

Begin Again

1 Corinthians 15:14-26

Mark Vroegop

“And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits 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 also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor. 15:14–26).

I’m not a huge fan of board games. I’ll play them on occasion, especially if they have some level of strategy built into the equation. Part of the reason that I like the strategy-oriented games is because they add some energy to the experience. I’m more interested in a game if it has an appropriate level of intensity.

Maybe that’s why I’ve always been fascinated with the game called Jenga. Many of you, I’m sure, have played this game. It involves fifty-four wooden blocks stacked in groups of three over eighteen rows. You play the game by using one hand to remove one of the blocks from within the body of the tower and then carefully placing the removed block on the top.

It can be a stressful game as you gently try to figure out which block you are able to remove without the entire tower crumbling.

The game doesn’t have winners. It only has a loser.

Eventually, there’s one block that causes the entire tower to collapse. This single block is holding the balanced load of the entire tower. Once it’s removed, the game is over.

Today, we celebrate Easter Sunday. And I’m here to tell you that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the “block,” that if removed, causes everything to collapse. It’s that important. That’s one of the reasons this event is uniquely celebratory. What Christians celebrate on this day really matters.

Easter Sunday commemorates the victory of Jesus over death—something that reminds us that the world is broken and that we are not in control of our lives as much as we think.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ affects how we think about hope in the future and even now. The resurrection affects how we think about forgiveness and eternal life. It affects how we think about life and death. It affects what we believe about our ability to change and start over again.

It doesn't matter where you are in your spiritual journey, what we are going to talk about today applies to you in some way. I want to show you how the resurrection is the singular building block, that if removed, ruins everything. But when the resurrection is rightly understood and applied, it changes everything.

Our text this morning is in the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians. It is one of the most hopeful texts about the resurrection in the Bible. Here's the main thought: **The Resurrection is central to hope.**

My goal for the next few minutes is for you to fully understand why the resurrection is important and then what it means for your life.

The Resurrection Is Central

The first step we need to take is to understand both why and how the resurrection is so essential. In other words, we need to get our minds and hearts around how central the resurrection is to the message of the Bible, the forgiveness of sins, and even eternal life.

Now, we are dropping into the book of 1 Corinthians. That makes it challenging—almost like when you arrive ten minutes late for a movie and you missed the early character and plot development. Let me summarize what is happening here.

The letter was written by the apostle Paul to a church in modern-day Greece. Paul wrote to them around 50 A.D. to address a number of questions and concerns that he was hearing about the church. Among those concerns was an issue related to the church's belief in the resurrection. The prevailing belief about the after-life in the Greco-Roman world was that life was extinguished or that people lived in other-worldly spiritual existence in the underworld.¹ That was the dominant and typical world-view.

The Christian view, however, was radically different. The doctrine of the resurrection held that Jesus of Nazareth physically died on Good Friday and that he was physically raised from the dead. Eight days later and in a touching moment after his resurrection, Jesus physically appeared in a room where the disciples were meeting:

“Eight days later, his disciples were inside again, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he said to Thomas, ‘Put

¹ Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2213.

your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ Thomas answered him, ‘My Lord and my God!’” (John 20:26–28)!

The resurrection of Jesus means that he is physically alive. The disciples could see him, talk with him, and touch him. He wasn’t a spirit. He wasn’t a form or a figure. Jesus wasn’t a ghost. He was dead, but now he is alive. I’ll help you understand why that is so important in a moment.

But just try to get your heads around what that must have been like for the disciples and the others who saw him, talked with him, ate breakfast with him, and watched him ascend into heaven.

The physical resurrection of Jesus was a fact, and it was central to Christianity. But the church at Corinth began to doubt the resurrection of Jesus and Christians in the future. Physical existence after death was fable-like and laughable by educated people.² (Smart people can be wrong!) And the Corinthians were falling into that cultural narrative.

Paul writes to this church in order to strengthen their confidence in the resurrection, not only of Jesus but for all those who put their trust in him.

He highlights five areas in which the resurrection is central. Let’s look at them:

1. Preaching – In verse 14, Paul tells the church that if the resurrection of Jesus is a fable, then “our preaching is in vain.” In other words, he’s saying here that without the resurrection of Jesus, the message of the church is “in vain.” The word in the original language means *empty, without purpose, or foolish*. Now Paul has in mind the public proclamation of the Word, but he also means the basic message of the church’s message. If the resurrection didn’t happen, we should all be home. This Sunday, and every Sunday, doesn’t matter.

2. Faith – In the same verse we read “your faith is in vain.” What you believe is only as good as the substance of what you are believing in. If Christ isn’t raised from the dead, then their previous spiritual commitment is foolish. Faith is worthless if you believe something that isn’t true.

But the apostles believed the resurrection to be true. They died for that belief. I read a quote from Chuck Colson, this week that struck me. As you may know, Colson was convicted of crimes related to Watergate and was gloriously converted. Here’s what he said about believing in the resurrection:

I know the resurrection is a fact, and Watergate proved it to me. How? Because 12 men testified they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, then they proclaimed that truth for 40 years, never once denying it. Every one was beaten, tortured, stoned, and put in prison. They would not have endured that if it weren’t true. Watergate embroiled 12 of the most powerful men in the

² Crossway Bibles, [The ESV Study Bible](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2213.

world—and they couldn't keep a lie for three weeks. You're telling me 12 apostles could keep a lie for 40 years? Absolutely impossible.³

Since the resurrection is true, faith is not in vain.

3. Credibility – In verse 16, Paul says that if the resurrection isn't true, then all the apostles were liars. They made the resurrection of Jesus and the future resurrection of believers central to their message. Both the credibility of their message and the entire message of the Bible is on the line.

4. Forgiveness – This next point is really important. The resurrection is central to forgiveness because, according to verses 16-17, if it isn't true, then we are still in our sins. In other words, the cross didn't count. It didn't do anything. Let me explain why.

The Bible tells us that God is holy and our world is broken by sin. Humanity has a fatal flaw: We want to be our own God. We express that by doing things that are wrong. And the effect of this is a tragic spiritual separation from God. God so loved the world that he sent his only son—that's Jesus. He lived a perfect life and died on the cross for the purpose of providing atonement for sins—yours and mine. The effect is that if anyone puts his or her trust in Jesus, God grants forgiveness and cleansing to them: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1).

But the only reason we know that the cross was effective is because of the resurrection. Sin and death are connected. If Jesus was never raised from the dead, then sin and death would be greater than him. The resurrection shouts: “Forgiveness is possible.” Without the resurrection, there's no forgiveness.

5. Future – The final arena into which the resurrection is central relates to what we think about the future. In verses 18-19 we discover that without the resurrection, there would be no hope at funerals. They would just be sad and without any hope for eternal life. What's more, if life is nothing more than the here and now, then we have a very dismal existence. Any kind of sacrifice, responding the right way to wrong things that happen to us, or hoping for some kind of future justice is worthless if this is it.

For some of you, that's a really important thought. You may have come to church today with this nagging question in your mind: “Isn't there more to life than what I'm living?” Maybe you've found yourself chasing satisfaction or fulfillment only to find out how disappointed you are. Somewhere in your heart, you know there's more. The resurrection of Jesus is the answer.

You see, it's not just a historical fact. The resurrection of Jesus means that death was defeated, sin can be forgiven, the devil isn't going to win, people can be changed from the inside out, and eternal life awaits those who put their trust in Christ. The resurrection is central to Christianity because it signals the opportunity to begin again. If Jesus conquered death, don't you think he can help you with your heart, your addiction, your marriage, your loneliness? Don't you think he can redeem your sexuality, your finances, your career, and your family?

³ <https://twitter.com/between2worlds/status/1118741845679443968>

On Monday of this week, I participated in a funeral for an eight-month baby boy who had passed away. It was a sad but hopeful day. We heard moving stories from people who walked with this little boy's family, and we marveled at the strength God gave their family. One of our pastors concluded his funeral message with these words: "Stick with Jesus. You'll love the ending." How true! And you know why? Because of the resurrection. It's central.

The Resurrection is Hopeful

The second truth that I want you to consider is how the resurrection is amazingly hopeful. There is something about this day that has the potential to give us hope, both for the future and for now. The message of Easter helps us to see how we can dare to hope again if we've been wounded, burned, betrayed, or are feeling lost.

There are four additional thoughts that the Apostle Paul provides in verses 20-26.

1. Firstfruits – In verse 20, Paul says that Christ's resurrection is the "firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Jesus is using an Old Testament word picture here. The Jews would take the first sampling of their harvest as an offering in the temple. The first fruits were presented to God, but it meant there was more left behind. When Paul tells us that Jesus is the firstfruits, he is saying something incredible-- namely, that what happened to Jesus is going to happen to those of who are in Christ. His resurrection predicts ours. Or as one theologian said it, "the resurrection of Christ is a pledge of the resurrection of his people."⁴

2. Renewal – The other reason for hope is because the resurrection of Jesus sets in motion the reverse of the curse of sin. In verse 22, Paul tells us that Adam's sin brought death into the world. But Jesus's life brings about the possibility of renewal. This is the big-picture plan of the Bible. God sent Jesus into the world in order to make right what's wrong, to redeem that which is broken, and to renew that which is lost. Now, it's not complete yet. But there are small glimpses of it happening.

One of our elders was sharing his faith story at our elder meeting on Monday. A failing marriage woke him up to his need for Jesus. After he saw the change in his wife and understood his true spiritual need, he too trusted Christ. Once he got that right, it started to transform every aspect of him. He's a different man today because he experienced the renewal that come through Jesus.

3. Victory – I love verses 24-25! They give us hope because the resurrection of Jesus is just the first step in a divine plan of victory. What is God up to? What is the plan? Jesus is going to deliver the kingdom to God the Father after he destroys "every rule and every authority and power." In other words, the victory

⁴ Leon Morris, [*1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*](#), vol. 7, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 205.

that we sing and talk about on this day points us toward a future day where every powerful structure, person, and force of evil that works against God's good plan will be destroyed.

It's no wonder that the political and spiritual rulers in the day feared the news of the resurrection. After all, if governments, dictators, and religious systems are not able to threaten people, what power do they have?

4. Defeating Death – The final promise and statement of hope comes in verse 26: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." If you think about it, death is one of the scariest realities of our humanity. We might be able to delay it, but we ultimately cannot avoid it. Death comes for all us eventually. It's why grief is so scary and why funerals are so hard. There's a reminder that something's in the world that is completely out of our control.

But what if death is going to be defeated—forever? What if the greatest, most frightening foe known to mankind will one day be destroyed? What if those who know Jesus are going to live in a place where there is no more pain, sadness, and death? Well, the resurrection of Jesus is the first and greatest sign that that day is coming.

Do you see how all this connects to the resurrection? It was the one moment that not only changed everything, but it also provided hope.

Personalizing Hope

Let me make this very personal. This is important because Jesus didn't come to save people theoretically. He was raised from the dead so you could begin again.

It starts by coming to terms with the brokenness in your soul related to what you have done wrong. I trust I don't need to convince you that you made mistakes. You failed in some way to obey God's law. The Bible calls this sin. It's the deadly pursuit of our autonomy from God. You can begin again by being born again. How? By placing your faith and trust in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of your sins. That can happen today. Right now. On Easter Sunday. It's the reason God has brought you here. God loves you, and he sent his son, Jesus, to die for you. Why not come to Jesus today?

If you are already a Christian, I want to remind you that the resurrection matters not just when you come to Christ for the first time. The resurrection matters every single day. Here's what Paul said in Romans 6.

"For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 6:10–11).

It means that the resurrected power of Christ has started its work in us already! It doesn't matter how bad your marriage, your addiction, your loneliness, your attitude, or your past is. The resurrected Jesus can help you begin again. It doesn't matter how far you've gone, how long it's been, or how deep you're in, the resurrected Jesus can help you begin again. The resurrected Jesus is central to true hope.

Stick with Jesus. You'll love the ending.

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