

Is Easter Good News? It Depends on Who's Asking.

I have a question for you this morning which at first may sound like a silly question. The question is this: "Is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead really good news? Our initial response to such a question is "YES!!!" This is Easter and this is what Easter is all about. Of course the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is good news. It is the best news possible. It means that our sins are forgiven, death has been conquered, and the Devil has been shown Who's Boss. It means that whosoever believes in Jesus Christ will not perish but has everlasting life. It means that our separation from loved ones when they die or when we die is only temporary. It means that at the end of the game and at the end of history we win. Easter is the best news possible! How could anyone question that Easter is good news?

But, here's the deal: One day last week I was reading and thinking about some verses from I Corinthians 15, and I found some things that concerned me. I Corinthians 15:1-8 say, "Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born."

It seems to me that the correct answer to the question as to whether or not the resurrection of Jesus Christ is good news is "it depends." There is a very big little word in I Corinthians 15:2. Did you hear it? Do you see it? The word is "if." On the one hand, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is good news if one believes the gospel and if one holds firmly to the truth of that message. On the other hand if one hears and initially responds but chooses not to hold fast to the message or to continue on the Christian journey, that person—says Paul—has "believed in vain." Eugene Peterson, being the good Presbyterian that he is puts it this way in the Message: "(I'm assuming, now, that your belief was the real thing and not a passing fancy, that you're in this for good and holding fast.)" Which is to say, if your belief was only a passing fancy and that you are not in this for good and that you are not holding fast to the faith, it will not do you any good; that is, such a person has believed in vain. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is not good news for those who have rejected Him. It is not good news for anyone who has not taken the message to heart and allowed it to take root and to bring about real change in that person's life. The open grave and the risen Christ stand in judgment of those who ignore them or brush them off as being of little or no consequence to life. **Good news is only good news for those who believe it.**

2

Another thing in I Corinthians 15 that caught my interest and raised concern is found in verses 20-22: Here Paul say, "But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive." There are two things we need to notice about these verses, especially verses 21-22. First of all, Paul is setting up a parallelism in which two things work the same way. Notice what Paul says. He says "in Adam all die." Then he says, "so in Christ all will be made alive." It's a parallelism; the second thing works like the first.

The other thing I noticed in these verses was the word "all." Here is another example of a wee little word with a huge meaning. All doesn't mean some. All means all. As in Adam all die so in Christ will all be made alive. And again, someone may ask: "Well isn't this good news?" "This is surely good news." Well, it depends.

I think there are some people who look to death and not to Christ to be their savior. They think that death will be the solution to all their problems and the end of all their responsibilities. They are not afraid of being held accountable for their sins because they think that when they're dead they're dead and that they will always be dead. But the Bible says that when you are dead you are not dead. "As in Adam all die so in Christ will all be made alive." There is life after death both for the godly and for the ungodly. Life after death for the godly is great thus Easter for the godly is good news. Life after death for the ungodly . . . not so great and thus Easter is bad news.

Shakespeare stated the problem from the perspective of an agnostic Hamlet. Hamlet posed the question:

To be, or not to be, that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die, to sleep,
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep;
To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub:
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause . . .
. . . the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will,

3

And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all . . .

But there was no uncertainty about this in the teaching and preaching of Jesus. One of the clearest examples comes from the 25th chapter of Matthew, where Jesus envisions the day of His return. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus says:

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me."

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

The King will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

"Then he will say to those on his left, "Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?"

He will reply, "I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life.

For those of you who were present to hear or happened to read the sermon from last Sunday, you may wonder what I'm doing with this message this morning. I went to some lengths last Sunday to show the contrast between the terror of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai where they received the Ten Commandments, and the gentleness of Jesus riding into Jerusalem riding on a donkey. I made the statement that fear is a poor motivator when it comes to producing long-term obedience to God. This sermon today is not a flip flop. I stand by last week's assessment. Fear will not help keep us on track over the long journey in our walk with God.

But that is not to say that fear has no place. As a short term motivator fear can be very effective, and there are times when a good dose of fear is exactly what we need. For example, if anyone thinks that death is a friend that will usher one into the bliss of everlasting forgetfulness or be an automatic ticket into heaven, it would be good for that person to hear the warnings I have brought forth this morning and be afraid. The Bible says several times that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. John Newton, in his hymn Amazing Grace, says "'twas grace that taught my heart to fear And grace my fears relieved."

By all means, if anyone does not know Jesus Christ as personal Savior, that person should fear the grave and fear the hell that lies beyond it. It is because so many people today have no fear of hell that they create such hellish lives for themselves and others in the here and now and have no real hope for life hereafter. Fear is good when that fear helps us understand our need for salvation.

If you are here today and you are not afraid of death because you know that Christ died for your sins and was raised to put you right with God, if you are not afraid because the Holy Spirit lives in you and testifies that you are a child of God, then Alleluia! Continue to live in the assurance of your forgiveness and in the joy of your salvation.

But if you are here today and you are not afraid of death because Satan has deluded you into believing that death will automatically free you from all pain, accountability and judgment, then you had better change your mind before it's too late. A good dose of fear is just what you need. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and preached the resurrection of Jesus Christ; He also made it clear that those who had rejected Christ were responsible for His crucifixion. Do you know how the people who heard that message responded? They were deeply troubled and terrified, and they asked out loud: "What must we do to be saved?" Peter's answer was simple: Acts 2:38-42 say:

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will

call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

In a moment we are going to sing "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine," and the question I have for you on this Easter Sunday morning is this: can you sing those words with confidence? If so, Easter for you is good news—the best news ever. If you cannot sing "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine, with confidence, and you have no desire to do so, I pity and pray for your soul.

But, if you cannot yet sing "Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine" with confidence but you would like to, then today is the day of opportunity. If you don't know what to do, look at Peter's prescription. He says "Repent." That means turn your back to the devil and your face toward God. Living your life outside of God's way is over for you; from now on you are going to live for Him day by day. If that's what you want, then take step two and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Repent and be baptized and then receive the gift and empowerment of the Holy Spirit to live a new life.

We are going to sing Blessed Assurance. If you already have that assurance then belt it out from the depth of your soul and celebrate for all you're worth. If you don't yet have that assurance pray for it. Turn your face to God and tell Him that from now on you want to live for Him. Then talk to me about baptism. You can pray at your pew or you can come to the altar rail, whatever feels right, but by all means pray. God will receive you. He will forgive you and cleanse you. God will give you a brand new beginning for your life.

The Fourth Street Church of God

2001 Fourth Street
Altoona, PA 16601
942-1007/946-4110

Sermon for April 24, 2011

Is Easter Good News?

It Depends Who's Asking.

I Corinthians 15:1-8; 20-22

Jon R. Neely, Pastor