

*What Does Christianity Have to Offer?**

1 Corinthians 15:1-8

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If there was ever a time we needed Easter and to hear this story of resurrection again, it is such a time as this. As I've reflected on the past six weeks of Lent, there is certainly a lot to process.

During this Lent alone, a white supremacist gunned down 50 Muslims in two New Zealand mosques, the sexual abuse of Catholic nuns finally spilled into public view, wealthy parents cheated the college admissions process, laying bare the duplicity of "equal opportunity," depression and suicide in children and teenagers has risen more than ever before, three African-American churches in Louisiana were burned down by arsonists, and explosions at churches in Sri Lanka killed more than 200 people. If there was ever a year the world needed Easter and to hear this story again and again, it's this year.

There is something that is hopeful and comforting about this story that we tell every year. Jesus died, but he's not dead. That is indeed the paradox of Easter. But it is a paradox that never changes. It always ends that same way. The stone has been rolled away; the tomb is empty; Jesus is loose! I can't explain how it happened, but I want to be told again and again that it did happen. I think we all do. I think that's why we come here on this day.

When my children were little and we'd get to the end of their favorite bedtime story, they'd always cry out, "One more time!" Aren't we the same? We want to hear this story of resurrection one more time! We need to hear it again and again. It's not because we think the story has changed or might end differently. It's because our story, our world, keeps on changing, and we're just not sure how it will end.

I *love* this book of 1 Corinthians because it's written to real people with very real questions; they too are not so sure how their story will end. There's a church in Corinth who is struggling with incredibly human things around human divisions of class and ethnicity and gender. They are striving to figure out what it means to be the body of Christ. "Can we eat meat that was sacrificed to idols," they ask, "or can we not?" Now, of course, those aren't our questions today. But we have our own questions. We have our own conflicts about what it means to be church amid a world that is divided. And we wonder if the Gospel has anything to say to this present moment.

What does this story of resurrection, what does Christianity, have to offer the world? In the southern hemisphere, countries in Africa, Central America, and parts of Asia, where people are in dire need and desperation, Christianity offers hope. The skeptic would say, "Well, that makes total sense. When people are in dire situations, they want to believe in a benevolent and comforting God who will rescue them from their pain and suffering."

** A sermon preached on Easter Sunday, 2019*

In those places, the Church offers education, healthcare, healing services, prayer, food, and shelter. Out of love for humankind, the Church responds to their basic needs. It also offers the promise and the hope of eternal life where there is no more pain and suffering. It's no surprise that in this part of the world, the Church is growing in leaps and bounds.

But what about in countries and places of prosperity and wealth? You've heard the statistics. In these places, the Church struggles. Membership and attendance are in steady decline. Contributions are down, as are the number of young people and families who participate. The culture is increasingly more secular, and the Church has become more of a museum where historical artifacts are guarded and treasured. So, what does Christianity have to offer those who are prosperous and somewhat self-sufficient?

The Church may be culpable of offering the wrong things. Can you imagine being the person asked about describing the Church and all you have are some brochures on denominations? "Here's information on what it means to be a Catholic, a Lutheran, a Presbyterian, an Episcopalian, a Baptist, a fundamentalist, a Pentecostal, a Mennonite." I don't know, but I think most people would walk off before you finished your speech or find an excuse to leave as quickly as possible.

Or, imagine standing there trying to sell a body of doctrine. "We believe in this...that...or the other...If you become a Christian, you will need to accept all of these beliefs. Just sign here on the dotted line." You know that there are some churches that make you do that.

If you were one representing Christianity, what would you have to offer? Sometimes I think they hear this: "Come and take a stand on social issues with us. Say no to abortion or yes to homosexuality. Stand against racism or for the rights of women. Take a stance on capital punishment, gun control, gambling, alcohol, drugs, or a host of other social issues. This is what it means to be a Christian." Many of these are commendable causes, but is taking a stand on social issues all that Christianity has to offer? Is that it? We've also offered this:

Membership in our Church entitles you to a majestic wedding in our beautiful sanctuary. Our pastor will preside at baptisms and funerals. Members are given preference and first place in preschool registration. We care for you in your times of need, provide comforting worship services to help you through the week, and don't forget, it looks good on your civic resume. Join the church and receive all the glorious benefits of membership.

That certainly sounds appealing and may get some of them in the door, but the first time their needs aren't met, they're gone. It's consumer-driven ideology.

We also get it wrong if we ask a person to simply believe in the miracle of the resurrection. Believing in miracles isn't really that hard. They happen every day. Did you know that while you sit here in this sanctuary, you are actually moving at the speed of 66,700 miles per hour? It doesn't really matter if you believe it or not, but it's true. Your brain tells you that you're not moving, but in 365 days you will orbit around the sun and you won't even know you did it. Miracles happen all the time, with or without us.

What does Christianity have to offer the world? To you and me? Maybe we should

ask the Apostle Paul. I think he has a lot to say about it:

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time.... Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. (1 Cor. 15:3-8)

What Christianity has to offer, not only on Easter Sunday, but on every day of the year, is that Jesus is not dead and that Christ is loose in the world! My friends, it is not to a denomination or to a body of doctrine that we invite others to come. It's not just taking a stand on a social issue or enjoying the benefits of membership. At the heart of what the Church has to offer the world is a relationship with the living Christ. It's what Paul shares in a simple sentence at the end of his beliefs: "He appeared also to me."

You see, something, or someone, changed the Pharisee, leader of the Jews Paul. He was a keeper of the law, a strict legalist who judged others for their shortcomings. He was self-righteous, self-sufficient, and self-made. I don't think I would have liked him at all. So, how did he move away from all of that? He met the resurrected Christ. He wasn't looking for it. He sure didn't want it. He didn't even know he needed it. But God's grace came to him unannounced, uninvited, unexpected, and undeserved. That's what Christianity still has to offer, and anything less than that is not powerful enough to change someone's life.

Paul's whole life was changed. He traveled the world, built churches, suffered persecution, and wound up a prisoner in Rome until his death. He wrote over two-thirds of our New Testament. He's not doing that because of loyalty to his denomination or doctrine. He's not driven by social issues or the benefits of membership. If Paul were here today, he would be offering a relationship with the risen Christ. That's what changed him, and that's who changes us. Anything less is not enough.

So here we sit on this glorious Easter day, hearing about the good news of Jesus' resurrection. If you are here this morning with someone on Easter Sunday but feel more like an observer than a participant, I get that. It's like me going to the Masters! I appreciate all the passion in the fans. I know something big is going on, but I don't really get the game of golf. I'm an observer, not a participant. You may be feeling like that this Easter Sunday morning.

We're not offering denominationalism to you this morning. We're proud of our Presbyterian roots, and while there may be fifty retired Presbyterian pastors and missionaries among you in the pews, they too know that denominationalism is not what we are offering. And even though we have solar panels on our roof and fully recognize our own complacency when it comes to climate change, we are not asking you to take a stand on social issues. Today, this Easter Sunday, is not about the benefits of membership or even believing in a miracle. What Christianity has to offer today and every other day is a relationship with the living Christ. Anything less than that is not powerful enough to change your life.

He is risen? He is risen indeed!