

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

by Ray C. Stedman

This morning I want to do what we seldom do here -- that is to speak to the guests who are with us more than to our own people, our own family. We meet as a family here each Sunday morning. We believe that God has brought us together -- many different people, of all different ages, and from various levels and groups of society. We have many visitors from Sunday to Sunday, and we welcome them. They are always welcome, but we don't try particularly to talk to them. We believe that this gathering is for the benefit of Christians, for their instruction in and understanding of what we have in Jesus Christ, and of what the Word of God is to mean to us. But on Easter Sunday we are delighted to have a great many other visitors with us, and we are happy to welcome you. And this time I'd like to talk to you who are here as visitors:

I think it is wonderful that we have "Open House" once a year on Easter Sunday, so that people can come and see what is going on. And I'm glad that it falls on Easter by tradition, for this is the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus, the great central truth of all Christian faith.

And yet I think that it is rather strange that it should fall on this day. There are many aspects of the Christian faith which I find are admired and respected by a lot of people who are not Christians. The idea that God is love is a welcome truth, even though it is taught only in the Bible. It is not taught in nature; it is not taught in history. But it is taught in the Scriptures, and many people admire and welcome that truth even though they never go to church themselves. There is the idea that we are all one family of mankind, that we are related to each other and share human life together, that no one is really different from anyone else in the sense of being more or less than equal. Then there is the idea that there is forgiveness of sins, and a release from guilt. All these ideas which are so central to Christian faith are welcomed by many, even though they don't come to church.

But the one thing I find that people most often stumble over is this suggestion that Jesus actually did rise from the dead. Many people look upon that as somewhat akin to the legend of Santa Claus -- that it is something fun to pretend, that it gives life a little more color and zest, but that you can't dream of really taking it seriously. I don't know whether you think that way or not. Some of you may be feeling, "Well, what difference does it make? Even if he did, it's not going to make any difference to me -- or if he didn't. I'm going to go to work tomorrow just as I always have. I'm going to do the things I usually do. It's not going to make any difference to my family or to me, or to my attitudes or my daily life, whether Jesus did or didn't rise from the dead."

We're glad you came this morning, because we'd like to say to you, as a group of Christians assembled here, that we believe that it did happen, that it isn't a legend, isn't a myth. It isn't merely a nice idea that Christians have, but it is something which occurred in history. It is a fact, and it produces a change. In fact, everyone in the world is affected by the resurrection of Jesus. Nobody can live unchanged by that great fact. If it didn't happen, your life is going to be changed tremendously. And if it did happen, your life is going to be changed tremendously. It is, as the Bible makes clear, the central fact of history. Nothing is more important. And everything is different, depending upon whether this did or didn't happen. I'd like to think with you a little bit about this great fact, and consider with you what life would be like if Jesus did not rise, and what would life be like if he did, and what effect it would have upon you.

We believe that there is a great deal of evidence that our Lord did indeed rise from the dead. But we are not believers simply because it is a nice thought, because it gives us a little something to hang onto when we are about to die. No, we are not believers because this has been traditionally taught. We are believers because we have examined carefully the tremendous evidence which exists, evidence which again and again throughout history has been examined by thoughtful, careful, logical minds, and which again and again has convinced

even those who set about to destroy the idea or to show how weak and illogical it was. We believe that there is evidence in the documents which exist from the 1st century and which say that this happened. There is great evidence also in the witnesses who were there and who persisted long after the event in bearing unceasing testimony to the fact that they saw Jesus after he had risen. It wasn't an illusion, and it wasn't an hallucination. And we believe that there is tremendous evidence in the changes which occurred and which can't be explained in any other way except that this dramatic event did take place. I'm not going to go into the details of that this morning. There are many books you can read which will substantiate it for you.

But what I would like to face with you is this question: "What if it didn't happen?"

Now we aren't the first ones to face that question. In fact, the Apostle Paul, among others, faced that question in the 1st century. There were many then who said, "Well, we can't be sure. This is such a fantastic claim that you are making -- that one could actually rise from the dead, break the bonds of death by himself and come back again."

Paul took up that question in one of his great chapters. In First Corinthians 15, he says that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, then to all practical effect, Christianity is a waste of time, that your time here this morning, and mine as well, is just a big waste; that if Jesus did not rise from the dead, though Christianity says some very brave and noble things, and puts them in rather beautiful language at times, nevertheless, it is really all a pipe dream with no basis in fact, it is just the wishful thinking of people who are tired with all the grief and heartache of life and want something beautiful to cling to, but it really is not worth anybody's time; and that the New Testament is the account of a deluded dreamer who thought he had powers he didn't have, who thought he was somebody he really wasn't, and who kidded himself, and a group of other people, into thinking he was someone else.

If this is the case, then all wonderful writings which many people have appreciated in the New Testament must be thrown aside -- the Sermon on the Mount, for instance. After all, it says things which are contrary to the way we naturally think. It exalts and highly values principles which most people think are unworkable. It says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit -- i.e., the bankrupt people, the people who have come to the end of themselves, who have realized they don't have what it takes to handle life -- blessed are they." And you know that we don't usually think that way. The world is basically committed to the policy, "Blessed are the pushers, the aggressive people, the self-confident, the ones who know what they are doing." But Jesus says the opposite. And if he didn't rise from the dead, then that message isn't worth the paper it is written on, and we ought to forget it. And Paul's expression in First Corinthians 13, which everyone loves to quote -- "Now abide faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love" {cf, 1 Cor 13:13} -- that is merely sentimental nonsense. Love isn't strong at all. Might makes right.

If Jesus didn't rise from the dead we would really have to eliminate the New Testament entirely. You can't take just a part of it and say, "This I'll accept, but the rest I won't," because it all hangs on the fact that Jesus was who he said he was and could do what he said he did. And if he didn't rise from the dead, that is not true. And, of course, the Old Testament has to go, too, because its predictions all look forward to One who is coming, to Someone who at last is going to achieve what man has never been able to realize. All its rituals point to a greater sacrifice, all the deaths of animals, and all the blood are pointing to Someone who was going to come, and who would be the real sacrifice. And all its dreams and hopes and longings expressed in the beautiful poetic language of the prophet Isaiah and others, pointing to a golden age among men, are all reduced to dusty, archaic stories which really have no meaning, mere beautiful words, that's all -- God's words -- which don't mean anything.

And if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then, of course, we really don't have any hope beyond this life. We really don't. The grave is the end. This brief life is all that we have. There are a lot of people who believe that today. Let me put it in the eloquent words of Bertrand Russell, one of the spokesmen for those who do not believe in the resurrection of Jesus. This is what he says life is like:

The life of a man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness and pain, toward a goal which few can hope to reach and where none may tarry long. One by one as they march our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man's

life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

That note of despair is sounded increasingly today, as many are asking the question, "Is there anything beyond?" -- and they conclude that death is the end. Joan Baez sings,

"We are but orphans in the world of no tomorrow."

And if Jesus did not rise from the dead, we do not have any hope. In fact, Paul says so: "We are of all men most miserable," {1 Cor 15:19}. We don't have any hope beyond the grave; we are just kidding ourselves if we think there is anything else.

Furthermore, we don't have any release from guilt and fear. Forgiveness of sin is a meaningless expression. If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, then we are locked inescapably into our past, and we can't change it or do anything about it today. No power can deliver us from the fatal tendency within each of us to do what we don't want to do, and to fail again and again to achieve what we want to achieve. We all do that, don't we? And if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, there is no way we can change it. We are locked into our sinful humanity, and there is no way out. We are doomed endlessly to repeat again and again the sad story of history.

And then, of course, you can't believe that God is love. That phrase has no more meaning than the bumper stickers you see around lately which say, KSFO LOVES YOU, or the assurance we are given by a local savings and loan association: *We care about you*. What difference does it make? If Jesus did not rise from the dead, there is no reason to take those words seriously at all.

So you can't merely go on unaffected and unchanged. If the resurrection didn't happen, then this whole business of Christianity is a joke, a big fraud, and we ought to forget it and get on with trying to get to the top of the heap in the best way we can.

But, what if he did?

- If Jesus rose from the dead, as the Bible says, and there is one who has come back and told us what lies beyond,
- If Jesus did break the bonds of death and come out of the tomb on that first resurrection morning, and
- If all the simple story which is so artlessly told in the Scriptures is true,
- If it really happened, then what does it mean?

Well, the first and most obvious thing is that it means that Jesus is still alive. He is still around, still available -- this beautiful man

- who lived in such a way that he captivated the people of his day, and shook them to the core
 - by the way he lived and things he said and did,
 - by the compassion of his heart and the honesty of his life which would strip a religious hypocrite naked right before the eyes of a crowd,
- who could not abide falsehood and untruth but was always tender and loving and compassionate toward those bound up with their own guilt and problems, their own evil.

If Jesus rose from the dead, he is still around, still available. He still can meet us in the same way.

His promises, which he uttered, are valid promises:

- "Come unto me all who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest," {Matt 11:28 KJV}.
- "He who follows me shall not walk in darkness but shall have the light of life," {John 8:12b RSV}.
- "I am the door; if anyone enters by me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture," {John 10:9 RSV}.

- "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid," {John 14:27 RSV}.
- "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world," {John 16:33b}.

This means that freedom from guilt, and power to conquer our failures and our weaknesses are still available to men. And that has been the good news for twenty centuries -- that in coming to Jesus Christ, men and women find ability to rise above this locked-in evil within us. And though we don't do it perfectly, and at times fall back into evil -- for nobody yet has presented a perfect pattern in doing this except Jesus -- nevertheless, the healing begins to take place. Changes occur, and life is different.

Here on this platform at the Good Friday service a young woman stood and told us how, all her young life, she had been searching for a way to fulfill herself. "Find yourself!" That is the cry of today, isn't it? "Oh, if I could just find out who I am, and be myself!" She told us how she had tried to do that. She joined this cause and that cause, this radical movement and that one. Her search led her into all of them, ending up with Women's Lib. She thought each time that she had found the answer, thought it would release her. Then at last she found Christ. And she told us with a glowing face, with such obvious truthfulness, what this discovery had meant to her, how every aching void of her heart was filled. And though the problems often were there -- yes, plenty of them, more than ever -- nevertheless, the answers were available within: peace, joy, a sense of direction, of quiet fulfillment. You couldn't hear her tell of this without understanding that it was true. Here was one bearing witness to the resurrection of Jesus.

In the stirring words of Tom Skinner, the black evangelist, to twelve thousand young men and women at the 1970 Urbana Conference in Urbana, Illinois:

Proclaim liberty to the captives. Give sight to the blind. Set at liberty them that are bruised. Go out to all the world and tell men who are bound mentally, spiritually, and physically, "The Liberator has come!"

That is what the resurrection of Jesus means. It means that the grave is not the end of the road; death does not have the last word. As Paul put it, "To depart and to be with Christ is far better," {Phil 1:23b}. That isn't just a faint and glimmering hope for Christians. That isn't merely something nice we say when we get close to death, in order to steady us so that we'll die well. No, that is a robust, positive certainty in thousands and thousands of Christians' hearts as they come to the end of life. They look forward to it, they anticipate it with welcome joy.

In fact, I heard recently of a Christian man who was told by his doctor that he was about to die, and it made him so joyful that, by the doctor's own testimony, the joy of spirit that he felt kept him alive for two more weeks!

This is because Jesus rose from the dead, and his words have meaning and validity in our lives. And he has promised, "Because I live, you shall live also," {cf, John 14:19}. And we sing it,

Jesus lives, and so shall I.
Death! thy sting is gone forever.

That is why Christians have something to hope for, to hold onto, to be confident of, as we face the last issue of life.

Then, of course, if Jesus rose from the dead, it means that the value of your life and mine will be determined by our relationship to that resurrection. In the book of Acts we are told that the Apostle Paul came into the city of Athens, the great university center of his day, the city of Pericles, of Demosthenes, of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle -- the great minds of that day and this. And there, in this center of learning, in the midst of all the monuments to beauty and art and truth which still are found in that city, the apostle stood and said to them that all of this represented nothing more nor less than the strugglings of men to try to find truth in the midst of life, and yet their search was ineffectual, it hadn't brought them anywhere, it hadn't solved any ultimate problems. He said to them,

"The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead." {Acts 17:30-31 RSV}

This means that every life here this morning, every one here, ultimately will stand before the risen Lord Jesus. He is the Lord of the world. Jesus is Lord, whether men know it or not. We live in his universe, we must abide by his rules. We must live life on his terms. There is no way out of that. And ultimately our life will be judged, examined, on those terms. If you link your life with the world and its ways, live for its pleasures, and its praise, and its values, you will ultimately find yourself joined to what the cross of Christ brought to a jolting halt. And, as someone has said, "Hell is nothing less than truth known too late." John says, "If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him," {1 Jn 2:15b}.

But if we begin to live in the power of Jesus' resurrection, in the fact of it, which God has set as the basis of life, we will learn to live in the world, right in the midst of it, right up to the hilt -- not withdrawn, not isolated, not in a monastic Bible-City experience -- right in the midst of it, but on a different basis:

- Drawing upon his forgiveness every day to recover from our failure and to stand again accepted in his presence;
- Drawing upon his strength by which to meet the demands which life throws at us, so that we are never suddenly caught short without adequate resources with which to respond;
- Drawing upon his love, the grace of a risen Lord who knows us, understands us, and has made provision for our weakness and failure and who picks us up again and carries us through -- not away from the situation but right through the midst of it!

When we do this we discover that "the world passes away and the lusts thereof; but he who does the will of God abides forever," {cf, 1 Jn 2:17}.

So we would like to say to you as our visitors this morning, that there is no joy like a Christian's joy. It is so different! It can well up in the midst of tears.

- There is no peace like the peace of God, which defies circumstances and passes understanding, so that when you have no business being peaceful, you are.
- There is no love like the love of Christ, which forgives and heals and restores. Savonarola, of Florence, Italy, hundreds of years ago said, "They may kill me, but they can never, never, never tear the living Christ out of my heart!"

That is what we would like to say to you today. We don't live perfectly. The church is always a kind of clinic where people are being healed. We are in all stages of the process of healing. There is a deep and deadly sickness loose in humanity which tears people up, eats out their hearts, destroys them from the inside -- even though everything looks great on the outside. But that sickness is what Jesus came to heal. And here we are, being healed. But we are in all stages. Some are just barely beginning, and the evidence of disease is all over among us. So don't look for perfect people here. But we have found the One who has the answer, and he is working it out. It isn't an instantaneous process -- one touch and it's done. It is something which is happening day after day, week after week, hour by hour.

God has fulfilled his word; the promises are true. We offer them to you. All we can say to you is that we hope you find Jesus Christ our Lord. He himself says, "Behold, I stand at your door and knock; if anyone hear my voice and open the door, I will come into him, I will come into him -- and live with him, and he with me," {cf, Rev 3:20}. And we would just like to say, "That is true! Jesus lives, and so do we." And we thank him for it.

Now we are going to stand and sing that hymn in closing: "Jesus lives and so shall I, Death! thy sting is gone forever," and as we do, we invite you, if you have never done so before, to simply ask Jesus Christ to come into your life. Open your heart to him and respond to his invitation.

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which

you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast -- unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. {1 Cor 15:1-8 RSV}

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. {1 Cor 15:12-22 RSV}

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

"O death, where is thy victory?"

O death, where is thy sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain. {1 Cor 15:31-58 RSV}

Title: What Difference does it Make?
Series: Single Message: Easter
Scripture: 1 Cor 15
Message No: 1
Catalog No: 3030
Date: April 22, 1973

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