

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Fifth Sunday after Easter, May 17, 2009

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Hymns: 206: 1-5, 207:2, 205, 585, 201:1
Lessons: Psalm 16, Romans 8: 1-39, John 10: 22-30.
Text: 1 Corinthians 15: 12-20.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What does it take for a huge building to crumble and fall? What does it take for a huge bridge to collapse? There is proof that it doesn't take much for either to fail and fall and collapse into rubble. A huge building? Think of the 110 story New York World Trade Center buildings and how one airplane that would easily fit on part of just one floor of the building caused the destruction of each of those buildings. Think of how the failure of just one bolt or just one steel beam of many beams could cause the destruction of a huge bridge.

Think about the building of your faith. The word of God speaks of God's household, the church, and how it is built on a solid foundation. In Ephesians 2:18-22 we read ***"For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit. Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."*** Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of your faith. Everything he did is part of that solid foundation, built on him as the cornerstone. If even a tiny part of it is not solid, or faulty, or corrupt, or has a crack, the whole building will fall.

Think about the bridge that brings you back together with God, who was angry with you because of your sins, and would have condemned you to eternal damnation except for the bridge that brought you back to him: Remember 1 Timothy 2:3-6 which tells us about ***"God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men."*** Jesus Christ is the only mediator, the only bridge between man and God. If any part of that bridge is defective or faulty or has a crack, the entire bridge will fall. What Jesus Christ has done is what brings you back to God.

Well, obviously, because of what Saint Paul wrote in our sermon text, there were some in Corinth who tried to deny what Jesus Christ has done. But Paul then assures us that

DENYING THE RESURRECTION OF THE DEAD
DENIES CHRIST'S RESURRECTION

- 1. If you have been told *Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?***
- 2. *And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.***
- 3. *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.***

There is no misunderstanding Paul's topic statement in this paragraph. If it has been preached that Christ was raised from the dead, then no one can say that resurrection of the dead is not possible.

We do not know who those individuals in the congregation were who denied the resurrection of the body, but they were reflecting the typical pagan Greek attitude toward the doctrine of the resurrection. Corinth was a typical Greek city and typical Greek philosophies were common. Even we cannot help but be influenced by the things we hear from those around us. It is only by God's grace, as we understand from the meaning of the Lord's Prayer, that we are delivered from the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. The Greek poet Aeschylus had written: "... when the dust has drunk the blood of man, and he's once dead, there's no uprising". In Athens both some Epicurean and some Stoic philosophers had expressed the same unbelief when they mocked Paul's message of Christ's resurrection and asked, "What is this babblers trying to say?" We read in Acts 17:18 ***"A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, 'What is this babblers trying to say?' Others remarked, 'He seems to be advocating foreign gods.' They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection."***

But we confess in the second article of the Apostolic Creed that Jesus Christ "rose again from the dead". That confession is confirmed in these words of the Nicene Creed "And the third day he rose again according to the scriptures". And that belief is repeated in the Athanasian Creed, so that the three most fundamental confessions of Christianity say "this is true and this is what we believe." Of course, the source of all these confessions is the Bible, which is the very word of God and source of what Christians believe.

In the third article of the Apostolic Creed we confess that we believe in "The resurrection of the body; and the life everlasting." In the Nicene Creed we confess that we "look for the resurrection of the dead, And the life of the world to come."

A denial of any kind of resurrection also denies that Christ rose from the dead. If no flesh – no human being – rises from the dead, then Easter – the resurrection of Christ on that first Easter – didn't happen either. The consequence of denying Christ's resurrection, in turn, is that gospel preaching is vain and Christian faith is vain. So Paul demonstrates that denying the doctrine of man's resurrection logically leads to denying the fundamental doctrine of Christ's resurrection. When that doctrine is lost, the entire message of salvation is lost. Deny one doctrine of Scripture, and you will, if you follow it through, deny other doctrines of Scripture as well, for Scripture is a web of truth. We often speak of the doctrine of inspiration as a starting point for our beliefs. But if anyone denies the resurrection from the dead, then everything that scripture states is useless.

A few verses later Paul expands on his statement ***"If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised."*** He writes ***"More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either."***

If Christ didn't rise from the dead, that means that St. Paul lied when he told the Corinthians that Christ rose from the dead. If man doesn't rise from the dead, then Christ didn't rise either. Then Easter was only a fanciful tale, and Paul's vision of the living Christ who appeared to him on the road to Damascus as recorded in Acts chapter 9 was only a hallucination.

Then Paul expands on his statement: ***"And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith."***

"And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men." A useless faith means, Paul now explains, that man's sins have not been forgiven. ***"He was raised to life for our justification,"*** Paul wrote to the Romans (Romans 4:25). If he was not raised to life, however, then

we haven't been justified. If we haven't been justified, that is, declared just and righteous, our sins haven't been declared forgiven. Then we are still in our sins. The dead in Christ are in the same hopeless state.

Having told us by inspiration of God that Christ has risen, the apostle answers those who said there would be no resurrection. There had been no justification, no salvation, if Christ had not risen. And then, must not faith in Christ be vain, and of no use, if he is still among the dead? The proof of the resurrection of the body is the resurrection of our Lord. If Christ had not risen, even those who died in the faith had perished in their sins. All who believe in Christ, who have hope in him as a Redeemer; who hope for redemption and salvation by him also have the hope of eternal life. But if there is no resurrection, their hope in him can only be for this life. And those who believe in Christ are surely in a worse condition than the rest of mankind, especially at the time and under the circumstances, in which the apostles wrote; for then Christians were especially hated and persecuted by all other men. But couldn't we make the same argument today? Those who believe in a resurrection and eternal life are still mocked by the world. Anyone who doesn't go along with the sinful excesses of the world is not popular with the people of the world. But Christians, just because of the resurrection of Christ and the hope of their own resurrection enjoy comfort in the midst of all their difficulties and trials, even in the times of the sharpest persecution. No matter what happens on earth, we find hope and comfort in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, as we heard in our epistle lesson.

Jesus' resurrection proves resurrection is possible. It forms the center of gospel preaching. It is the foundation of our faith, and gives hope for departed loved ones who also believed in Jesus Christ and gives a sure hope for us to be raised from death.

The word of God here today presents the logical reasoning that if Christ had not risen from the dead, then death would be the end for all, even believers. Thus the resurrection is asserted as one of the most crucial of all doctrines, so much so that if Christ did not arise, our lives are hopeless. The resurrection of Christ insures that those fallen asleep in Him are not lost.

Without Christ's resurrection we have nothing to preach. The bodily resurrection of Christ is the source for our resurrection hope and thus also for our preaching.

Saint Paul in the first verses of this chapter has given us assurances that Jesus Christ truly did rise from the dead.

He concludes this section of Scripture with a tragic picture. If Christians have hope in Christ only in this life, if there is no resurrection unto the bliss of heaven, they have made a sad choice. They have denied themselves, they have sacrificed, they have suffered, always hoping that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy of being compared with eternal bliss and glory.

That hope proves to be an idle dream if the words at the close of the creed, "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," were never true — what a miserable end to a great hope and a dedicated life! No wonder Paul says, "*if only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men.*" What fools to have counted on that hope if there is no resurrection!

When the doctrine of Christ's resurrection is lost, the entire message of salvation is lost. The entire building crumbles, the bridge collapses.

But the word of God goes on to assure us "*But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*" Yes, be assured, not because I tell you, but because God assures you and he proved it: Christ has indeed been raised from the dead! Amen.