



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Therefore

First Corinthians 15:50-58; 16:1-3

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Now about the collection for the Lord’s people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. ² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. ³ Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem.

Two weeks ago we celebrated the glory of Easter, as we should every Sunday. I mean the liturgical calendar calls today the Third Sunday of Easter, but if the church calendar started on January 1, today should actually be the Fifteenth Sunday of Easter, but of course if we had the brass ensemble, the parade of Easter lilies, the glorious Easter Celebration music every Sunday, we may tire of it, so maybe it is good to take one day out of the year and call it Easter and do all those glorious things.

I don't know, maybe I am wrong, but Easter Sunday just seems to be the highlight of the year, and the following Sundays it seems we have to get back down to earth. It may have something to do with the fact that once we have celebrated the resurrection we leave the church and find ourselves amidst the same old problems. The daily news may have changed a little, but it seems that the problems reported today are basically the same problems that were reported before Easter. People still suffer from horrible illnesses, there is still war going on, people around the world are still hungry, natural disasters still plague the human race, and political disagreements are full force as usual.

It has been this way since Jesus was resurrected. On Easter morning we proclaim that death could not hold him. Love has prevailed. Goodness, truth, and justice are vindicated. Now the meek triumph; the humble are blessed, the peacemakers, the healers, the little people, the outsiders are now raised up as Jesus is. But we have the same problems. The same people who engineered Jesus' arrest, mock trial and execution, eventually had to turn their attention to Jesus' followers. I mean, with the body gone, the Jewish religious leaders and the Romans, had to nip this little problem in the bud. They couldn't have Jesus' followers running around saying that Jesus was alive.

On the first Easter evening, Jesus appeared to his disciples, and we expect them to burst out from behind the locked doors and hit Jerusalem with an evangelical fervor, but what happened was they stayed in the little room. One week after Easter they were still there, hiding in the room, wondering what to do next. Apparently, not much happened for an entire week, because there's no mention of any activity. They must have sent out for pizza or something. Maybe they took walks at night. Surely they talked a lot about what happened. What else was there to do? But one week later they were still there. Their question may have been, "Now what? We've experienced the risen Lord. We know something we didn't know before. Now what? What should we do?"

What on earth is the church supposed to do in the wake of the glorious news of the resurrection? The Apostle Paul may not have been the first to consider what Easter has to do with the rest of life, or how to understand the practical implications of Easter, but he was the first to write about it. As you are aware, Paul was the church's first foreign missionary and greatest theologian.

In Paul's writings there is a letter we know as First Corinthians. It was written in response to news Paul had received about the church. There were problems in the church; people were not getting along, and there were questions.

In Paul's plea for unity he wrote that wonderful chapter that is read at most weddings, First Corinthians 13: "Now faith, hope and love abide, but the greatest of these is love."

Paul then turned his attention to the meaning of the resurrection, where he wrote with as much skill, and as beautifully as he did about love. Paul wrote, **"If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile . . . But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died . . . as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ . . ."**

I am sure you are aware that Handel wrote *Messiah* in three parts. Three-fourths of the final part are First Corinthians 15. There is the startling chorus where the choir almost with an eerie sound sings, **"Since by man came death,"** then a sudden burst of joyful song, **"even so in Christ shall all be made alive."**

Then there is the recitative bass, **"Behold, I tell you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall be changed in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."**

Then from verses 52-53 the Air where the bass sings, **"The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised, be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed."**

I think my favorite piece is the playful alto tenor duet, **"O death, where is they sting? O Grave where is thy victory?"**

The final Corinthian passage Handel uses takes form in the chorus, **"But thanks be to God who giveth us the victory, through Jesus Christ our Lord."**

Handel's *Messiah* is one of the most magnificent pieces of music ever written, but it is here in part three that Handel made a huge theological mistake. You see, Handel did not go far enough. In using the text from First Corinthians 15, Handel did not use the final verse, which is critical to understanding Paul's theology of the resurrection. This was the text I read earlier. It is the verse that comes after Paul writing about the meaning of the resurrection. He concluded with verse 58, with the word **"THEREFORE."**

Paul wrote, "This is what the resurrection means for you--Therefore."
"Therefore, my brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that in your labor in the Lord is not in vain." Then Paul began chapter 16, without skipping a beat, saying, **"Now concerning the collection for the saints."**

When Paul wrote First Corinthians he did not break his work up into chapters and verses. But he moves his readers from resurrection to collecting money. Imagine the collection of money; the offering, is in the context of Paul's theological treatise on the resurrection.

I am certainly not one to criticize Handel, but there can be a serious problem with our understanding of Easter. You see as long as Easter remains an aesthetic reality best expressed in wonderful music, poetry, art, eggs, candy, flowers and new clothes, we have missed the point. Sometimes we go to a different extreme, an intellectual extreme and express our faith not aesthetically, but by accepting a list of propositions as truth, and belief in Jesus Christ is simply to maintain our confessions of faith, but when Paul wrote about resurrection he added, **“Therefore . . . now about the collection.”** Easter cannot stop with intellectual theological assertions, or with a wonderful aesthetic experience, but it is something that is practiced, it is something we do, it is the way we live.

In the world of chemistry or physics, you can study what is observed. You can know the theories. You can figure out what will happen when you mix this chemical with that chemical and add a little heat. You can do the math and know how much pressure you have to use to move an object with a lever. But who cares, except for your professor? That is, unless you mix this and that to get soap, or plastic, or you add this and that to the plastic and it will turn to fertile soil (imagine that!), or you engineer a wall that will support the roof of a structure then build the wall. **It's not simply the intellectual classroom knowledge, it is the therefore, how is the knowledge of how to put the theory to practical use?**

There are, 1,035 “therefores” in the Bible. Someone said, only partially in jest, that the most important word in the Bible is “therefore.” Biblical faith from beginning to end is a synthesis of mind, heart and body: ideas and concepts and propositions, and the devotion of the heart in prayer and meditation and personal spirituality, **and practice**, the life lived, the action taken, as some put it so eloquently, “walkin’ the walk, not just talkin’ the talk.”

Paul wrote about the resurrection, then said, “Therefore.” **“Therefore stand firm . . . Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. . . Now concerning the collection for the saints.”** What is that about?

From the very beginning, the Christian church was a church where the rubber hit the road. We did not simply get into little groups to discuss the wonders of the resurrection, worship together, and talk about how wonderful my relationship is with Jesus. The Christian church from its inception has always

shown compassion for the needy. The early Christians took a special interest in the marginalized and included the outcasts. The church's model was Jesus, who ate with tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners. He healed the sick, fed the hungry and blessed the children.

In an ancient world, unwanted children were abandoned, and if they did not die from exposure, they were taken by slave traders. Christians startled the world of the first century by picking up abandoned babies and caring for them and by providing for orphans and widows. Christians could not separate the news of the resurrection from what they did.

As the years passed, the world wondered about this faith that established orphanages, homes for the aged, hospitals, and hostels for travelers. Who were these people who would sell a field in order to have the money to feed a poor family? Yes, the early church was a "Rubber Meeting the Road Church."

With Rome tightening the screws in Judea and with talk of rebellion, the church in Jerusalem fell on hard times, and Paul was fund raising in Greek cities for his brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. In Corinth, a city in Greece, Paul urged the Christians to help the church in Jerusalem carry on its mission. The Corinthian Christians didn't know and ordinarily would not have cared about people who lived so far away. It is remarkable that maybe the first time in history anything like that happened. And Paul wrote, in the context of his theology of the resurrection, **"Now concerning the collection, or offering for the saints."**

Our church has partners in mission all over the world who work to fight poverty through educational programs, who work to help the next generation of adults learn how to establish and maintain peace, especially in places like Israel, Palestine, Russia, Ukraine, Syria and Egypt. We have missionaries lining up, but do you know what more than anything holds the church back? Lack of funds.

My daughter went to Uganda on a medical mission trip; there she treated patients with various problems, but especially malaria. When she came home, she said the number one need in Uganda, and probably other similar missions is not people who will go, but resources to purchase needed supplies.

Do you remember Barnabas? He was from Cypress. No one knows where he learned about Jesus, but he was a man with a deep faith and was influential in the life of the Apostle Paul. He traveled with Paul on the first Christian missionary endeavor. We are told that once there was a human need in the church, and Barnabas so loved Christ and was committed to the outreach of the church that he

sold a piece of property and gave it to the church to help care for the poor. Imagine anyone doing that today!

Let me cut through the chase. This morning I am not necessarily asking the members of this congregation to give more of your income to the work of Christ, even though we as a church are giving less to mission because we do not seem to be able to support our regular expenses as we used to. I know you are very generous, and I know you have to be somewhat cautious in order to make it through retirement. But consider the moment when you no longer need your earthly house and other investments. I am talking about your last will and testament.

I don't think I have convinced many folks to tithe on the income they receive, and I understand because you give what is needed, and you need to be responsible enough to not to be a burden on others. But, I am talking about dollars you no longer need, because you are enjoying the benefits being resurrected with Christ in heaven. It is money that your kids may or may waste, but is so needed by the church to increase our mission for Christ in the world. Have you even thought about including the church in your will? Have you considered tithing on your estate, to have written into your will that it is your desire that 10% of your estate go to the Mission Fund of Westminster Presbyterian Church, or some other organization that will share God's love?

The math is easy for me. Sally and I have three children; we are leaving 30% of our estate to each one. The remaining 10% goes to the church. Will you do the same?

What will be your legacy? Here lies John Smith. He was the best car mechanic in town. He was a member of the Rotary Club. He had three children. He was a member of the First Presbyterian Church.

What will be your legacy? Well, think about it this week. Will your legacy say, he remembered the church in his will and part of his estate is fighting poverty through educational programs, part of her estate is going to develop an agricultural program in Ghana, part of his estate is providing an afterschool program for at risk children, part of her estate is providing clean water for a village in Haiti. Part of his estate is helping men and women being trained in skills through Christian Men's and Women's Job Corp. Part of her estate is simply helping people live with decency through the work of Love INC. What will be your legacy?

One of these days, you are going to be standing with Jesus in the Kingdom of God. And I bet you have a great conversation. You may even say, “Jesus, I am grateful that you were with me every step of the way, for I could not have made it without you. I had my problems, but you so blessed me. I lived in a nice house filled with beautiful furniture, and we always had two cars. There was food on the table. I always seemed to have nice clothes. There was enough in my bank account to make it through retirement. I enjoy many extras. There is the vacation home, and the boat.” And you go on giving thanks for all the good gifts you enjoyed during your life.

When you are finished with this act of thanksgiving for the goodness of God, Jesus will put his arm around you, and ask, “Well, what are you doing with that stuff now?”

Alleluia, Jesus is risen, therefore.... Amen.