

The Faith We Confess:
A Series of Sermons on the Core Doctrines of the Christian Faith
The Resurrection of the Dead: “Without the Bodily Resurrection Our Faith is Futile”

Have you ever come to the end of a puzzle only to find out that you have one missing piece?

It does not look right. That hole sticks out like a sore thumb. All that hard work for nothing. Who wants a puzzle with one missing piece?

Life is like that. Many things can come down to that one little thing being in place, going the right way, or being true, but if you don't have it then everything else is for naught.

Today we come to a doctrine of the Christian faith that is like that. Everything else hinges on this one doctrine being true. If it is not then everything else is useless, for naught, no good, invalid.

The doctrine that I am talking about is the bodily resurrection and the apostle Paul said that if Christ is not raised from the dead then our preaching is useless, our faith is futile, we are guilty of lying to the world, and we are dead in our sins.

That means that whatever wonderful benefits you might have obtained from being a Christian they are worthless without the bodily resurrection being true. It means that if everything else about Christianity were good and right but this one thing was found to be false then your life would look like that puzzle with one missing piece. What good is that? A puzzle with one missing piece is one of the ugliest things in the world. In fact the pieces look better scattered inside the box than it does completed with just one missing piece.

You Cannot Be Christian and Deny the Bodily Resurrection

The first thing that I want to say this morning is that if you deny the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ then you are not Christian. Yes, you heard me right on that. You are not a Christian. If this is not a boundary for our faith then what boundaries do we have?

Now I am aware that Christians can come to gradually believe, or struggle in their faith, or be plagued by ignorance, and that those kinds of things can affect our understanding and embracing of this doctrine. We have room to grow and struggle in the faith. “Lord I believe. Help my unbelief.”

But what I am talking about here is people who claim to be Christians but just flat out don't believe it, so they redefine it so that they can say they believe it. It kind of goes like this: Jesus Christ did not bodily arise from the grave. The reason the Bible talks about his resurrection is because those words were written and those stories were told so they could give hope to the disciples of Jesus who were crushed and deflated because of his death. The truth that the church gets from the resurrection stories is that the life of Jesus continues to live on and on through the

Christian community. In other words, his body rotted in the ground, but by telling the wonderful stories of his teaching during his earthly ministry and by telling the story of his resurrection from the dead the disciples were encouraged in their time of grief and given strength to go on in life, even though Jesus died and was not resurrected. The point of the resurrection is not that Jesus arose from the grave bodily (literally), but that he lives on in the hearts of his followers. That's how Jesus was resurrected!

This interpretation of the resurrection that I just gave you is quite popular in "liberal Christianity.

John Shelby Spong, a popular priest in the Episcopal Church, who loves the old liturgy of the prayer book but doesn't believe a word of it, espouses this kind of interpretation. He thinks Christianity must be liberated from superstitions like the bodily resurrection in order for it to survive; therefore he works tirelessly to redefine and reconstruct the Christian faith so that the modern world will find it palatable. Our own Douglas Ottati, a former professor at Union Theological seminary in Richmond, VA and now a professor at Davidson College, holds to this kind of view as well. Unfortunately such people are permitted to teach and remain ordained in the Episcopal Church USA and the Presbyterian Church USA. Why is that?

It is very obvious from our text today in I Corinthians 15 and from the scriptures as a whole that one cannot adopt some type of metaphorical and symbolic interpretation of the resurrection of Jesus and be true to the Bible. The scriptures say that Christ rose from the dead bodily and literally.

John Leith, in his book *Christian Doctrine* had this to say about the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Any interpretation of the resurrection as a vision, a hallucination, or an event (that occurs) in the human heart contradicts the New Testament witness... We cannot reconstruct what happened in the resurrection of Jesus Christ and his disciples. (p.141)

Of course we can reconstruct and redefine the story if we like, but not without going against the witness and intent of Holy Scripture. When someone reconstructs and redefines the resurrection to mean something that it does not mean then one has created a new faith that is no longer Christian. If you want to deny the bodily resurrection fine. If you want to claim the ethics of Jesus but not the resurrection of Jesus fine; it is a free country and you can believe or not believe it, but please don't do this and still call yourself a Christian. You cannot be a Christian and deny the bodily resurrection.

The bodily resurrection of Jesus is that important. The faith truly lives or dies off of this one thing being true. This is the weight of what Paul is trying to get across in I Corinthians 15. If God did not bodily resurrect Jesus Christ from the dead then our faith is futile, we are dead in our sins, and we are to be the most pitied of all people. If Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead then the apostle Paul (*a real historical man who really did take the gospel from tiny little Jerusalem*

all the way across the Mediterranean coast line to Rome, eventually causing Christianity to spread thorough all of Europe and ultimately to here in America) risked his life for nothing.

Paul said a little later in I Corinthians 15,

As for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? (*if the resurrection is not true*) If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus for merely human reasons, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised then let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!

I don't blame Paul for saying this. If Jesus Christ was not raised from the dead then I would have never put up with all the trials, disappointments, setbacks, imprisonments, death threats, sickness, disease, and poverty that he put up with either. As a believer I have a hard enough time putting up with a fraction of it, but there is no way in Hades that I would put up with any of it if I did not believe that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. Paul endured his sufferings because he believed in the bodily resurrection.

Why It Is Necessary for the Bodily Resurrection to be True

What I want to do now is briefly share with you two reasons why the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary and essential to being Christian. I hope that what I say here will be of practical help to you in your Christian life and in your thinking about God.

First the bodily resurrection of Jesus is absolutely necessary and essential because it vindicates his work on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins.

To vindicate something means to prove it to be right and true. To vindicate means to validate something (give credibility to it) through some type of action. The resurrection of Jesus makes credible his ministry on the cross. If he did not rise from the dead then his death would have been in vain.

I want be very clear here as I talk about the resurrection and how it relates to our salvation.

We are not saved by Jesus' bodily resurrection. If you believe that then you have totally missed the gospel. The Bible never says or teaches that Jesus rose from the dead for our sins. The Bible always says that Christ died for our sins.

Now the reason we humans need saving is because our sin deserves the wrath and judgment of God. God is holy and our sins must be dealt with. God cannot turn a blind eye to it. The wage that is owed for our sin is death; therefore we have a dilemma. But God sent his Son into the world to make an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

We become one with God again (that's what the word atonement means) through Jesus' death on the cross. He steps in our place as our substitute and he bears the wrath of God's judgment on our sin so that we won't have to bear that sentence ourselves. That's what saves us but we can never talk about what saves us (his death on the cross) without also talking about his bodily

resurrection because his resurrection is what gives credibility to his work on the cross. The two realities are inextricably intertwined.

Now though the resurrection of Jesus is not what saves us it most certainly points us to the benefits of our salvation. The fruit that we obtain from our being saved (made right with God) through Jesus' death on the cross is life. Because he lives so too will we live if we trust in him.

This leads me to the second reason as to why the bodily resurrection of Jesus is absolutely necessary for the Christian faith.

It is necessary because without it we do not have life.

If Jesus is not raised from the dead then neither will we be raised from the dead. You might say here big deal. Who cares if my body dies and is never raised from the dead. My spirit will go to heaven and that's all that really matters.

Unfortunately there are a lot of Christians who believe this. Their doctrine of salvation, their understanding of eternal life with God, is only that of the immortality of the soul. The soul goes to heaven and that's it. While this is true it is only half the story; half the gospel.

The other half of the gospel that we learn through the bodily resurrection of Jesus is that the body really does matter. God loves the body too. He created your body and declared it to be good. So why wouldn't God want to redeem it from death as well? God sent Jesus into the world to redeem the whole sinner, not just half the sinner. Jesus came to crush the curse of sin, both spiritual and physical. God never does anything half way. God goes all the way in everything; therefore he will resurrect our bodies and give us new glorified bodies as well.

In doing this God puts his ultimate stamp of approval on the goodness of his creation. God created the material world and the body is part of that material world and because it is so God loves it and will redeem it as well. If God loves our bodies so much so that he would redeem them then the least we can do as Christians is to believe that truth and seek to glorify God in ways that are proper for our bodies.

Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit; do you treat it as such? Or is there a discrepancy between what God is going to do to your body in the next life (resurrect it and redeem it) and what you are trying to do to it in this life? In other words are you properly preparing your body for the life to come in God's eternal kingdom? The apostle Paul admonished the church to "present our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" and to not use "the members of our bodies as instruments of sin." The resurrection of the body really does matter. God loves the body. Does your life and body reflect this reality in your Christian life?

In the name of the Father, the Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen.