

1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Easter Sunday
Sermon Series: What Is Truth?
He Was Raised on the Third Day

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
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Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

Let's pray. Lord, sanctify us with the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

On Friday, we worshipped God as we remembered the day that Jesus gave His life for us on the cross. Around six o'clock that morning Jesus was sitting in the Roman headquarters in Jerusalem being questioned by the governor, Pontius Pilate. As that questioning went on, Pilate asked Jesus whether or not He was the king of the Jews. **"You are right in saying I am a king,"** Jesus replied, **"In fact, for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone on the side of truth listens to me."** Pilate simply scoffed, **"What is truth,"** and then turned and walked away (Jn 18:33-38).

What is truth? It sounds like a pretty simple question, doesn't it? But if you blocked off the time to read through a couple of college level philosophy textbooks you'd find the answer isn't as simple as you might think. There are dozens of different theories out there about what truth really is. One of those, the theory of relativism states that there is no such thing as truth, or at least not universal or absolute truth. It proposes that perceptions of truth and morality are only valid to the person who holds them.

It's a tempting theory because it means that whatever you decide is best for you *is* what is best for you. While other people may have a difference of opinion, their truth is only relative to them, so they have no jurisdiction, so to speak, to say what's true for you. Relativism is a very self-serving line of reasoning, and because of that it's rather appealing. If you look around the world, you can see that theories like that have a pretty strong hold today.

On the opposite side of the spectrum from relativism, is the proposal that there is absolute truth—there is an absolute moral standard. As Jesus stood trial before Pilate, He told Him that

He believed in absolute truth, that the reason He came into this world was to testify to that truth. And then He took it one step further saying, **Everyone on the side of truth listens to me.** In fact, just a few hours before this trial with Pilate, Jesus had told His disciples, **I am the way and the truth and the life** (Jn 14:6) **I am the truth.**

Because of that, one of the most central tenants of the Christian faith is that there is only one reality, one moral standard, one truth, namely the truth embodied in Jesus Christ. Now, maybe you're wondering, "What does any of this have to do with Easter?" Well, the short answer is "Everything." You see, the validity of all of Jesus' taught during His ministry here on earth hinged upon one final event, an event which He had foretold on numerous occasions: His resurrection from the dead.

In the Gospel of John, we read that at the beginning of His public ministry, Jesus had cleared the merchants and moneylenders out of the temple courts. The Jewish leaders questioned Him, asking what miracle He could perform to prove that He had the authority to back those actions. **"Destroy this temple," Jesus answered them, "and I will raise it again in three days"** (Jn 2:19). John goes on to explain to us that Jesus wasn't talking about the building they were standing in, the temple He was speaking of was His body.

About a year later, Matthew tells us those Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Him again asking for some sort of miraculous sign. He told them the only sign they would receive was the sign of the prophet Jonah. **As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, He said, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth** (Mt 12:40). So Easter, the resurrection, was to be *the* sign that would demonstrate Jesus was who He claimed to be and that everything else He had taught was true.

Jesus claimed that He was the one path to salvation. He claimed that He had the authority to forgive sins (Mk 2:10) and that whoever believed in Him would not perish but would have eternal life (Jn 5:24). The proof He offered that those statements were true—that He was, as He claimed, the Son of God—was that three days after He had died He would rise to life again. My friends, we are here today to celebrate the historic fact that Jesus Christ did rise on the third day. We celebrate the fact that all He has said to us is true. And we know it is true, because He is risen.

Our lesson this morning comes from St. Paul's letter to the Christian church in Corinth. If Paul's argument here is solid, then Christianity is true. And if Christianity is true, then this chapter, 1 Corinthians 15, outlines the most glorious and wonderful prospects that could ever be offered to us. So let's take a look at what Paul has to say.

He starts out by saying, I'd like to remind you of the gospel message, the one I preached to you while I was with you, the one which by God's grace you received, the one upon which you have taken your stand, the one by which—if you are holding fast to it—you *are being saved*. That gospel. That gospel is this: That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures. That He was buried. That He has been raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. And that He then appeared to Peter, to the twelve, to five hundred of the brothers, to James and the rest of the apostles, and finally to me. It's a simple, beautiful summary of the Christian faith. So let's break down this creed and look at the four statements it contains.

1. Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

The first question then is, is that what the Scriptures said would happen? On Friday night, we read through Isaiah 53. In those twelve verses alone, although there are many others throughout the Old Testament, we see that God prophesied that His Messiah was going to be stricken, smitten, afflicted, crushed and finally slaughtered—cut off from the land of the living.

That passage also makes abundantly clear why He had to suffer all of those things. It was for our transgressions, our iniquities, our sin. So yes, the Scriptures did predict that the Christ would die for our sins.

The next question then, is did Jesus die? I don't think anyone in the history of the world that has ever contested *that* fact. Even Jesus' harshest opponents believed that fact, they were, after all, the ones who had killed Him. Yet God gives us more than substantial evidence. The apostle John, who was there when Jesus died tells us that after He died, to make doubly sure that He was dead the Roman **soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing forth a sudden flow of blood and water** (Jn 19:34). Jesus was dead. He did not fall into some sort of coma; He died. He died because He was killed. He died because His soul was separated from His body just as every other man that has ever or will ever die. Yet unlike any other man, He died for our sins, according to the Scriptures.

2. The next thing Paul tells us in His creed is that Jesus was buried.

This, again, is an uncontested, historical fact. And it lends further proof to the first statement. Jesus was dead they wouldn't have buried Him if He wasn't.

3. Next Paul tells us that Jesus has been raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.

And again, Paul adds, "according to the Scriptures." And once again, we can look to Isaiah 53 to see that it was prophesied that after the suffering of the Messiah, He would see the light of life. He would rise again. On the back cover of your service folders, there is a quote from one of David's psalms, a psalm in which we hear the pre-incarnate Christ Himself proclaim, **You will not abandon Me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.**

That Jesus died and was buried are uncontested, historical facts. That He rose again on Easter Sunday has certainly been contested, but that doesn't make it any less a historical fact.

4. That's what Paul shows us in the last statement of His creed: that Jesus appeared to Peter and the twelve, to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time then to James and the rest of the apostles, and finally to Paul himself.

Jesus' resurrection was eyewitness news. It's a historical fact. And Paul lists all these witnesses as if to tell the Corinthians "don't take my word for it, ask them yourselves."

But what if all those witnesses conspired together to fabricate this story, to deceive the millions even billions now who would come after them and believe their testimony? Some people have suggested that. But here's another historical fact. Paul, and James, and Peter and the rest of the Apostles did not simply claim that Jesus had risen and then leave it at that. They dedicated the rest of their entire lives to sharing that message with as many people as they could. They suffered imprisonment, stonings, lashings, and one by one they were put to death for preaching the resurrection of Jesus. That's hardly the commitment you would expect if those men knew what they were preaching was a lie.

Finally, if that's not proof enough, then what do we make of the countless lives that have been changed by the power of that Gospel message? Paul is a perfect example. **I do not even deserve to be called an apostle, he said, because I persecuted the church of God.** Paul says that his worthiness to be an apostle, his value to the church was equal to that of "one abnormally born" which is our translation's polite way of putting a miscarried child. Paul was spiritually dead. He was worthless, of no use whatsoever to God's church. But something changed him; something transformed him so completely, that he began to pursue the spread of that gospel message he had been trying to stamp out, and pursuing that spread more passionately than any of the other apostles including Peter and the twelve.

What was it that was able to transform Paul so completely, bringing him from spiritual death to spiritual life? It was the power of God's grace contained in that gospel message! The message that Jesus died his sins, that He was buried, and that He had been raised, a message delivered to him by the risen Christ Himself!

We're not all that much different than Paul. Paul didn't think he was worthy to carry out the work of the Savior. Am I any more worthy than he was? Are you? Whether you're a lifelong member of the Church or a recent convert to Christianity, are you worthy, because of anything you've done, to be a follower and proclaimer of Jesus? Just like Paul, you and I have persecuted Jesus and His church. Every sin is an attack at God. Every cruel word, indecent thought, and selfish action is an assault against Jesus and the Church. We're sinful people, just like Paul. And just like Paul, we realize that we aren't worthy to call ourselves Christians.

But by the grace of God, we are what we are. By the grace of God, we have been called from unbelief to faith. By the grace of God, we *have been* declared worthy. By the grace of God, Jesus came into this world to give up *His* life on the cross to pay for *our* sins. And by the grace of God, Jesus rose from the dead, proving His victory over sin and giving us victory over death and hell.

Do you know what the biggest problem with the theory of relativism is? The problem is that it's a theory. You may believe with all your heart that *what* you've determined for yourself is morally acceptable *is* morally acceptable and that *what* you've determined for yourself is right or good enough *is* right or good enough; but where's your proof? Without absolute truth, without an absolute proof, there will always be at least an inkling of doubt and uncertainty in your mind.

Jesus offers us something entirely better. He offers us His righteousness and His perfection. He offers us immortality, escape from death, a place in the everlasting kingdom of heaven. And as proof that He has the power and authority to grant us everlasting life, we have these historical facts: that Jesus died for our sins, that He was buried, and that He has risen in accordance with the Scriptures.

So, what is truth? This is truth: Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia! Amen!