

Pastor Kenneth Mars

St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

The Resurrection of Our Lord (Series B)

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Text: I Corinthians 15:1–11

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

We all know that some things are more important than others. Paying the house payment is more important than a vacation in New Zealand. Our children's education is more important than the many good, but secondary extracurricular activities. The same is true for things in the Church and the Bible. The genealogies found in the Old Testament are important – Adam begat Seth and Seth begat Enosh and Enosh begat Kenan (c.p. Gen 5) and so forth. It's the inspired Word of God but some chapters and verses are more important than others.

The apostle Paul tells the Corinthian Christians what are the most important things in the Christian faith. Without these things: there's no faith, no forgiveness, no Church, no Christianity. Those most important things are listed in today's epistle reading from I Corinthians 15:3–8:

<sup>3</sup>For I delivered to you as of *first importance* what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup>and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. <sup>6</sup>Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup>Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. <sup>8</sup>Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

The reason we gather this morning is to celebrate these things of first importance. Our most holy faith, and the faith of billions of Christians, the faith saints and martyrs, is founded upon these most important events recorded in Holy Scripture.

They are remarkable events. And since our faith is founded upon them, it would serve us well to know them intimately. Or to put it negatively, without them, our most holy faith is bankrupt. Mark this well, saints of God. If any of these things of "first importance" is falsified, shown to be fraudulent, then Christianity collapses. Four

things are listed here. They are of “first importance” – 1) Jesus died for our sins, 2) was buried, 3) was raised on the third day, and 4) His resurrection was verified by hundreds of eyewitnesses. Think of them like the four legs of a chair. If even one of them fails, the whole thing collapses.

Lest you think I exaggerate the importance of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection, and the eyewitness accounts of the Lord’s resurrection, listen to what St. Paul writes just a few verses later in I Corinthians:

<sup>14</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. <sup>15</sup>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. <sup>16</sup>For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. <sup>17</sup>And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.

The importance of these first things cannot be overemphasized. So let’s consider them for a few moments.

Christianity, like no other religion, is bound up in the objective facts of history. It is for this reason – the historic concreteness of Christianity – that both the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds mention that Jesus was crucified under Pontius Pilate. The mention of that rather insignificant mid-level political leader grounds Jesus’ crucifixion to a specific time in history. Prove that Pontius Pilate didn’t exist and three of the four legs – Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection – collapse destroying the edifice that we call Christianity.

Critics and opponents of Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century claimed that Pilate didn’t exist. And since he didn’t exist, the claims of Christianity could not be trusted. In 1961 (just 50 years ago), an archeologist discovered what is now called the “Pontius Pilate stone.” The stone included a dedication to Tiberius Caesar that read, “To the divine Augustus Tiberius, Pontius Pilate, prefect of Judea...has dedicated this...” The stone was part of a theatre built in Caesarea Maritima located on the Mediterranean coast of western Israel. Let’s just say, the opponents of Christianity don’t say that Pilate didn’t exist.

That Jesus lived, died, and was buried is beyond any doubt. For these events are not only mentioned in the NT, but also by non-Christian authors, some of whom were actually enemies of Christianity. The consistent historic witness by foes and friends of Christianity is that Jesus lived in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel, died, and was buried.

The historic truth of the resurrection is also well authenticated. That miraculous event happened in time and space. Real women went to a real tomb, as we heard from Mark's gospel this morning, in order to pay their last respects to a real Jesus buried three days earlier. They expected to find a real corpse that could be anointed with real spices (Mk 16:1).

Even Christianity's 1<sup>st</sup> century opponents state, in their various writing, that Christians believe Jesus rose from the dead. The Jewish leadership, those responsible from Jesus' death, had the means, the opportunity, and an intense motivation to produce the dead body of Jesus. If they did, that new religion would be silenced instantly.

But they didn't produce a body because Jesus rose from the dead, as the angel told Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome. So the first 3 legs of our hypothetical chair are on firm, historical grounding. Jesus died, was buried, and was reported to have risen from the dead while Pontus Pilate was governor.

What's often overlooked is the hundred of eye witness accounts of the resurrection, that's the fourth leg upon which Christianity is built. St. Paul provides a quick – who's who – of the eyewitnesses: Peter and the rest of the apostles, James, more than 500 hundred men, and last of all, Paul himself. These are people who saw the resurrected Christ.

From a purely worldly perspective, they had everything to lose and nothing to gain by confessing that Jesus had risen from the dead. Many of these early eyewitnesses would die martyrs' deaths because they believed and preached that Jesus, the eternal Son of God in human flesh and blood, died, was buried, and rose again from the dead on the third day.

It has long been said that sane, sensible men and women don't die for something they know is a lie. These eyewitnesses knew what they saw – Jesus resurrected from the dead. And they knew that nothing in this world, not even the threat of death by governmental or religious leaders would change that fact. Those 21 Coptic Christians martyred in February by ISIS did not give their lives for a lie. They knew and believed the fact of Christianity. Jesus is risen from the dead!!

Dear saints of God, don't be swayed by the many things you hear that describe the Christian faith as being irrational, or as lacking real, external evidence to support her faith claims. Nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus died, was buried, and rose

from the dead, as supported by the testimony of hundreds of eyewitnesses, most of whom died proclaiming those rock solid truths. But none of this really gets to the “so what” question. Why does all this matter?

If everything is true about what the Bible says about Jesus, His life, death, burial, and resurrection – as all the corroborating evidence supports – then the Lord Jesus has made a significant claim upon your life. The reason He died by crucifixion was to pay for your sins; sins that the Bible also claims are worthy of eternal judgment by God the Father. The reason Jesus was buried was to sanctify the graves of all His people. Yes, the grave of every Christians is holy ground, made holy by Christ’s burial. The reason Jesus rose from the dead was to guarantee that your body would not remain subject to the powers of sin, death and corruption. He rose from the dead so that you too might rise from the dead in glorious splendor on the Last Day.

Before listing those things of “first important”, the apostle Paul wrote this in I Corinthians 15:1–2, “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved...” Those most important facts of Christianity are the events that secure your eternal salvation. You stand upon them with the sure and certain hope that death does not have the last word. Death is not the end.

The resurrection life of Jesus is triumphant. And through your baptismal faith in the resurrected Jesus, you to shall rise physically from the dead. Your bodies will be transformed and glorified. Never again will you be subject to sickness – not even to all this nagging influenza that’s been afflicting people so much recently. Never again will you be subject to the temptations of evil and sin and Satan. All of that will be finished.

Because Jesus died, was buried, and rose again from the dead – as corroborated by the eyewitness accounts – so it shall happen to all of you who believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. That’s the claim that Christianity makes. Better yet, that the claim that Jesus makes upon each of you. Those are the most important things of all!

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.