

## **!THE WRONG SIDE OF EASTER@**

Evangelist Johnnie Lavender

1 Cor.15:12-22

If you were to put into one word the essence, the heart and soul, the hard core meaning of Christianity what would that one word be? I was asked that question several years ago by a young exchange student from India. We had been traveling together on the plane from San Francisco to Saint Louis. During the long hours of the night, our conversation turned to a discussion of the Christian faith.

As the great plane made its final turn for landing, with a real student's love for profound simplicity my young friend asked this question, "Of all the words you have used tonight to tell me the story of Jesus, what is the one word above all other which sums up the meaning of Christianity? What is the one word I can carry with me? The one word that says, "This is it! This is the essence of Christianity!"

Well, it was a big order. For a moment my mind went blank. Then, like a flash, the Holy Spirit came with heaven-sent inspiration, and I heard myself saying, "Easter!"

Now, think about it for a moment. Where else can we find a word that really gathers together and focuses the essentials of our faith? Where else can we find a word that describes what we mean when we talk about the triumphant Christ? Where else can we find a word that truly puts it all together? For Christianity is essentially a religion of resurrection.

We have a saying which turns up in conversation from time to time. It's the little phrase, "too good to be true!" It's our way of expressing the mixed emotions of joy and wonder when the word we've heard, or the message we've received, is really beyond belief.

I'd like to say this Easter morning that resurrection is too good not to be true. And, the song of triumph we should never stop singing, the message of hope we should never stop preaching, the good news we should never stop shouting from the rooftops is this, "Jesus is alive! Christ is

risen! Death could not keep her prey. And, because Jesus lives, we, too, shall live.@ Indeed, that message is too good not to be true.

Now, I don't mean to imply that we should forget the cross. For Christians, the cross is and ever will be at the very heart of things. If we poor, benign sinners ever lose sight of the cross, even for a moment, we're through. But friend, listen! You can gaze at the cross and miss the Gospel that saves, because the cross is on the wrong side of Easter.

The resurrection adds meaning to the cross.

The resurrection was God's stamp of approval upon Christ's sacrifice for our sin.

The resurrection is not an epilogue to the gospel, a kind of theological postlude which satisfies our longing for a Hollywood ending.

The resurrection *is* the Gospel story.

In fact, if there were no resurrection, there would be no story!

The thing that brought the New Testament into being -- that caused the Christian church to be born, and transformed the disciples from a band of quaking cowards into an army of courageous conquerors -- was the resurrection! The burning certainty that Jesus, who had been crucified and buried, was alive! The resurrection is not a kind of tail on the kite, a pretty postscript to the faith.

The resurrection *is* the faith. It is the overpowering, magnificent, stupendous news that Christ has been raised from the dead. And I say to you, that tremendous revelation is simply too good not to be true.

To help you understand why, I invite you to come with me into the Holy Scriptures, this library of resurrection, for my Easter text. I have chosen the words of Paul, the apostle, as they are found in 1 Cor.15:12-22 and, I would direct your attention to verse 23, **A**But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so all in Christ shall be made alive.@

Please notice, Paul begins verse 20 with the conjunction, **A**but.@ **A**But Christ has been raised from

the dead.@ A conjunction is that part of speech which directs our attention to what has gone before, so we can better understand what is to follow.

In his masterful dissertation on the resurrection, Paul has been arguing from the negative. That is to say, he has been relating the bitter conditions which would prevail if Christ had not been raised from the dead. He has been emphasizing the negative in order to later accentuate the positive, and, in this way, he helps us thrill to the throb of the powerful forces which were unleashed that first Easter morn.

Listen as he punches home his first important point. The resurrection is too good not to be true because (verse 14) AIf Christ had not been raised, then our preaching is in vain.@

### **Our Preaching is in Vain**

Surely it is obvious to us that our world has been rocking and reeling from the crushing effects of the last few years. And, against the backdrop of cynicism and despair, we who love the faith have been saying, AHey! There's hope! Christ has overcome the world!@

We have said don't be afraid. The power which was strong enough to bring Jesus out of the grave, the power which was mighty enough to shatter and confound the whole alliance of hell and could actually slay death itself, that same power is in action today!

We have cried, this is our Father's world. God is the Lord of history. History is his -- story. The story of what *God* is doing to save the world from death and destruction. And God will not stop what he is doing until Christ is crowned King throughout the earth.

That's what we have been saying. That's what we have been preaching. But, if Christ is *not* risen, then our faith is in vain. We've been duped. We've been fooled. We've been deceived. We've been betting on the resurrection, and we were wrong.

It turns out we were idle dreamers. Fanciful fanatics. Utter fools. And our preaching is in vain. It is, as Harry Emerson Fosdick points out, like watching a horse race acted out on stage. The

horses strain and sweat. The drivers crack their whips and cry. But they are not getting anywhere. It is simply the moving stage and the shifting scenery that make them seem to go. Nothing is really happening. It is, after all, an illusion in which the watching through mistakes mere motion for the reality of progress.

Is that all there is to it? Is it true that our preaching is in vain? Is it true that all of our sacrifices have been to no avail? Is it true that our ministering has accomplished nothing? No! A thousand times no! To believe that is to forget the resurrection is too good not to be true. For as verse 20 declares, Christ has been raised from the dead and the resurrection puts meaning into ministry, power into preaching, and significance into sacrifice. Jesus is alive! And, because he lives, we are associated with a cause which cannot be stopped.

The Pharisees tried to stop him. They tried to put an end to the gospel of resurrection before it began. They placed a seal on the stone and guards at the grave. But, as someone has said, AThey might as well have tried to stop the sun from rising by saying, >Halt! Or, try to hold back the incoming tide by putting up a sign on the sand which reads, >No trespassing.@ God was at work that first Easter morning, even as he is at work today. He could not be stopped then, and he cannot be stopped now.

Praise God, our preaching is not in vain, for the resurrection is too good not to be true. AChrist has been raised from the dead.@ To try to hold back the victory of his resurrection is as futile as trying to Alock morning in the tomb of night or spring in the grave of winter.@ It can't be done. AFor in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead (and) all in Christ shall be made alive.@

ATherefore,@ as we read in verse 58, Amy beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor (your preaching, your witnessing) is not in vain in the Lord.@

Paul goes on in verse 17 to say, the resurrection is too good not to be true because, AIf Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.@

**You Are Still in Your Sins**

If Christ is not risen, the ushers had better come and take away the cross that stands in front of this pulpit. It has no meaning now. If Christ is not risen, the value of his death upon that cruel torture rack is nil. If Christ is not risen, it is utter folly to go on singing, *AIn the cross of Christ I glory.*@ If Christ is not risen, the rhyme and reason of his crucifixion are destroyed. If Christ is not risen, the cross is a monstrous mockery, Christ is a meaningless memory, and we had better swiftly return to the Old Testament with its lamb-slaying, blood-letting, lentil-sprinkling, sacrifice-making means of salvation. For, if Christ is not risen, our faith is futile and we are still in our sins.

That's what Paul is saying. He is making it clear that the empty tomb is as much a part of our redemption as is the cross itself. The one without the other is like a dollar bill which has been torn in two. You can't divorce the parts. When you do, you lose the value of them both!

To be sure, there *is* a cross in Christianity. But notice, beloved, it is a cross which is strangely vacant. We do not worship a crucifix this morning. We do not glory in a wooden Christ upon a wooden cross. To do so is to live on the wrong side of Easter. It is to miss the message that the resurrection is too good not to be true. For Christ has been raised from the dead. Therefore, the resurrection puts power in that cross and enables us to sing with confidence,

AMy sin, oh the bliss of that glorious thought  
My sin, not in part, but the whole (hallelujah!)  
Is nailed to the cross, and I bear it no more.  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, oh my soul.@"

Hallelujah! Jesus lives! And Jesus saves!

And then, good preacher that he is, Paul makes his third and final point as he pushes his argument from the negative to its ultimate and obvious end.

### **We Are of All Men Most to be Pitied**

Verse 14 tells us that if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain.

Verse 17 goes on to say that if Christ has not been raised, we are still in our sins.

And now, verse 19 explains that the resurrection is too good not to be true because if Christ has

*not* been raised, then it's only in this life that we have hope in him and AWe are of all men most to be pitied.@

We are to be pitied because if Christ could not conquer death, neither can we. The grave is the end of it all. We might as well heed the modern heathen who says AEat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.@ Forget the idea of a new life! A new look is all that matters. That's the meaning of Easter. Bunny rabbits. Painted eggs. New clothes. That's all it is, if Christ has not been raised.

If Christ has not been raised, we are of all men to be pitied most, because we are still in our sin and there is no way out. We are on our own. Those sins which have plagued us, plague us still. The hours of remorse, the nights of restlessness, the stabbing pangs of conscience are ours to bear forever, *if* Christ has not been raised. No sense in praying. A God who would not hear Jesus with his perfect life, surely will not hear us while we are still in our sins.

That's what Paul is saying. He's arguing, if Christ has not been raised, then death is the victor. And, try as we might, we can't hide it, nor can we hide from it. We may try to cover its blackness with beautiful flowers. We may try to ease its pain with beautiful music. We may try to end its sorrow with tender words. But it is useless! For we are of all men most miserable. *That's* what our existence would be like, says Paul, if Christ has not been raised. But, thanks be to God, the resurrection is too good *not* to be true and the Good News is that AChrist has been raised from the dead (and) all who are in him shall be made alive.@

You see, my friend, the thing that makes Easter a joy-filled festival to Christians is not the feeling that we shall survive death, but the fact that through Christ we will conquer death. ABecause He lives, we too shall live.@ And, ever since that first Easter morning, there has not been a stone heavy enough, a grave deep enough, a seal strong enough, or a force powerful enough to keep one of God's children forever in the grave.

Oh, hear me this morning, for the person who knows Jesus as Savior and Lord, death is not a terminus. It is a passageway. It is not an end. It is a beginning. We have lived before in our

mother's womb and we shall live again in the bosom of God.

This is the powerful conclusion to which Paul leads us through the conjunction ~~A~~but. All of this sad, mad, bad stuff is true if Christ had not been raised. ~~A~~But-- the truth is -- Christ has been raised and all who are in him shall be made alive.

We tend to look at life in terms of horizons. We look to the right or the left, but the horizon is always there, marking the end of what we can see. There was a time when men thought the world was flat. They believed that if you went far enough you would just drop off the edge into an eternal abyss.

But one day a man named Christopher Columbus set sail in a small craft and went beyond that horizon men thought marked the end of things, and discovered the world is round. When he came back to share the things he had seen and learned, there were those who called him mad. But there were others who took him at his word. They believed, for Christopher Columbus had been there and he knew.

When I was a small boy growing up in the San Francisco Bay area, I enjoyed going to the beach. I was always fascinated by the sight of the ships as they would sail across the bay, and through the Golden Gate, across the blue waters of the Pacific beyond the horizon to the west. As I watched the ships sail out of sight, I couldn't help but wonder, what lies beyond the horizon? Is there more?

Then, one day I met a man who had sailed on one of those ships. He had gone beyond that horizon and had come back again. He told me thrilling stories of the open sea. Of huge islands in the midst of the waters. Of strange cultures and societies of people on the other side of the globe. I hadn't seen any of those places, and I haven't seen many of them yet. But I believed, for that man had been there and he knew.

Then there were other days when my buddies and I would take a sack lunch and climb the foothills in back of our home and, turning to the east, we would be greeted by another horizon

formed by the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains. These, too, marked the end of what we could see, and we would sit around in a circle and wonder what lay beyond the horizon. Was there more?

Then, one day a family friend came to visit us. He had taken a model A Ford and had crossed that horizon. He had gone beyond those mountains all the way to the Atlantic seaboard, filled up a sack with sand, turned around and came back again. I remember as vividly as if it were yesterday, the Sunday afternoon when we sat in our tiny living room warming ourselves before a crackling fire, the bay area rain beating down on the roof. I listened with intense fascination as he told of the great open plains and prairies. Of mountains that were higher than the ones I could see. Of the mighty Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. Of sprawling cities clogged with people, of towering skyscrapers which reached as many as 25 stories into the sky! I hadn't seen any of those things, and I haven't seen many of them yet. But I believed, for that man had been there and he knew.

The great truth Paul has been pointing to in our text is the fact that for every one of us there comes a time when we must stand on our faith alone. A time when someone we love walks through the valley of the shadow across that line which marks the end of all we can see. And, being human, we cannot help but wonder, is there more?

Paul says: AYes! The resurrection is too good not to be true. And I know a man who went beyond that horizon we call death and he came back again. He told of a place, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. A place where death and darkness are known no more. A place where tears are wiped away. A place where sorrow and sickness are forever vanquished. A place where God and truth and righteousness are forever on the throne. I haven't seen that place called heaven, but I believe, for that man, Jesus, has been there and he knows.

And, on this Easter morning, His words have tremendous meaning for all of us. For Jesus said: ALet not your heart be troubled, you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you, and I will come again to receive you unto myself, that where I am you may be also.



**Invitation**

There are some things which cannot be proved by reason alone. The resurrection is one of them. It is something you come to believe by experience. The experience, by faith, of having the Lord Jesus Christ who conquered death, as your own personal Savior.

When you have worked this experiment of faith in the laboratory of your soul, you will know. You will know the resurrection is too good not to be true. You will know your Lord and Savior lives. You will know that because he lives, you shall live also. Not for a day. Not for a year. But always! Tell me, is that not cause enough for singing: Hallelujah! Listen!

**This sermon was followed by a large Community Choir singing The Hallelujah Chorus.**