

Southport Presbyterian Church
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Your Life Counts
1 Corinthians 15:19-20; 58

Have you ever found yourself saying, “Why bother? I’m not going to make a difference anyway?” I can recall a time when I felt that way, when I literally said those things out loud as I was driving home from work. I felt like whatever effort I could muster up to try and bring about change in a large, ministry-related issue beyond our church was like a drop of water in the ocean. It would disappear instantly and the powerful forces arrayed against me would dwarf my puny efforts into meaningless insignificance. “Forget it,” I said to myself. “I give up.”

Is there help when we feel this way? Definitely, and it is found in a single word: *resurrection*.

In a passionate, heartfelt, profoundly insightful letter, Paul the apostle wrote to Christians in the Roman city of Corinth in the first century. He tried to persuade them to amend their lives and their life together. And he framed his letter with a reminder of the crucifixion of Jesus at the beginning and of the resurrection at the end. He begins his great chapter on the resurrection, which anchors the whole letter—he saved the best for last—with these words:

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain. For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and 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 brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit 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 toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.¹

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians of the centrality of the message of the death and resurrection of Jesus, dwelling especially upon his resurrection and its eyewitnesses.

Then he goes on:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection from the dead?²

Apparently some in Corinth, though they believed Jesus was raised, didn’t believe that those who followed him would also be raised. So Paul argues the point further:

If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been 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. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished.³

You can see the dilemma created by believing Jesus had been raised, but, perhaps because it seemed such an unsophisticated idea, denying that those who trust in Jesus will also be raised. The whole Christian faith tumbles like a house of cards. If the dead aren't raised, we make God out to be a liar and we fool ourselves into believing empty promises. "If for this life only we have hoped in Christ," sighs Paul, "we are of all people most to be pitied."⁴

Paul's astute assessment of a resurrectionless life is that it would be a pathetic existence, particularly for Christians. We'd end up a pitiable lot, mocking ourselves in pious self-deception. "But in fact," he continues,

Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power.⁵

Using an agricultural metaphor to drive home the logic of his argument, Paul explains why Jesus' resurrection necessarily also signals the resurrection of those who trust him. His rising from the dead is like the first fruits of the harvest on a farm. The first part of the harvest alerts the farmer that the rest will soon follow. In a similar way Christ's resurrection alerts us that the rest of the resurrection, which had until Paul's time been pictured as happening all at once, will occur sometime later.

In case such logic is not convincing enough, Paul offers two illustrations to show that the resurrection is absolute bedrock to our faith. I want to ponder his second illustration. If there is no resurrection, Paul asks, then

Why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? I die every day! If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'⁶

"If the resurrection is not real and true," Paul is saying, "then why bother? Why even try to live the Christian life, with its immense challenges? Why suffer for the gospel?" Yet the resurrection is true; it did and will happen. Therefore, we have every reason to live confidently.

All this is another way of saying that the gospel has the power to overcome our fears that we are inadequate to the task, that the opposition is just too strong and we may as well give up, or that our lives finally don't really count anyway, so there's no use in trying.

Albert Lutuli knew those fears. Born in 1898 in a Rhodesian mission station in South Africa, Lutuli grew up in a society that was becoming increasingly segregated. He became a Christian when he was still young and spent many years as a teacher. But in 1935 his tribe elected him Chief, a lifetime office,

and during the next sixteen years, he says, “I saw, almost as though for the first time, the naked poverty of my people, the daily hurt of human beings.”

“During those same 16 years,” write two biographers, “South Africa moved step by step from racial segregation to a full-blown national system of apartheid. Black voting rights were revoked in the Cape (1936), United Nations oversight was rejected (1947), the Afrikaner Nationalist party came to power determined to enforce apartheid (1948), mixed marriages were forbidden (1949), pass laws were intensified (1950), public protests against apartheid were forbidden (1950), U.N. criticism of apartheid was rejected (1950), and separate voting lists made it impossible for ‘non-whites’ to vote (1951).

“In 1952, the African National Congress (ANC)... joined... in a ‘Campaign for the Defiance of Unjust Laws.’ This [non-violent] passive resistance campaign consisted of meetings of up to 10,000 people. The resisters attempted to use white-only public facilities, stayed out past curfews declared for Africans, and publicly disobeyed pass laws. More than 8,000 were arrested—including Albert Lutuli. That year, Lutuli was elected President General of the ANC, an office he held until his death.”

The government “insisted that Lutuli either resign from the ANC or resign from his position as chief; they could not allow a chief to encourage the disobedience of any law. Lutuli chose the ANC.”⁷ In a speech describing his choice, here’s what Lutuli said:

Laws and conditions that tend to debase human personality..., be they brought about by the State or other individuals, must be relentlessly opposed in the spirit of defiance shown by St. Peter when he said to the rulers of his day: “Shall we obey God or man?” ... As for myself, with a full sense of responsibility and a clear conviction, I decided to remain in the struggle for extending democratic rights and responsibilities to all sections of the South African community... The wisdom or foolishness of this decision I place in the hands of the Almighty. What the future has in store for me I do not know. It might be ridicule, imprisonment, concentration camp, flogging, banishment and even death. I only pray to the Almighty to strengthen my resolve so that none of these grim possibilities may deter me from striving, for the sake of the good name of our beloved country, the Union of South Africa, to make it a true democracy and a true union in form and spirit of all the communities in the land. My only painful concern at times is that of the welfare of my family but I try even in this regard, in a spirit of trust and surrender to God's will as I see it, to say: “God will provide.” It is inevitable that in working for Freedom some individuals and some families must take the lead and suffer: The Road to Freedom is via the CROSS.⁸

Lutuli could live through times when he surely asked himself “Why bother?” because he knew that freedom stands on the other side of the cross. He trusted in resurrection as God’s great victory over all the forces of evil.

Paul did too. That is why he put himself in danger every hour. His was a life of loyalty to the gospel that brought imprisonments, countless floggings almost to the point of death, stoning by a mob, shipwreck, danger from God’s own people, danger from nonbelievers, dangers in the wilderness, at sea, and from false believers, hardship, hunger, nakedness, anxiety, and weakness (see **2 Corinthians 11:23-29**). He suffered all this, he says, because of the resurrection, and only on that basis. When he wanted to give up, he stayed in the game because of that sure and certain reality.

It’s interesting that the view of the resurrection most common among evangelicals in the U.S. today leads almost to the same outcome Paul saw in Corinth. In both cases, though for different reasons,

beliefs about the resurrection lead to a kind of other-worldliness rather than to a robust view of the life of discipleship here on earth.

The popular view of the gospel is a truncated one that inclines us to think more in terms of escape than of a long endurance of one obstacle and opposition after another. Many think the gospel is mainly about believing in Jesus so we'll go to heaven when we die. But as Bill Hybels asks, if that was the main point, "Why didn't God just FedEx us to heaven right after we came to believe in Jesus? What are the other 20 or 30 years of life on earth between now and the time we meet Jesus face to face all about if that's the only goal?"

In other words, our proclamation of the resurrection may have just the opposite effect from what Paul's proclamation of the resurrection was meant to have. Our understanding of the resurrection may cause us to devalue life on earth and to minimize the importance of our own contributions here and now. By contrast, Paul's understanding of the resurrection led him to value life on earth and to maximize the value of our own efforts.

But we face another challenge too. Our upbringing in this culture has inclined us at the gut level to decide on our course of action only after calculating what is most likely to bring us success. Think of the calls for a coach's resignation after the loss of a game or the "failure" to make it to the championships. We are programmed to decide what we will do on the basis of the likelihood of succeeding or winning or getting what we want.

It's natural and understandable to think that way. But if the resurrection of Jesus actually happened, then that way of thinking is entirely inappropriate for his followers.

Consider for a moment Paul's own career as we see it in Acts. He preached the truth of the gospel and its implications to his fellow countrymen. He was often resisted and his message rejected. Did he give up and walk away? The book of Acts shows him staying the course to the very last page of the book, where he sits in prison awaiting trial. Why? Because the odds were in his favor and he knew he would change peoples' minds? Hardly. Paul kept at it because God had sent him, which is how it always is with prophets. Even well meaning Christians tried to dissuade Paul and protect him from harm by talking him out of going to Jerusalem where he would suffer and perhaps die (see **Acts 21**).

I wonder if Paul ever recalled **Psalm 11** during a moment like this, when even other believers were telling him to get somewhere safe. "**In the Lord I take refuge,**" the psalmist tells those who are worried, or perhaps he is just addressing his own anxious soul. "**How can you say to me, 'Flee like a bird to the mountains; for look, the wicked bend the bow, they have fitted their arrow to the string, to shoot in the dark at the upright in heart. If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?'**"⁹

Like the psalmist, Paul was undeterred. We see in **1 Corinthians 15** the deep reason for his willingness to suffer so relentlessly and so often: *he knew the reality of resurrection.*

What happens when we hold firmly to the message of Jesus' resurrection? At least two things result. First, we see how the resurrection operated in relation to Jesus' own life and particularly his choices. And second, we see that we too will be raised and therefore know ourselves called to choose the way Jesus did.

Jesus could and did daily choose to trust God and walk in his ways, knowing it meant suffering, rejection, and ultimately death. He did so in full confidence that God would raise him, vindicating his life of suffering. He went the way of downward mobility, of insignificance, the way of the cross, as Hebrews tells us, “for the sake of the joy set before him,” resurrection joy.

In the same way and because of Jesus’ power at work in us now, we are called to walk that same road, daily taking up our cross and following him. Though worldly evaluations speak seductively in contradiction of this call, naming the way of the cross “foolishness” (see **1 Corinthians 1:18**), Paul reminds us of the divine assessment: the cross is God’s wisdom and power at work in the world. But that wisdom and power are only obvious in view of the resurrection, which is God’s stamp of approval on the life of his faithful ones.

So if the resurrection helps us when we’re tempted to quit and asking ourselves and maybe each other “why bother?” what way of life corresponds to the message of the resurrection? Simply this: faithfulness to living and proclaiming the gospel and its implications no matter how high the odds are stacked against us, no matter how insignificant our small role may seem.

May I offer a picture of faithfulness to keep in mind? It is Horton the elephant, who faces multiple hurdles and roadblocks, numerous oppositional figures and even imprisonment, but who stays faithful, as he routinely reminds himself, one hundred percent. Horton may not have had the resurrection to spur him on, but he lived as if he did.

A few years ago I ran across a book by N.T. Wright that brought all this home to me, and I share it in hopes that it will do so for you too. “Many in our society,” he writes, “stand and stare at the Christian message, and don’t know what to do with it. They remain imprisoned in the country of their own limited possibilities. But those who go in, and see, and believe, find, thrust into their hands, a passport which declares that all things are now possible. No country is barred to them; all roads are now open.

The passport allows you to start your journey. But the journey itself is often hard; the road is twisty and rough. We need a map to check that we really are going in the right direction. As such a map, I offer a little word of St Paul, right at the end of the chapter in which he discusses the meaning of Jesus’ resurrection (**1 Corinthians 15**). At the end of his long argument, Paul does not conclude by saying ‘so therefore we can be assured of life after death.’ He says, rather, **‘be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, since you know that, in the Lord, your labor is not in vain’.**
(1 Cor 15:58)

The resurrection spreads out before us *the map of God’s new world*. When Jesus of Nazareth came out of the tomb on Easter morning, in his transformed, renewed body, having gone through death itself and out the other side, he gave the world the first glimpse of the fact that God is in the business, not of abandoning this sad old world and taking us off to a disembodied heaven, but of redeeming, renewing, transforming this world, so that everything that has been good, lovely, just, holy, beautiful is enhanced, purified, ennobled, raised to new heights of glory. In that new world, as in Jesus’ restored physical body, even the scars and wounds become signs of glory. Easter offers us a map of that new world, a map for explorers, a map to encourage us to get out there and get on with the task.

The point is this. What was *begun* with the resurrection of Jesus will be *continued* until it is thoroughly finished; every act of faith and love, of justice and mercy, of beauty and truth in this

present world will be part of God's eventual new world. In the Lord, your labor is not in vain: what you do here on earth will stand, will last. Failure, cynicism, deconstruction and despair do not have the last word. They are the soldiers standing guard at the tomb, and when morning comes they are sound asleep. The passport of Jesus' bodily resurrection declares that you are free to travel; the map of God's new world declares that all your traveling in faith is worth while...

We in the modern West are tempted every day to leave the passport on the dressing-table, to suppose that if anything good can be done in the world we somehow have to do it by ourselves, by our own little schemes and hatched-up plots. Not so. We go to the task with the Easter passport in our hands, the document which says that God has opened up new possibilities in the world, bringing light out of darkness and life out of death. And we are always tempted to imagine that cynicism and despair will triumph after all, that the tyrants and the rich, the oppressors and the bullies, will win in the end. Not so. Every step away from the tomb to announce Jesus' lordship to the wider world is marking out territory on the map of God's new world. In the Lord, your labor is not in vain. When God's new world is finally revealed, what you have done to bring healing and hope, beauty and joy to your bit of the world will shine out as a glorious part of the rich tapestry of the new creation. And the wounds and scars which result from announcing Jesus' lordship in a world where other lords guard their territory with tanks, bombs and laws will be the sign that we have fought Jesus' battles with Jesus' weapons.¹⁰

I spoke a moment ago about Albert Lutuli in South Africa. Interestingly, at the beginning of the speech we heard earlier, Lutuli said he felt his first thirty years of work had been in vain. They had not led to the outcome he had hoped for, and so he considered them a loss. But even after he joined the ANC, Albert Lutuli never did live to see victory for his cause in South Africa. Might he have concluded that those last fifteen years therefore had been spent in vain along with the first thirty? Perhaps he would have. Of course our perspective forty years on helps us see otherwise, now that apartheid has been dismantled. But even if it hadn't been, even if that country were still caught in the evil web of officially sanctioned separation of black people from white people under the twisted assumption that God wants it that way, even then Albert Lutuli's faithfulness would have mattered immensely, every last ounce of it. We have only part of the story. We still await the rest of the harvest, the final fruits of the resurrection. Only then will not only Albert Lutuli's labor in the Lord, but the labor of us all, be seen for what it was and is: never in vain for a moment. Our labor in the Lord counts. Your life counts. My life counts. What we do in the Lord—no matter how obvious it seems that evil will prevail in this or that situation—*always* counts. It is *never* in vain.

So here's a caution for all of us: let's beware of living our lives, of living our life together, according to the wrong calculus. We are not called to measure the worth of our actions by the likelihood of our success now, whatever that success may look like. This is a great heresy that has embedded itself in much western Christianity. No, brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to be faithful to the one Lord Jesus Christ no matter how high the odds are stacked against us, because our calculus is not success but resurrection.

In an article called "Love Amidst the Brokenness," Timothy George, a senior editor at *Christianity Today*, writes about Augustine, a North African bishop in the early fifth century living during the time when the Roman Empire was crumbling. And he asks a profound question: "What can we learn from Augustine's understanding of history in light of the fall of Rome?" George answers the question for us this way: "Augustine teaches us that Christians are those who live in time but who belong to eternity." He explains what this means for us today:

There are two major (and regrettably common) mistakes Augustine wants us to avoid. One is the lure of utopianism—the mistake of thinking we can produce a society that will solve our problems and bring about the Kingdom of God on earth. This was the basic error of both Marxism and 19th-century liberalism.

The other error, equally disastrous, is cynicism. This creeps upon us as we see ever-present evil. We withdraw into our own self-contained circle of contentment, which can just as well be a pious holy huddle as a secular skeptics club.

C.S. Lewis confronted the temptation to give in to lethargy and cynicism when he preached at the University Church of St. Mary the Virgin in Oxford on October 22, 1939. Less than two months earlier, Hitler had invaded Poland. Britain was about to face the horrible Nazi onslaught. This is what Lewis told the assembled students:

“It may seem odd for us to carry on classes, to go about our academic routine in the midst of a great war. What is the use of beginning when there is so little chance of finishing? How can we study Latin, geography, algebra in a time like this? Aren’t we just fiddling while Rome burns?

“This impending war has taught us some important things. Life is short. The world is fragile. All of us are vulnerable, but we are here because this is our calling. Our lives are rooted not only in time, but also in eternity, and the life of learning, humbly offered to God, is its own reward. It is one of the appointed approaches to the divine reality and the divine beauty, which we shall hereafter enjoy in heaven and which we are called to display even now amidst the brokenness all around us.”

This is our calling, too, amidst the brokenness... all around us. We are to be faithful to God’s calling, to bear witness to the beauty, the light, and the divine reality that we shall forever enjoy in heaven. We are to do this in a culture that seems, at times, like Augustine’s: a crumbling world beset by dangers we cannot predict.

The Christian attitude toward history is neither arrogant self-reliance (“We can make it on our own”) nor indifference (“It doesn’t matter what we do anyway”), but hope—the hope that radiates from a messy manger, a ruddy tree, and an empty tomb.¹¹

We cling to this hope, knowing, believing against all odds, that our labor in the Lord is not in vain.

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:1-11.

² 1 Corinthians 15:12.

³ 1 Corinthians 15:13-18.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:19.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:20-24.

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:30-31a; 32.

⁷ Gerald L. Pillay and Carolyn Nystrom, “God’s Image in Color,” *Christian History and Biography*, Issue 94 (Spring 2007): 29-30.

⁸ Albert Lutuli, “The Road to Freedom is Via the Cross,” (<http://www.anc.org.za/ancdocs/history/lutuli/lutuli1.html>): accessed 2/7/2009).

⁹ Psalm 11:1-3.

¹⁰ Tom Wright, *The Way of the Lord: Christian Pilgrimage Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 110-18.

¹¹ Timothy George, “Love Amidst the Brokenness,” *Christian History and Biography*, Issue 94 (Spring 2007): 9-10.