

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church**  
**Davidson, North Carolina**  
**Lib McGregor Simmons, Pastor**  
**“The People’s Choice: What is the point of the resurrection, anyway?”**  
**I Corinthians 15: 1-20**  
**June 18, 2017**

Paul was a founding pastor of First Church, Corinth, and he loved the members of his congregation deeply. The news that had come to him about the itchiness that had taken hold in that congregation was breaking his heart. So Paul wrote them a letter from his pastor’s heart of love, addressing very specifically the disagreements that had begun as pesky, annoying splinters and were now morphing into boulder-size warring factions threatening the very existence of the church.

Paul had spent most of the first 14 chapters of this letter addressing specific disagreements within the church; these disagreements were largely about behaviors. Here, in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, Paul hints that all those disagreements are actually surface symptoms of a deeper spiritual anxiety about what Jesus’s resurrection means in terms of their own experience of life and death.

-----

Today we begin our summer worship series “The People’s Choice.” For 9 weeks, the pastors are ditching the lectionary in order to preach on some of the topics that you have suggested. (You gave us more topics than we can address in just 9 weeks. We are hanging on to the list, though, and who knows, some of the topics just may show up after the heat of summer has passed.)

We begin with this, stated this way:

“My suggestion for a sermon topic is one about which I have asked a number of ministers but have never gotten a satisfactory answer: what is the point of Jesus’ s resurrection, anyway? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:14 that if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is in vain.

But Christ came into the world in a way which demonstrated the overturning of the accepted world order, he taught us, and he sacrificed his life that we would be reconciled to God. Did it really matter if, after the Crucifixion, he rose again? I get that the disciples needed a demonstration of God’s power so that they wouldn’t lose faith (sometimes they just didn’t quite get it), but what, if any is the overwhelming and necessary reason for the resurrection? Why does Paul say it is essential?”

Okay...

Shall we say that you haven’t given your pastors an easy topic with which to start the series?

And let me say at the outset that if no satisfactory answers have come from a raft of ministers before me, then I’m realistic enough to offer a disclaimer about this preacher’s ability to come up with a truly satisfying answer!

I’ll dive in by sharing an experience that one of my preacher friends had. He was in the car and put the radio on scan when it happened to pause on a Christian radio talk show. The talk show host was taking calls from the listeners and a woman called in. This woman had problems...a lot of problems. As she unfolded her litany of troubles and woes, the radio host interrupted her. “I want to ask you something. Are you a believer?”

"I don't know."

"You're either a believer or you're not."

"I'd like to be, but I guess at this point in my life, I'm more agnostic."

The talk show host jumped on her response immediately. "I have a book that I want to send to you. In this book I offer proofs that Jesus was who he said that he was and that he was raised from the dead. Now, if I send you this book and you read it, will you become a believer?"

"I don't know. I've had a lot of trouble from preachers."

"We're not talking about preachers. We're talking about proof. I offer proof that Jesus was raised from the dead."

The woman replied, a hint of frustration in her voice, "I don't think you're listening to me. I'm having trouble trusting anything in my life right now."

To which the talk show host replied, "We aren't talking about trust. We're talking about truth, the unassailable truth that Jesus was raised from the dead. Now if I send my book to you, will you become a believer?"

To which she replied, according to my friend, "Yeah, I guess so."

In relating the conversation, my friend said, "I'm a little sorry that the woman threw in the towel so quickly." (1)

I'm glad...grateful...that the DCPC questioner has not thrown in the towel on the question, What is the point of the resurrection?

Last week, Chris Currie in an excellent sermon commented that it is hard to imagine a church that would advertise itself, Come worship with us this week, where we see Jesus and we worship him, but some doubt.

However, I actually know of a church that advertises itself in a manner that is something along those lines. The opening line of its mission statement is: We are a community where honest questions are valued, and faith is considered a process, not an arrival."

The line isn't in our DCPC vision statement, but I trust that we too are a community where honest questions are valued and faith is considered a process...a process of not giving up on asking questions, asking them over and over again. I trust that we live this process here at DCPC...it is one of scads of reasons that I am grateful to be a pastor here.

And when it comes to the resurrection...there will always be questions. That talk show host didn't have any irrefutable proof of the resurrection. There isn't any logical, scientific proof of the resurrection. There were no security cameras recording the events at the tomb.

To be sure, in the latter part of the passage that I read from I Corinthians, Paul sounds a bit like the radio talk show host. Paul's witness to the resurrection is garbed in language that brings to mind a syllabus distributed to a Philosophy 101 class.

But you know, we Presbyterians believe in reading Scripture in light of Scripture; we understand that one of the breathtaking things about the Bible is that it doesn't speak in a single voice about faith. And in the case of the resurrection, it is important to note that the gospel writers to a person are

modest in describing the resurrection of Jesus. Not a single one of them offer an eyewitness account of the actual event of resurrection.

What the gospel writers do share with one another and with Paul is that they offer stories of encounters with the risen Christ, stories that had been passed on to the gospel writers themselves by people for whom the resurrection experience had been transforming for their lives. And their lives were transformed by virtue of those stories so that they felt compelled to pass them down to the next generation who passed them down to the next generation...and so forth, until the stories of resurrection lodge in our own lives so that we are alert to signs of resurrection in our own present experiences.

For the gospel writers and, yes, even for Paul, who wrote “for I handed on to you as of first importance what in turn had received...,” resurrection is a process, not an arrival at an irrefutable truth.

If you listen closely, you can hear anguish in Paul’s appeal to the Corinthian congregation. Remember, they are at each other’s throats over petty stuff like whether it was okay to eat meat that had been sacrificed to idols. He is saying, would I be preaching all this stuff and putting myself out for you if there were no resurrection, no truth in this story that life and love win and death and division do not? If I were doing this, my preaching would be in vain.

And further, Paul is saying, would you be putting yourself out for one another if you yourselves had not glimpsed the power of resurrection in your own lives and in the life of your congregation?

In these words, Paul is reminding the Corinthians...and us...that what is irrefutable to him is that there is a risen Christ who comes to us every day to give us life and hope in the midst of a death-dealing world and to enable us to rise above our petty differences.

What is the point of the resurrection, anyway?

I don’t know if my answer is any more convincing than any of the other ministers to whom this DCPC member posed the question.

But for me, the point of the resurrection is...

Two teams – one Republican and one Democrat – trotting out onto the baseball field at Nationals Park, with players kneeling briefly in prayer near second base, their fans in the stands intermingling red and blue, united in a sense that the game must go on in Washington—just not quite as stridently as it has before. (2)

The point of the resurrection is...

Ten days after a bombing at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, England, which left 22 people dead and more than 100 wounded, Marcus Mumford of Mumford and Sons starting the show “One Love Manchester” with a moment of silence and upon telling those gathered not to be afraid, “there was a roar from the crowd that just gave you chills.” And that spirit lasted beyond the concert’s end. As fans streamed toward the exits, they continued to sing, “Manchester, we’re strong/we’re still singing our song.” (3)

The point of the resurrection is...

As I grieve the death last week of one of the shining stars in my personal sky – Joe Owen who died last week at the age of 94, a pastor who served five churches as a pastor and was fearless in asking questions and expressing his doubts about resurrection and was never satisfied to live life on the surface and was ever encouraging and kind to those of us who had the privilege of being his pastor in his

retirement years, the point of the resurrection is that knowing Joe in this life, I am led to trust that God has more in store for him beyond his life on earth, beyond his death.

The point of Jesus's resurrection is that while death and division in all their many forms continue to rear an ugly head time and again, it does not and will not have the last word, and there is resurrection light all around us, if we open our eyes to see it.

1. Thomas G. Long, "So, What About the Resurrection?" [www.day1.org](http://www.day1.org), February 15, 2004.
2. Matt Flegenheimer, "Washington's Rebuttal to Violence: 'Play Ball!,'" *The New York Times*, June 16, 2017.
3. Joe Coscarelli, "How the Manchester Benefit Came Together So Quickly," *The New York Times*, June 6, 2017.

