

Our lesson this morning is all about the resurrection of Christ, which got me thinking about Easter, which got me thinking about holidays in general. Having one of those enquiring minds that wants to know, I googled “favorite holidays in America” and the results were about what I’d expect, I guess. On most lists, Christmas and Thanksgiving are either number 1 or 2. Fourth of July and New Year’s follow, and then Easter comes in somewhere between numbers 5 and 7, depending on the source. Does this jive with your personal favorites? I love Christmas, so I’d have to go with the majority on that one. I know many like Thanksgiving, because of the emphasis on family and feasting. New Year’s Eve and Day celebrate endings and beginnings, sometimes fairly boisterously. The Fourth of July includes national pride, fireworks, and meat on the grill. You can see why any of these could be someone’s favorites. But, I have a friend who would put Easter at the very the top of the list, in fact, she recently told me that she likes *everything* about Easter, from the joyful music and Easter lilies in church, to the themes of hope and resurrection, to the ham dinner with scalloped potatoes, to the jelly beans in Easter baskets. I guess we’d all have our favorite. But in light of today’s lesson, which holiday do you think *St. Paul* would rate most highly? I’d say there’s no doubt that Easter would top his list, and in his time, that predates the joyful music, the Easter lilies, the ham dinner and the jelly beans. But as our lesson makes quite clear, Paul’s faith and theology are all about resurrection. I’d say that Good Friday would come in second for Paul, because he has an awful lot to say about the significance of the cross and Christ’s crucifixion too. But, he definitely believes that Good Friday is not the end of the story, and that in and of itself, Good Friday doesn’t get the job done. *Easter* puts the final nail in death and sin’s coffin. In fact, in today’s lesson, Paul makes the claim that the resurrection of Christ is the absolutely fundamental center of the Christian faith, without which, Christianity is meaningless.

This is a provocative claim on Paul’s part. Which is understandable, given the leap of faith it requires. But consider this: All four of the Gospels, our earliest written sources to the life of Christ, insist upon the

literal death and resurrection of our Lord. They do not precisely agree in all of the details surrounding these events—what Jesus said from the cross, for example, varies in each Gospel, or how many angels there were at the tomb, and so on. But, they do all insist that Jesus was truly dead, not just shamming or in a drug-induced coma. And they insist that he truly rose; the tomb on Easter was literally empty, because he had physically been raised from the dead. It's a crazy, radical claim, and all of them make it. So do the first witnesses to the resurrection and the oral traditions about the resurrection. And so does Paul, who met the risen Lord on the Road to Damascus in a life-changing conversion experience. Nevertheless, the audaciousness of this claim was a cause for offense and rejection. Paul is making this argument we read this morning to the church in Corinth because some or many therein were saying that there was no resurrection. They just didn't believe it! He begins, "How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation and your faith have been in vain." It's not difficult to understand why the Corinthians were struggling with this concept; none of them had been first hand witnesses to the risen Lord. They weren't Jews, they didn't live in Palestine; they lived in Corinth and were part of a grand and sweeping Greco-Roman culture; from their perspective, why on earth would God raise this lowly Jewish peasant from the dead, rather than, say, a Roman emperor? It just didn't compute to them. And since apart from Jesus, whenever someone is truly dead, they stay dead, it may not compute for us either. We may also struggle with our understanding or belief in the resurrection, but Paul maintains that the struggle is necessary. Because without the resurrection of Christ, he declares that the Christian faith loses its unique and hope-giving authenticity. Paul's thinking runs this way: if Christ isn't raised, then God hasn't conquered death, sin, and the devil. If Christ isn't raised, then neither shall we be. If Christ isn't raised, our faith is in a teacher and a prophet, but *not* in God incarnate in Christ who defeats sin, death, and the devil. Which makes the Christian faith just like many other faiths that center around a charismatic teacher or prophet but go no further than that. If Christ isn't raised, Paul contends, instead of being fools for Christ, we're just plain fools. And of all people, we are most to be pitied for our folly.

Paul obviously thought deeply about Christ's death and resurrection, probably more so than most of us have done. In fact, we might think that it's all an issue of theology that doesn't really impact our lives and faith, but that's not so. Let's consider how Paul's resurrection emphasis might play out in real life and actually matter. We were privileged to witness three Holy Baptisms in the month of April. Each of those began with the words, "In baptism our gracious heavenly Father frees us from sin and death by joining us to the death and resurrection of our lord Jesus Christ." The sacrament of baptism rests on the theology that Christ's victory over sin and death becomes our victory over sin and death through the amazing grace of God. But if Christ wasn't actually crucified and raised, then what's the meaning of the Sacrament? Why bother? On June 30, 3 of our young people will affirm their faith in the rite of Confirmation. Part of that rite includes affirming the Apostle's Creed, which includes the words: I believe in Jesus Christ, Who suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried, on the third day he rose again." In fact, we all affirm our faith in those words quite frequently when we recite the Creed. Are we just kidding? Are we asking our confirmands to profess something we neither believe ourselves nor expect them to actually believe? Again, if so, why even bother? On June 8, the memorial service for DeWayne Rubedor will be held here. More recent members may not know DeWayne, but he was a much loved and long time church member who moved away to be closer to his family in recent years. For many of us, our grief is real. He will be buried at the Oneota Cemetery after the service here, and I will say the words, "In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to almighty God our brother, DeWayne." If Christ wasn't crucified and raised, then what meaning could those words have? Are we speaking the truth as we believe it? Yes, we are, if Christ is risen. If Christ is not risen, then it's a little sketchy, isn't it? My point is that how we think about baptism, confirmation, our living and our dying is impacted by our belief about resurrection. Much though we like to deny it, death is somewhere we all go, not only personally, but with those we love who precede us in death. We face mortality all the time, and the older we get, the more often we face it. That's *why* resurrection matters; it's not just a theological nuance, it shapes how we understand how and where our journey ends----

only in the grave? Or in resurrected eternity? Whatever that may mean and however it may look? Beyond that, our belief about Christ's resurrection matters throughout life from our baptism through our confirmation and all that follows. Because if Christ is raised; if God has defeated death, sin and the devil; then we don't have to be afraid of the journey or the journey's end anymore. We might even say with St. Paul, as he does in Romans 8, "If Christ is for me, who is against me? If God is on my side, what does it matter who or what else comes up against me?" An attitude which fosters hope and empowerment, rather than despair or paralysis. The way we view resurrection most certainly impacts how we see the end of our journey, and not only the end, but the journey itself; because knowing the end of the story can impact how we live out the story. As we think about living out our faith and our story, there is one verse within our text today that, at least for me, is absolutely drenched in grace and hopefulness, and it is verse 10: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and God's grace towards me has not been in vain." Let's think about why St. Paul would write these words. Remember that prior to his conversion experience on the road to Damascus, Paul was a zealous persecutor of early Christians and the fledgling church. He was very likely party to some fairly nasty acts that resulted in the imprisonment, beating or even death of followers of Jesus. He has much of which to be ashamed, good reason to feel unworthy to be the recipient of a personal visionary encounter with the Risen Christ. His conversion to faith, therefore, was a dramatic before and after kind of experience; he is truly a changed man, "a new creation", as he writes in his 2nd letter to this same congregation in Corinth. Paul's words should not be heard as an excuse for poor behavior or as an exercise in fatalism, as in "I am what I am, nothing to be done about it. They are rather the celebration of being a new creation, of putting on that resurrection of Christ, in order to recognize how completely God loves us and accepts us, brokenness and all, and how thoroughly God steeped us in grace, so that our faith and actions are not futile, not in vain, but become life-giving for others. As Easter people, we can claim that new creation aspect of ourselves, we can know God's grace is active in our lives and making our actions purposeful and life-giving. As Easter people, we can see

how God's resurrection of Christ changes everything, not only the end of our stories, but how we live our stories now.

If we are, in fact, like Paul, Easter people, then let's think about all of the "little Easters" we experience all the time; let's think of all the in-breakings of resurrection that are all around us. These are those hopeful happenings that give us pause and make us question the cynicism and fatalism of our culture at large. Simply hearing Paul's strong and bracing words this morning during worship become a little Easter for me, a trumpet blast that makes me sit up and take notice and rethink my perspective. And the music we hear every Sunday during worship here makes my heart sing, and that singing lives on within as I leave here and enter the rest of the week. I see little Easters in the strength and lovingness of our community of faith as we pull together in joy or in sorrow; I believe that witnessing that could possibly make a believer out of the most skeptical atheist. What about the little Easters of the warblers and hummingbirds, which are showing up on feeders and in branches? Furthermore, those branches are bearing early buds of leaves and blossoms which are a sermon in hope in themselves. I just had a visit with our 100 year old matriarch last week, sharing in conversation and Holy Communion, and my heart was warmed and gladdened by her lively spirit. Little Easters. Little in-breakings of resurrection. I do experience them. How about you? I'm betting that you most certainly do, and that this is one of the reasons you are a part of a worshipping Christian community, claiming and celebrating Christ's resurrection, even if we sometimes struggle with it. How else do we interpret these in-breakings of resurrection and hope apart from the power of the rising of Christ from the dead? How else do we explain these little Easters apart from the one glorious Easter? Maybe St. Paul is right in having Easter as his favorite and most significant of holidays! The whole point of the Easter resurrection is that *there is hope*. Death does not have the last word. God defeats death, sin, and the devil. And if that's true, what else is there, ultimately, to fear? Christ *is* risen, and our faith is not in vain. Amen.