

“Your Part of the Story”

Easter Sunday, 2013

1 Corinthians 15: 12-26

In the context of spring, with everything coming to life around us, it's easy to believe in resurrection. But if we were in the Southern Hemisphere, we'd be in autumn. What's it like to celebrate Easter in that context? While our habits of worship might keep us confident in the resurrection of Christ, if we were buying heating oil and staring down the tunnel of a long, dark winter, I wonder how confident we'd feel in our own part of the story—the promise that we, too, will make a transition from death into life. How does our context affect our ability to tell the story of our own resurrection to come?

When I stand in God's Acre on Easter Sunday, I think about how that story draws so many people together to celebrate the resurrection in community. I also think of the individual stories in our graveyard, especially the faith stories represented in scripture texts chiseled into the stones, testifying to confidence in the resurrection of the dead. “His servants shall see him, and they shall see his face.” “He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live.” “Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life.” “Them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him.”

Our belief in Jesus' resurrection must extend to confidence in our own. But without the right context, we might struggle to find that confidence—just as the church in Corinth is struggling when Paul sits down to write a letter.

Paul can be ingratiating when it suits his purposes, and he begins the letter by reminding the church how truly blessed it is. Its people, he says, have heard the word, they are educated in

it, and they have an abundance of spiritual gifts. That's the good news that Paul acknowledges, before turning to what is not going well in Corinth.

You know the context in which Paul writes by what he preaches against in this letter: dissension, factionalism, boasting, immorality. Some quarreling parties are even resorting to lawsuits against one another. And within this context, the Corinthians are trying to live into a brand new religion. The result is a full-blown theological crisis, at the heart of which is their understanding of resurrection.

Some of the Corinthians are saying that there is no resurrection of the dead—at least not for mortal folk like themselves. There is no evidence that they have stopped believing in *Christ's* resurrection. But they have stopped believing in their own.

Why? Maybe the problem is context.

In a context of boasting and factionalism, some of the Corinthians seem to be feeling a bit more spiritually evolved than their fellow Christians. Some have interpreted the promise of resurrection to mean a heightened spirituality which they have already achieved; that is, they are claiming to have already attained resurrection. Perhaps this is what all the boasting is about. *I'm resurrected, and you're not!*

In that context, perhaps others see themselves as *undeserving*. If resurrection is a reward for heightened spiritually and incisive understanding; and I'm surrounded by people who tell me that they deserve that reward; and they seem to be better, or smarter, or more holy than me; then it's hard for me to believe that I will be resurrected.

Maybe, by the time Paul writes, some in Corinth have decided the promise of their resurrection is an idle tale. Just like the disciples thought, according to Luke, when the women returned from the tomb with the news of Jesus' resurrection. What if the story had ended there?

And what would have happened to the church in Corinth if their own story had ended the same way? What would that look like—a church whose members no longer believe in their own resurrection?

Well, Paul tells them exactly what it would look like. Paul builds a vision. Actually, you might say that rather than building a vision, he unbuilds it, taking it away one block at a time ... starting from the bottom.

Because his argument is just *upside down*, compared to how the resurrection is usually preached. On Easter Sunday, we usually hear that because Christ was raised from the dead, we can believe in our own resurrection. But Paul comes at it from the opposite direction: Let's assume, as some of the Corinthians do, that there is no resurrection of the dead. Well, if *that's* true, then we must also assume that Christ has not been raised.

Are you shocked? Well, I'll bet the Corinthians were, too. Whatever they think about God's ability or willingness to raise *them* from the dead, they don't seem to have lost faith in *Christ's* resurrection. But now Paul tells them that Christ's resurrection *depends on their own*. If there is no resurrection for *you*—each one of you—then there was, there is, no resurrection of Christ. Paul has just pulled a building block right out of the foundation of the church. And he goes on pulling, whisking each block out as if it weighed nothing, unbuilding the vision of the church, block by block.

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised.” Whisk! “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain”—whisk!—“and your faith is in vain.” Whisk! “We are even found to be misrepresenting God....” Whisk! “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”

Paul has pulled out and tossed aside the pillars of belief upon which the church is built! The preaching of the word; the speaking of God's truth; the efficacy of faith; the forgiveness of sins; all gone—and the structure totters, and groans, and collapses as if into a sinkhole, tumbling into a dark and silent chasm—in fact, a grave, from which no one will rise. Not Christ; not the Corinthians; neither you nor I. “Those who have fallen asleep in Christ,” says Paul, “have perished.” End of story, except for this sad coda: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Even at this stage in Paul's rhetorical deconstruction, people still fall asleep “in Christ.” Those without hope in the resurrection were still in Christ when they fell asleep, but what then? Then they left this life. With no resurrection possible, death separated them from Christ just like it separates everyone from everyone else. With no resurrection possible, their great love for Christ is, in the end, lost like any mortal love; the dead are separated from all whom they have loved, *including* Jesus. And so those who have loved Christ most have lost him through death, and they are intensely pitiable.

This is the end to which Paul's unbuilding has brought us. If we lose faith in our own resurrection, “we are of all humanity most to be pitied.” There is nothing on earth more pitiful than a Christian who has lost his hope. Or, since Paul says “we,” there is nothing more pitiful than a *church* that has lost its hope. A church that lost its hope and then just got tired, so tired that it just fell asleep, and, with no resurrection possible, was separated from Christ. Will the last one to lose hope please turn out the lights?

“But.” The word is a snap, the noise of steel against flint, a spark struck in the dark. It is a musical tone—like the note of a single trumpet, pushing back the darkness just before an Easter

dawn. “But,” says Paul, this whole scene of destruction that I’ve just created, this collapse of the church—this is *not* what happened.

“But *in fact*”—the words are more musical notes; could there be a *band*, playing somewhere in the distance? “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” Yes! It is a band; in fact, a mass of bands drawing together; the music swells. “For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” And then it’s hail, all hail, victorious Lord and Savior!

Paul has continually preached the story of Christ’s victory over death, and the Corinthians still believe it. But they have stopped believing that *they* have a part in the story. In a context of the same old bad behaviors and sins against one another, it must be hard to believe that humanity can ever be made new. In that context they struggle to believe that their own bodies could be sown perishable, but raised imperishable; sown in dishonor, but raised in glory; sown in weakness, but raised in power; sown as physical bodies, but raised as spiritual bodies. Yet their bodies do have a part in the story of resurrection. *Our* bodies have a part in the story of resurrection. But in times of despair, struggling to understand resurrection in the often discouraging context of our modern world, we have trouble believing it.

So what do we do? We do what Paul advised the Corinthians to do: Create the right context for belief. *Make love our aim*. Create a church, a community, a world where faith, hope,

and love abide, and new life is always in evidence. And then we will feel new life in ourselves, and know that each of us has a part in the resurrection story.

Here is your part of the story: You are a being whom God created, whom God loves and for whom God has plans *even after you die*. You are so beloved that nothing can separate you from the love of God, ever. That is the context in which you can testify to your hope in the resurrection. *Your hope* keeps the church alive, and the church keeps hope alive in this world. Believe in your part of the story. *Tell* your part of the story. Your part of the story keeps Christ raised up. Now it feels like Easter; and resurrection hope shines before the eyes of the world. Hallelujah! Amen.