

“But in fact “
1 Corinthians 15:19-26
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EASTER SUNDAY 4-11-04
First Christian Church
Columbia, Missouri

The greening earth, the tender heavenly blue;
The rich brown furrows gaping for the seed ...
... bursting bud and leaf . .
... hedgerows sweet with hawthorn and wild rose;
... meadows spread with gold and gemmed with stars,
... tint of the tiniest flower,
... daisies smiling to the sun;
... birds that build in joyous hope,
... lambs that frisk,
... leaves that rustle in the wind,
... spring poplars, and spreading oaks,
... queenly birch, and lofty swaying elms;
... earth's ten thousand fragrant incenses,
Sweet altar-gifts from leaf and fruit and flower . . .

With those words the English poet John Oxenham, celebrates the annual spring rebirth of life. (John Oxenham “A Little Te Deum of the Commonplace”)

How wonderful is the world when all of earth springs back to life.

But can you imagine what it would be like to live in a world of winter twelve months of the year? Can you imagine life without spring? That is what the apostle Paul is trying to describe at the close of his first letter to the Corinthian church.

The Apostle Paul was writing to members of a church in the ancient Greek city of Corinth who were having great difficulty believing the Easter message of Christ's resurrection. From their Greek heritage they focused upon mind, spirit, truth, and had no concern for the idea of resurrection of the body. It was not only beyond their wildest imagination, it was pure foolishness to their minds.

If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

If Christ has not been raised, our faith is futile.

If Christ has not been raised then we are still in our sins: The powers of ignorance and hatred which nailed Jesus to the cross have triumphed, and our lives are still

overshadowed by their dark spell.

If Christ has not been raised, then our loved ones who have died have all perished; death has swallowed them up, and they have become like candles in the wind, snuffed out, never to be lighted again.

If Christ has not been raised, then all that we struggle to achieve and attain, all the truth we seek to learn, all the goodness which we endeavor to embody, all that matters naught, but is wiped out with the last breath.

If Christ has not been raised, then “All we are is dust in the wind.”

If Christ has not been raised, Paul wrote, then we who profess faith in the crucified Jesus, are of all people, most to be pitied, for we would live in a wintry, Good Friday world, without the hope of Easter.

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,” Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “we are of all people most to be pitied.”

But that is not the case. “But in fact,” he says, that is not the case!

”But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the fruit fruits of those who have died.”
And because of that life forever has been changed.

Here is the message of Easter!

Here is the proclamation of the Christian gospel which shocked the women at the tomb early on that morning; which disturbed Peter the thrice denier of Jesus; which emboldened the hearts of those Galilean fisherman who thought their friend and teacher was gone forever, and sent them out telling the story in the streets across the Mediterranean world.

Here is the message which inspired Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and so many others to start writing down the stories of Jesus, and which has rung out from steeples across the world down through the centuries.

Here is the message which has brought us together in this place on this day.
“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead!”

Can we hear it? Can we share it? Do we know what it mean?

Desmond Tutu, the famous Archbishop of the Church of South Africa told the story of one of the ministers of his church.

“For those who are to preach, it is customary in my country that the preacher

kneel for prayer before entering the pulpit. The daughter of one of my clergy noticed her father praying Sunday after Sunday as he prepared to mount the pulpit. She asked her daddy what he prayed for. When the minister replied that he was asking God to help him preach a better sermon, the child asked, "Well, why doesn't He?"

If Christ has not been raised, then everything is up to us, and there is no help to make our lives better.

But because we believe that Christ has been raised, we dare to believe that everything is not up to us. We are not left to rely on our own strength alone. We are not left only to our own devices, intentions and creativity. We are not left to struggle alone when life get tough, and we are worn out by the stresses and strains and problems of living in a wintery world. Because we believe that Christ has been raised, we have a source of energy at the depths of life which energizes and invigorates us when our batteries run down and our tanks are empty.

Contrary to what the ancient preacher whose words are recorded in Ecclesiastes, who believed that history is only an endless cycle of events with no ultimate meaning or purpose, we believe there is a direction, drive, and purpose at the helm of the hand steering the ship. As the historian said,

"One lesson, and only one, history may be said to repeat with distinctiveness, that the world is built somehow on moral foundations, that in the long run it is well with the good, and in the long run it is ill with the wicked."

Because we believe that Christ has been raised we dare to believe that history has meaning and purpose.

History is not a merry-go-round, but history is a railroad. Like the old Wabash railroad which came into Columbia. When you went across 10th Street and got on the Wabash there was only one place to go, to Centralia, but then to the rest of the world. And so it is with history; there is only one place to go, to the kingdom of God, and then to the rest of God's wide world.

Because Christ has been raised we believe as Paul says that the risen Christ will hand over his kingdom to God – that the forces of death and destruction will yet be defeated in this world, that the kingdom of this world will become the kingdom Christ.

"If for this life only we have hoped in Christ we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the fruit fruits of those who have died."

Because we believe that Christ has been raised, we know that it matters to God what happens to us.

If Christ has not been raised, then we are all still in our sins, the powers of hatred and ignorance will forever control the events of history, and death will never relinquish its icy grip on our lives. But if Christ has been raised, then everything is changed. We believe it matters to God what happens to us, and it matters to God what we do.

In 1842 an Indiana farmer nearly forgot to vote, but as it turned out the candidate he voted for as his state representative, Madison Marsh, won by one vote. In those days state legislators elected U.S. Senators, and the next year, on the sixth ballot, and after changing his vote, Marsh cast the deciding vote for Edward Hannegan as senator from the state of Indiana. In 1846, when the U.S. Senate was sharply divided over whether to declare war on Mexico, Senator Hannegan was absent at the time. He was called into the chambers, and he cast the deciding vote for war. And so the nation went to war with Mexico, and a result of that war California became the possession of the United States. Consider how that single vote changed history.

(Rick Beyer, *The Greatest Stories Never Told*, HarperCollins)

Consider how that single life of the Galilean carpenter changed the world. And consider how our lives, alive with his spirit and his love, can change the world in which we live.

“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”

Something new has broken into history! Something has changed the way we think and feel and act. Therefore, in the face of darkness we believe light will come at the end of the tunnel.

I'm sure that you remember the film, *Castaway*, with Tom Hanks. His plane went down in the south Pacific Ocean and somehow his life was spared. Somehow he was washed up on the shore of an island where he forced himself to survive living alone for five years. When he was about to give up, the wind washed ashore a big piece of sheet metal and he fashioned a boat and set sail out onto the ocean where he was rescued.

When he returned home he discovered that his girl friend had given him up for dead, and married another man, and he learned that his life with her was over. But something inside would not let him give up.

One day logic was proven all wrong because the tide lifted, came in, and gave me a sail. And now, here I am. I'm back in Memphis talking to you. I have ice in my glass. And I've lost her all over again. I'm so sad that I don't have Kelly.

But I'm so grateful that she was with me on that island. And I know what I have to do now. I have to keep breathing. Because tomorrow the sun will rise. Who knows what the tide could bring?

That is the promise of Easter. Who knows what the tide can bring? Who knows what the wind will blow in? Who knows what the spirit of God will yet do with our lives and this world?

Here is the proclamation which can save our lives!

The story was told of the days following World War II when the Russian communists took control of Poland. They wanted to convince the people that communism was not only a superior way of life, but that their teaching of atheism should be accepted as well.

One day a communist leader demanded that the people come to a town meeting. Thousands of people stood in the streets while he spoke to them for an hour on the merits of communism and atheism. At the close of his long speech, he called the Polish Christian Bishop to the platform and said, "I will give you two minutes to respond."

The Bishop smiled and said, "It will not take that long." The Bishop looked out at the people and proclaimed in a loud voice, "He is risen!" The people replied in a thunderous response, "He is risen, indeed!"

In the face of a world of where death and disbelief reigns, What do you make of this Easter story? I say, He is risen! What do you say?