

Easter Sunday

1 Corinthians 15 is often called the resurrection chapter. In it Paul writes:

“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. But each in his own order: Christ, the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:19-23).

This is what it is all about. This is why this is The Big Day in the Christian year.

In order to spell that out, consider the generations in your family. Each one of you has a father and a mother. Each of your parents has a father and a mother. Those are your grandparents, four of them. And each of your grandparents has parents. That’s eight of them. Then, of course, they, too, have parents and that’s sixteen of them.

Can you tell me about your great, great grandparents? Who were they? What did they do? When did they live? Where are they buried? And you will say to me: Who cares? What difference does it make now? It may be interesting and even useful to study one’s genealogy, but one still lives in a different time with a different situation.

Let’s flip it over: You may or may not have children and your children may have children, your grandchildren, and then there are the great grandchildren and the great, great grandchildren and they will look back and say about you: Who were you? What difference does it make? After all, they will say: “I’m living today.” Who they were, and what they did, and where they are buried, what difference does it make? What matters now is manage life and problems today.

What is really real and decisive? Often times today, on TV or in newspapers, when secular people talk about us Christians, they imply that we live by myths or illusions. To them we may imagine God exists, but they don’t take Christian truth claims seriously.

We, however, are very concerned with what’s really real. As we come to Easter today, we are really asking ourselves: What is really real? What is final? The Christian witness, as confessed in the Nicene Creed, is: God came, died, and rose again to change everything for you and me. That’s what the Nicene Creed says.

Over against that is the common understanding that Christians are making stuff up and not seeing the world the way it really is. In the Large Catechism Luther writes that the First Commandment is really about the question: Who is God? He says: “That to which your heart clings and entrusts itself is really your god.”

When you think about it, it’s relatively easy to sort that out. Here are six examples:

First, Christians say it's the cross and resurrection, but that really has something that is reasonable and convincing to me. Prove it to me. What Luther is saying is that if this is your view, then your god is what is reasonable to you, and what you're convinced of.

Second, Christians say it's the cross and resurrection, but everybody says "we know," and then in that case, your god is what everybody says.

Third, Christians say it's the cross and resurrection, but well, everybody says it's about tolerance, and not being prejudiced, and about a certain understanding about religions, and then in that case, your god is tolerance and a certain view of religions.

Fourth, Christians say it's about the cross and resurrection, but they don't act any better than anybody else, in which case, of course, your god is good works.

Fifth, Christians say it's the cross and resurrection, but things aren't going very well in the world. Look at all the evil and problems, in which case your god is a particular view of evil.

Sixth, Christians say it's the cross and resurrection but they die, too. And so what does that do?

That's what we have in front of us as we celebrate Easter. What is this really about? Its about: Who is God? It's really about the Big Death and the Little Death. The Big Death is described by Paul in Romans 14:9: "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

And then in John 19:30, it says: On the cross, "it is finished." The last judgment is all taken care of. That's the Big Death.

Of course, there's the Little Death, which we see in John 11:25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he shall die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

What we're celebrating on Easter is not some little incident that happened in 30 A.D. in the city of Jerusalem. Rather, this is that which changes everything, and in this resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15:26, it says: "The last enemy to be destroyed is death." This is that which changes everything. It's the biggest and most important event in all of whatever has happened. It is even bigger than when he created the world out of nothing at the beginning. Here death is defeated. And it's not then something simply natural. Very specifically here and throughout the New Testament, it says: Death is the enemy, and it is conquered. Paul goes on in this resurrection chapter to say (paraphrase): "Yes there are those who say: Eat and drink for tomorrow we die." He's quoting from 800 years earlier in Isaiah 22:13-14 where it says already: "Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die." And it says in the next verse: "This sin will not be forgiven you."

What we are celebrating on Easter is this great reality. It's over against another reality.

There are two religions, two realities. The one which says: On the cross and in the resurrection, everything changed. That's what's real, and that's who God is. The other says: Well, if that is what floats your boat, if that suits you, fine, but, of course, we know that's not real.

In 1 Corinthians 15:19-23, Paul puts it in a striking way: Either that's not the way it is, or it is. Paul writes: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. And further: "We of all men the most to be pitied." It's like what Shakespeare wrote in MacBeth: "It's a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Shakespeare even adds: "Told by an idiot."

Either that, or that as Paul goes on to say: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep, [and] then at his coming, those who belong to Christ."

That's the Christian witness. You can't have both. We sort of say: "Well, that may be, but you have to watch out for this or for that." No, these are mutually exclusive, as Paul very specifically spells it out.

And if it's true, and we as Christians stake everything on this, if it's true, and because it's true, it changes everything. It doesn't just change a little something. It's not a little perk, a little plus. It changes all of life. It changes what we're doing because after all, death is not the end, and we have life, fuller life, more life, in him forever.

You ask yourselves: "Where and how does this work?" In hearing of the Word and in the celebrating of the sacraments, he comes to us now and gives us life. It isn't because we're good. It isn't because we think right. Rather, it's because he does it, and the perfect illustration of what it's about and how it works is infant Baptism. In Baptism that little one doesn't decide, doesn't feel, doesn't think. It's simply God's doing, outside of us, in spite of us. Thank God! Because then it doesn't depend on us.

Then we ask ourselves: What about now? What about today? Paul spells this out in Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?"

That's really what it's about. He who changed everything in the death and resurrection of his Son is the one who takes care of those in him now and forever. That's what's at stake, and that's what we confess. As Paul writes in Romans 14:9: "For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living."

Amen.