Paul's answer to us would be his answer to the Corinthian Christians: there is nothing more important than Christ's death and resurrection and its sheer impact on us, right now in this life. Paul lays out the best, most concrete evidence he's got to help them trust that Christ really rose from the dead, unpacking that evidence across three perspectives. He begins with their own experience of Jesus, reminding them that when they first heard the good news and all Paul had to teach them, it became their new solid ground to stand on, their new truth. That their belief in that good news drew them into the Body of Christ, transformed their faith-life; that the good news is what's saving them, day by day, from being lost to sinful, meaningless lifestyles, giving them new purpose and new life together.

From there, Paul moves on to external witnesses, in both scripture and actual people who saw Jesus, post-resurrection. He turns them toward Scripture - remember at this point that mostly means the Old Testament and perhaps a gospel - because barring a few members of Jewish background, Corinth is mostly a Gentile church. And there's no guarantee that they'd know the scriptures well or even consider them as having any significance or authority.

Paul is reminding them that there is a rich, complex history underpinning Jesus' resurrection. The God who raised Jesus, whom Jesus is, has been active for a long time. This is the work of an ancient, powerful God who is also deeply trustworthy and faithful to his people and the promises he makes to them.

The resurrection appearances also lent weight to the realness of the resurrection. Paul cites reliable, known sources and then goes for quantity, too, reminding them of 500 people, some still living then, who had seen Jesus after his resurrection.

Cephas - or Peter, as we know him better - and the original twelve all stood by the truth of Jesus' real, bodily resurrection, too, and so did James - Jesus' own brother - and other apostles, men and women who understood themselves as sent out to share this good news in the world.

And that brings us to Paul's own testimony, his own experience with the resurrected Jesus.

Throughout his letters, Paul returns again and again to the importance of a personal faith, a personal relationship with Jesus and his own incredible encounter with Christ, which completely changed the direction of Paul's life. Paul never met Jesus while Jesus was alive, and as a young man, he'd dedicated his life to destroying the fledgling Christian church. Paul really means it when he said he felt he didn't deserve any of the good things, the incredible purpose with which he'd been entrusted by Jesus. The language Paul uses to describe himself gets a bit lost in translation. Our English Bibles say: "Last of all, as to one untimely born, [Jesus] appeared also to me." This makes it sound like he was just born at the wrong time and missed out on being one of the original twelve disciples of Jesus. This is a poetic but poor translation.

The word Paul uses to describe himself is the same term used to describe a premature birth. Even today, that is a word that sadly often remind mothers and fathers alike of a painful, shared grief at a child lost before his or her life could truly unfold.

In Paul's world, only about half of healthy babies born lived past age ten; an untimely, early birth had little chance of survival. That is how Paul saw himself; the story of Jesus' resurrection is not the only resurrection story that Paul is telling. There are two resurrections being proclaimed in this letter.

Paul preaches the resurrection with such passion and drive and absolute certainty because he was as good as dead when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. Paul was trying to destroy the church, participated in the execution of its members, doing everything he could to stop the Jesus movement.

To borrow Paul's own words from another letter: "the death Jesus died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." Paul knew himself to have been resurrected to new life in Christ, his old dead life gone, and a new resurrection life laid out before him. If the grace of God could work something good through someone like me, Paul tells us, surely being touched - transformed and resurrected by that same grace, dead to sin and our old life, alive anew in Christ - surely that same grace will work wonders in the lives of others, starting now.

These are just the opening verses of Paul's challenging, rich chapter on the resurrection. It only gets more challenging from here, I think. But before all the complexities of tying the resurrection into Scripture, the unpacking of the why's and to what end's of it, Paul shows us why he knows it all to be true: he was dead and didn't know it, until Jesus came and enfolded Paul into Jesus' own new, resurrection life.

Paul encountered Jesus and he was the never the same again. He reminds the uncertain, disagreeing Christians of Corinth and us, too, that we have met the same, life-giving, life-changing Jesus, each in our own way.

I wonder...do you think it's possible to un-see Jesus, once we've encountered him? Or are we all somewhere on our own journey of dying and rising to new life in Christ, here and now? In this Epiphany season, which is all about the impact of Christ revealing himself in the world, we're reminded today that seeing the resurrected Christ permanently changed the direction of Paul's life, the path he was walking away from the God Paul thought he loved and served well.

Without the revelation of Christ, there is no good news. But when Jesus reveals himself to us, our own personal worlds are transformed. We can't go on with life as normal, because we can't un-see him. Even if we chose to walk away, encountering Christ demands a response, a choice made; he cannot be ignored. Like Paul, we are probably unworthy in our own way of this life-changing revelation of the power of the resurrection. But may we also work and worship as tirelessly as Paul to extend God's grace and Christ's new life to others who need it. Thanks be to God. Amen.