

**Easter**  
**April 11, 2004**  
**1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

**Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke**

**The Message of First Importance**

1. Simple
2. Reliable
3. Powerful

***<sup>NIV</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:1 Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. <sup>2</sup> By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them-- yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. <sup>11</sup> Whether, then, it was I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.***

In the name of Jesus, our living King and Savior, fellow Christians,

Christianity's most important message is...what? Some would say, "Love one another." And they might even quote Jesus in support of their answer. Others would give a variation of that response and refer to what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "**Do to others what you would have them do to you.**" (Matt. 7:12) You wouldn't find many people who would argue that these are *unimportant* messages. But here in the opening verses of St. Paul's great resurrection chapter, the apostle says that the most important message in Christianity is not "Do!" but "Done!" The message is not "Do to others!" but a call to

believe what Christ has done for us. *"Christ died for our sins." "Christ was raised on the third day."*

The Bible in the course of its sixty-six books treats hundreds, even thousands of subjects. Why, right here in 1 Corinthians the apostle Paul deals with topics as disparate as lawsuits between believers and the Lord's Supper, sexual ethics and the roles of men and women, spiritual gifts and worship decorum. And all of it is divinely inspired and important in its own right. But the message of first importance is, *"Christ died for our sins." "Christ was raised on the third day."*

And that's why we've gathered this morning, to celebrate the joy, the peace, and the hope that come from knowing that Christ, who died for our sins, has been raised from the dead. This is the great message of the Bible and the great truth that lies at the heart of our faith. St. Paul calls it **The Message of First Importance**. As we hear him speak about this message we'll see that the gospel message of Christ's death and resurrection is 1] simple, 2] reliable, and 3] powerful.

### **1. Simple**

Paul says to the Corinthians, *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures."* Paul calls this message the gospel (the good news) and says it was the content of his preaching. Jesus died for our sins and Jesus was raised from the dead. That *is* simple, isn't it? I know from doing my daughters' tax returns recently that the instruction book for Form 1040 EZ runs to more than 20 pages. Not all that EZ! And many of the volumes in the popular line of books to help dummies learn to use their computers have more than 300 pages. But the heart and core of Bible lore is so simple even a little child can say it: *"Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."* *"Christ died for our sins." "Christ was raised on the third day."*

But as simple as this message is, it does clearly tell us that there was a purpose to Christ's death. *"Christ died for our sins."* It's not that Jesus miscalculated the reaction to his rhetoric, angered the wrong people, and ended up dead. He came on a mission to give his life as a ransom for us. We were bound in the chains of sin and living on spiritual death row. We had no basis for an appeal and no prospect but hell. That's why Jesus came. He wasn't willing to see us destroyed. To effect that rescue he was willing to offer his holy life for ours. That's what led him to the cross. His great love for us led him to suffer and die in our place.

As a part of this simple message of first importance, Paul writes that Christ was buried. He says that to establish that Christ actually did die. The Holy Spirit must have known that there would be skeptics who would suggest that Jesus only fell unconscious on the cross and that later, in the cool of the tomb, revived and recovered from his injuries. But the Gospels are quite specific about this: Pilate released the body of Christ to Joseph of Arimathea for burial only after he'd been assured by the centurion on duty at Calvary that Jesus was really dead. This was no "swoon" on Jesus' part. He actually died on that dark day and he was buried.

But as Christians we've come together today to do more than honor a fallen hero. The tomb couldn't hold Jesus. He was raised on the third day. That is, God the Father raised him from death. He exerted his mighty strength and called Jesus out of the tomb. In doing so, God was declaring that Christ's payment for our sins was sufficient. Jesus' resurrection means that our sins have all been forgiven. The basic message of the Bible, the basic truth of the Christian faith is this simple. *Christ died for our sins. Christ was raised on the third day.*

But the fact that a message is simple doesn't always mean that it's reliable. Maybe you've seen President Harry Truman gleefully holding up a copy of newspaper with a simple, but inaccurate headline: "Dewey Defeats Truman." You can't get much simpler than three words, but much to the embarrassment of the editors of the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, Thomas Dewey did not defeat Truman. The headline may have been simple, but it was also premature and wrong. So it's not enough for the most important message of our Christian faith to be simple. It must also be reliable. As the apostle continues here, he's working to demonstrate that "*Christ was raised on the third day*" is also a reliable message.

## **2. Reliable**

You notice that when Paul tells us that Christ died for our sins, he adds, "*according to the Scriptures.*" And again when he says, "(Christ) was raised on the third day," he uses the same phrase, "*according to the Scriptures.*" The death and resurrection of Christ are not some newly- coined novelty. Old Testament prophets like Isaiah and King David had predicted the death and the resurrection of Christ. These great events followed a script that the Holy Spirit had written; it's the very opposite of a story hastily devised by disciples who didn't want to let on that Christ was dead and was going to stay that way. Jesus reliably did what the Old Testament had said he would do.

The message that Jesus returned to life is also reliable because there are reliable witnesses who saw Jesus alive. Paul mentions six appearances of the risen Christ here: *“He appeared to Peter [1], and then to the Twelve [2]. After that he appeared to more than 500 of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep [3]. Then he appeared to James [4], then to all the apostles [5], and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born [6].”* Paul wrote this letter around the year 55 A.D., less than thirty years after Jesus’ death and resurrection took place. Many of those who had seen Jesus alive were still living. You could talk with them and ask them what they saw. It’s possible that apostle Peter had even visited Corinth. And, of course, there was Paul, whose career as a persecutor of Christians came to a sudden halt when Jesus appeared to him on the road to Damascus. He had spent a good deal of time in Corinth. All these witnesses had seen Jesus alive.

Paul’s point in listing these resurrection appearances is not to prove to unbelievers that Jesus rose. The resurrection lies outside the ordinary categories of historical proof. His goal is rather to reestablish the beliefs that he and the Corinthians had in common. While the Corinthians apparently continued to believe that Christ had risen, some of them were less certain of their own prospects for resurrection. So Paul goes back to what he and the believers in Corinth agreed on—that Christ had been raised from the dead—in order to show that Christ’s resurrection means that all who trust in him will rise, too. Along the way, Paul shows that the report of Christ’s resurrection is something more than fantastic stories of the Art Bell variety or hysteria-induced hallucinations. Numerous reliable witnesses, even large groups of people, saw Jesus alive.

But what’s at stake here is far more than the accuracy of the Biblical record of the resurrection. *“Christ was raised on the third day”* is not just a historical event, but a powerful, living reality. We see the power of the resurrection message in the transformation that took place in St. Paul.

### **3. Powerful**

Paul expands a bit here on his own occasion for witnessing that Christ had risen. He writes, *“And last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”* I suppose you could say

that this biographical information about Paul is not strictly necessary to the point he's making about the "first importance" of Christ's death and resurrection. But Paul's credibility as an apostle was under attack in Corinth. There were apparently some who viewed Paul's late call to apostleship as proof that he was least of the apostles, if he was one at all. But rather than arguing with them, he concedes that he's the least of the apostles, that he's not even worthy to bear the title "apostle." And, yet, look what God has done! He took a former persecutor of the church, a man who considered Christianity a heretical aberration from the true faith, and made Paul Christianity's foremost spokesman of the apostolic era. In fact, it was through Paul that most of these Corinthians had first heard the gospel. Does anyone really think that Paul would have persevered as an apostle through persecution, imprisonment, and every other sort of opposition if he had not believed that Jesus was alive? Of course not! The cushy life of a prominent Pharisee was just fine if Jesus was dead. It was the realization that Jesus was alive that transformed him.

The realization that Christ has been raised from the dead is still a powerful force in the lives of Christians today. Whether Jesus is a dead hero or a living Lord makes a huge difference in our desire to serve him with our lives. Dead heroes don't inspire so much devotion. It's the fact of Jesus resurrection that enables us to endure tribulation with the attitude of St. Paul, who said that **"our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us"** (Rom. 8:18) and, in another place, that **"our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all."** (2 Cor. 4:17) It's the "distant triumph song," the promise of the resurrection, that makes our hearts brave and our arms strong, even when the fight is fierce and the warfare long. Christ's resurrection means that we, through faith in him, are the forgiven children of God and the heirs of heaven. It's seeing ourselves in that light that gives us the power to live for Christ now.

Do you remember 10 or 15 years ago when *Trivial Pursuit* was popular? Some of us spent hours amusing ourselves with questions and answers that were admittedly trivial. There was even a Bible trivia game. But what Paul says to us on this Easter morning is anything but trivial. These are matters of life and death, matters of first importance. *Christ died for our sins. Christ was raised on the third day.* It's a simple message, but it's also reliable and powerful. And God's promise is that all who believe in this crucified and risen Christ will be saved. Amen.