

**MINISTRY BY MAIL**  
**Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship**  
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**Easter Sunday, April 9, 2023**

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 193, 188:1-2, 201, 200, 210.

Lessons: Job 19: 25-27, 1 Corinthians 15: 12-26, John 20: 19-23.

Text: 1 Corinthians 15: 1-8

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

In 1 Corinthians 15:14 we read: ***“If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:14 NIV) That verse is the heart of this chapter. Even those who deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ recognize that the claim of the bodily resurrection of Jesus is central to the entire Gospel and entire message of Christianity.

Today we want to emphasize this message of Paul by the inspiration of God to the Christians in Corinth, and to Christians of all times:

**IF YOU HOLD FIRMLY TO THE GOSPEL, YOU ARE SAVED**

- 1. The heart of the Gospel is the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead.**
- 2. Without this Gospel – and there really is no “other Gospel” – you have believed in vain and are damned.**

Although the chapter and verse divisions were not inspired, this is the longest chapter in the first letter to the Corinthians. That really emphasizes the most important message that St. Paul – or any Christian teacher – could give to any human being. That is the message of resurrection to eternal life because you believe that Jesus Christ died for your sins, as we read in Romans: ***“He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”*** (Romans 4:25 NIV)

First of all, this chapter of scripture teaches and emphasizes Christ’s resurrection from the dead and then the resurrection of everyone who believes in him as Savior.

The foundation of our faith must include the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. If that is true, then everything else we believe as Christians on the basis of Scripture is true, and everything that we as Christians reject on the basis of Scripture is false. Pontius Pilate asked Jesus ‘what is truth’, but didn’t really want the answer. The difference between truth and error, between faith and unbelief, between heaven and hell, between hope and despair depend on this central event in history: Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the morning we have come to call Easter.

Paul starts with statements that lead up to this central idea: ***“If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.”*** (1 Corinthians 15:14 NIV)

He reminds them of the Gospel he preached to them and that they have heard, have received and have believed. Is it possible to believe all of the Gospel except for the account of the resurrection of Jesus Christ? No. Because without Christ’s resurrection there is no Gospel.

Paul repeats the evidence of Christ’s resurrection, even naming people who saw him after he rose from the dead. He writes that this is the same Gospel he preached to them. Why? Perhaps because Paul wants to emphasize again the foundation for his instruction for those in the Corinthian congregation – and for anyone who had doubts about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

First he told them that Christ truly died, that he died for their sins and if he died for their sins, he also died for our sins. The death of Christ for the sins of the world is the central truth of the Gospel, together with his

resurrection. For if he had died and not come back to life, there would be no proof that he really died for our sins. Think of even the greatest men of history. They died. Occasionally you read of someone who died trying to save someone else – protecting lives of others, rescuing someone from drowning, from a burning building, from a natural disaster, or dying in war for a cause they believed in. Or you will hear how someone saved the earthly life of another but lost his or her life while doing so. That might be a picture of someone dying for someone else. But the person whose earthly life was saved eventually died of some other cause. So we could say that the person who died for someone else died in vain, because the person he or she saved still died sooner or later. We might even think about saying that the person who died for someone else had a totally wasted life and death.

But that's not what God tells us in the scriptures about his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. God tells us ***“that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.”*** It was a horrible, very painful death, of which some details are recorded in the scriptures. And we are even told the reason: Because we are sinners who ourselves deserved death – death on this earth and an everlasting death, if you can imagine such a thing. We've seen earthly death – and in some cases perhaps even a very traumatic death. We haven't seen eternal death. But it will happen. An eternal death. An eternity of dying that never ends, of suffering, of unspeakable pain.

To prove that Jesus really died, God tells us in our sermon text ***“that he was buried.”*** That's what you do with dead bodies. You bury them. Sometimes people hold memorial services or funerals for people who have died. And that gives some finality to the death. The women who came to the tomb where Jesus was buried on the third day after he died wanted to give some closure to Jesus' death and to honor him. For all humans – except Jesus Christ – the person is gone and will not come back. But Scripture tells us something else about Jesus. He not only died, but he died for our sins. He died the death that we deserved. But more importantly, God tells us here that Jesus ***“rose again the third day according to the scriptures.”*** That third day is the day we celebrate as Easter, or the Resurrection Sunday as some prefer to call it. If he had not risen from the dead, he'd be like everyone else on earth. He's dead, that's it, get on with your lives, you friends of his. (Pause)

Paul writing by the inspiration of the Holy Ghost declares again, just what he had told them in the past. He doesn't have a different message, just more of the same Gospel they had already heard. We read ***“brothers, I want to remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this Gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”*** It is the same message he had preached to them in person.

And he says they “received it”. We are reminded of his words to the Thessalonian Christians: ***“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”*** (1 Thessalonians 2:13 NIV)

We don't know the specific dates and experiences the Corinthian believers first received and heard the Gospel of Jesus Christ from Paul. In the same way we don't know all of the specific dates and experiences we have received that Gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives. When it happened isn't the important idea. That it happened is. You have received it at many different times, and in different ways: Regularly attending church and Bible classes and Sunday School and Catechism instruction and listening as someone read the Bible. As infants, and through baptism. As catechumens studying and learning the Word of God. As confirmands who made your vows to God to remain faithful to his Word. As confessing members of this congregation. As guests at the Lord's Supper. You, too, have received the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and are hearing and receiving it again today.

That is the Gospel – the good news – ***“on which you have taken your stand.”*** If you want to stand, and remain standing, you need your feet firmly planted. You need a solid foundation. And what is it that the Corinthians, and all who believe are planted and grounded in? What is the foundation for all believers? It is the Word of God, not mere words of men. We stand on the word of God, the Bible. That is our foundation.

But it is more than just something on which we stand. It is the Word of God, it is the Gospel which saves us, as we read: ***“By this Gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”*** You who have made your confession and wanted to be part of this congregation are standing on the Word of Christ, the Gospel. You aren't standing with this congregation merely because we have a charismatic pastor, or have abundant social activities, or any of the other reasons many people choose a church. You stand on the Word of God as it is taught and confessed and preached here, and we pray, by the grace of God,

may continue to be taught here in its truth and purity. It is that Word of God which leads us to faith. It is faith in the Jesus Christ whom that Word of God teaches which saves us.

And there is some admonition and warning in that word **“if”**. **“By this Gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.”** You need to hold firmly. You need to “keep it in memory” as the King James Version says. Do you realize how many Bible passages you have memorized, in addition to the words of Luther’s small catechism? Do you all realize how important it is to memorize bible passages? If something is in your memory you can call it up again and again. You know it and haven’t completely forgotten it. Memorizing the Word of God is important, and we still struggle to have our children – and ourselves – memorize bible verses. Even Billy Graham, that world-famous evangelist of the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, said in an interview at age 88, with failing eyesight, that “Now that reading has become more difficult, I probably read the Bible less but pray more. Of course over the years I’ve memorized many passages from the Bible, and I’m especially thankful now that I did this. I wish we gave more attention to Bible memorization in our churches today.”

You need to remember something so that you can **“hold firmly”** to it. And we want to continue to hold firmly to the Word of God.

If you don’t hold firmly, the warning is, you will not be saved. Faith can’t be a “now and then” sort of thing, something we set aside on a particular day because it is not convenient for our lives at the moment. The Gospel has to be always in your mind and in your heart, so you can hold firmly to the Word of God. **“Otherwise,”** St. Paul writes, **“you have believed in vain.”** In vain. That means uselessly, with no good fruits, with no positive results.

The picture of holding firmly reminds us of the picture of someone who is drowning and has been thrown a life ring, or a life preserver. If you hold on firmly you will be saved from drowning. Even movies like “Titanic” have made that point. But remember God is faithful. He throws you the life preserver in the person of Jesus Christ. God is faithful! Don’t ignore it! Don’t throw it away! Remember: if you hold firmly to the gospel, you are saved, you will be saved eternally. The heart of that Gospel is the fact that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Without this Gospel – and there really is no “other” Gospel – you have believed in vain and are damned. The true, honest, word of God assures us that **“Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”** Mark 16:16 (NIV)

You have received that Gospel and today you stand on it in faith. May God preserve you unto the eternal life Jesus Christ gained for you when he rose from the dead! Amen.

(Adapted from a Ministry By Mail sermon for March 27, 2016)