

“The Central Mystery, Part Two: First Fruits/Potent Seeds”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for April 8<sup>th</sup> 2018 (Second Sunday in Easter)  
by Foster Freed

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15: 12-34

I suppose I ought to begin, this morning, by making explicit a thought that may be floating around in at least a few of your minds, namely: namely that we have just heard a scripture reading that may prompt at least a few of us to conclude that the Mormons (on at least one contentious issue) may be right, after all. But I’m getting ahead of myself! I promise I won’t sit back down until I return to that provocative little assertion about the Church of the Latter-Day Saints. But I don’t want to begin there. Rather... rather...let’s start at the beginning. Better still: let’s start with a statement I made **last** Sunday...concerning the remarkably rich scripture text to which we have returned for a second helping: the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

And the statement I have in mind—the one I shared on Easter Sunday—involves my conviction that 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 ought to be counted as the New Testament’s fifth great resurrection text: the **only** New Testament passage, in my humble opinion, that demands to be placed in the same rank as the resurrection narratives found at the close of Mark, Matthew, Luke and John. But frankly...frankly, where 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 reveals itself to be not only the equal of the four remarkable sections at the end of each Gospel, but an indispensable accompaniment to those four accounts, only becomes crystal clear when we begin reading (as we began reading this morning) with that great chapter’s 12<sup>th</sup> verse. You see: through the first 11 verses of this wonderful chapter—the portion we heard last Sunday—Paul is speaking strictly and exclusively about the resurrection of Jesus; as we now discover, however, what we heard last Sunday serves as the foundation—the foundation and the springboard,—for everything else Paul wants to say through the remainder of the chapter. And what he is wanting to say...

...something that Paul makes far more explicit than anything found in the resurrection accounts provided by Mark, Matthew, Luke or John...

...what Paul makes explicit, is that Christ’s resurrection—far from being an isolated event—is to be regarded as the first-fruits...and, in a very real sense the potent seed, of the general resurrection to which Christ’s resurrection points. That’s what makes Paul’s argument in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 so essential; in a very real sense he connects all the dots, making it clear that Jesus points the way. Points the way not only by modelling what a faithful life entails, but points the way by disclosing the miracle God intends for all humanity and—indeed—for all creation. That’s why we ignore Paul at our peril; that’s why we overlook 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15, to our profound loss.

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That having been said: no one has ever accused Paul of being an easy read...and 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 is certainly no exception. Nor does the fact that I am planning on spending four Sundays with this rich text, mean that I have thereby

managed to divvy it up into easily digested bite-sized morsels. Even taken at a reasonably deliberate gallop, Paul's writing in this chapter poses significant interpretive challenges. Looking no further than the portion of the chapter we heard a few moments ago, we encounter a text that divides into three distinct portions, each of which has its distinct aims and strategies. What can be helpful this morning, however, is to think of the text to which we just listened as a letter that arrives in an envelope. On the front of the envelope is some writing; that's the first portion of this morning's text<sup>i</sup>. On the back of the envelope is more writing: that's the third portion of the letter, which amplifies the points made on the front of the envelope<sup>ii</sup>. But when we open the envelope, the letter is available to be read, and it contains the real heart of what Paul wants to say to us<sup>iii</sup>. And so let's begin with the envelope, the front and back of which both say, with a fair degree of urgency, that the resurrection is important, that the resurrection is for real, and that the people in the Corinthian Church who are denying the resurrection are contradicting themselves in all sorts of ways. That's why Paul begins with a question designed to point out one of those contradictions, his question being: *Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?* Or to put that somewhat differently: if you are part of a faith-community that is celebrating Easter—i.e. Jesus' resurrection—what in the world are you doing by then turning around and denying the possibility of your own resurrection.

From the outset, you see, Paul regards **Christ's** resurrection as inextricably linked to **ours** although, to be fair, he tends to conduct his argument the other way around from the way a modern-day apologist for Christianity might go about their business. What I mean is that we tend to say: "Christ is risen...and **therefore** one day we too will be raised." Paul moves in the opposite direction, insisting that *...if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.*" You see: as a devout first century Pharisee, Paul didn't need Christ's resurrection to convince him of the reality of the resurrection, and he doesn't use Christ's resurrection as some sort of "proof" for the general resurrection to come. For Paul, the eye-opener wasn't that God is intent on raising the dead, but that God had already begun the work of raising the dead through the man Jesus, a man Paul initially regarded as a renegade Jew, a false Messiah. Having come to faith in Jesus, however, Paul now insists that what God has done in and through the miracle of Easter is of non-negotiable importance: and that all of the preaching and all of the teaching done in the name of Jesus, all of the care-expended and all of the compassion-extended in the name of Jesus Christ would be ultimately pointless if it all ended at the cemetery gates. *If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied;* those are the words with which Paul concludes his argument on the front of the envelope. If we turn the envelope over, he's carrying on in much the same way: insisting that: *If the dead are not raised, "Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die."* For Paul, the life of faith, the life of Christian discipleship, would be absurd were it a commitment that was buried along with our earthly remains. That's his bottom line: no resurrection, then there's no point to the entire game we're playing. But why...why is this so urgently important for Paul?

Well: suffice it to say, we'll find the answer to that question if we open up Paul's two-sided envelope, and have a look at the letter inside.

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Some of you may be familiar—some of you may have at least some acquaintance—with one of the great (and frankly one of the never ending, this side of the grave) debates into which Christian theologians enjoy venturing. It's the debate between "eternal life" and "resurrection of the dead." And please bear in mind—this is important...

...please bear in mind that Paul was the apostle not to the Jews but to the Gentiles, and that, as the apostle to the Gentiles, Paul was well familiar with the fact that "eternal life" was hardly an unheard-of concept in the pagan world to which he was bringing the Gospel. And so the point some of the very best modern theology likes to make is that the resurrection—the **bodily** resurrection of the dead—was a scandal to the Gentile world not because it imagined a life beyond this one—that was fairly common-place—but because the Jewish notion of bodily resurrection was weird even in the context of pagan thinkers who saw the soul as eternal. Hence the insistence of so many bright Christian theologians, that we must always emphasize not eternal life, but the resurrection of the dead.

And frankly...frankly...being a contrarian sort of chap, there's always a wee part of me that wants to say: "Yes, but!". After all, the final section of the Apostle's Creed, the Church's most ancient creed, insists that:

*I believe in the Holy Spirit,  
the Holy Catholic Church,  
the communion of saints,  
the forgiveness of sins,  
**the resurrection of the body  
and the life-everlasting.***

You see! They are both there: resurrection of the body **and** eternal life! Why is this worth arguing about? Why is this worth disagreeing over? And frankly...frankly...it's when Paul explains, as he seeks to explain right here in this portion of his great resurrection chapter....

...it's when he explains what God is planning to get up to in the work of resurrection: it's then and only then that the importance Paul places on the resurrection starts to make sense. Here, from where I stand, is the money quote:

*Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. (Please take note of that final flourish...the *in Christ shall **all** be made alive*. Take note of that "all". When Paul says "all" he means "all". But I'm getting ahead of myself!) For now, what I really need you to notice is that "Adam" has suddenly made an appearance in Paul's argument...and that's a big deal. It's a big deal because, with that mention of Adam (...that reminder that *as in **Adam** all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive*)...with that reminder, we're back to the opening chapters of the Bible...we're back to Genesis, back to the story of creation...back to Adam and Eve in the Garden...back to the goodness of creation at the beginning...and yes, tragically, we're back to the deep*

alienation humanity begins to experience as soon as we turn our corporate back on God in the third chapter of Genesis.

And that, you see, is what resurrection really and truly means for Paul, and what resurrection ought to mean to the likes of you and me. I know the language Paul uses here—the language of enemies and submission and subjection—can sound eerily warlike. I know full well that we can recoil with discomfort when he speaks of Christ delivering *the Kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power*. And yes, I know that Paul can make us squirm a wee bit when he insists that Christ *must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet* despite the fact that it's hard not to be cheered when he then mentions that *the last enemy to be destroyed is death*. Despite that hopeful note, all of that martial imagery, all of that warlike zeal can seem a bit over the top...and a bit foreign to many of our ears. Then again: the fact that Paul insists that even Christ, the Son, will eventually be subject to the vision of God the Father, should serve as an indication that all of this martial imagery is a reminder that the vision of God—the vision that led God to create the cosmos at the beginning of time—is a vision grounded in God's love, and a vision therefore that God is not prepared to relinquish. And the bottom line is that Paul—quite rightly—has no interest in a future that does not entail God putting right that which went wrong from the instant our forebears succeeded in getting themselves kicked out of Eden. And the point, of course...

...the point, for Paul, is that the future God is preparing for us, even here and even now, is a future in which creation will have been restored: a future in which God will once again be able to look out at all that God has made and once again pronounce that it is good, that it is very good. Incidentally, that is why you and I—as **disciples**—are called not to escape from this world, but to live rightly and generously, courageously and compassionately in this at times heart-breaking world. In our caring for the neighbour, in our caring for the good earth, we acknowledge the goodness of the world God has made...and yes: we acknowledge our anticipation of a time when God will put things right...a time when God will be all in all. That's what resurrection really and truly entails: not turning our back on the world, not fleeing from this life...but embracing this life in all of its beauty, complexity and brokenness, knowing that God too has embraced it, that God too rejoices in its beauty...and that God will not rest, until creation has been healed, that God will not rest until all God's children have found their true and abiding home in this world of beauty and grace. **That** is the resurrection promise! That is the promise of resurrection to which we—like our brother Paul—ought to cling with stubborn determination...and with the strong conviction that God—in and through the risen Christ—is making all things new. Amen! Amen! Hallelujah!

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You'll notice, of course, that I have not yet sat down...and that I have not yet shut-up: a fact that owes a great deal to a promise I made at the start when I vowed that I would neither sit down nor shut-up until I had at least made some small passing reference to Paul's passing reference to the fact that some members of the Corinthian Church were being baptized, not on their own behalf, but on behalf of the dead. And

yes: to the best of my knowledge, the only major Christian group that actively practices baptism of the dead are the Mormons. Some of us, to be fair, are grateful that they take so pointed an interest in the dead, since the Mormons are a wonderful source of genealogical information for anyone with a curiosity about such things. Others of us—I know this is true for many Jews—find it deeply offensive that the Mormons appear to feel no more hesitation about baptising dead Jews than about baptising dead gentiles. And so please rest assured that I have no intention of instituting that particular practice here at Trinity: a practice which appears to have died out quite quickly among most Christian groups, only to be reborn a couple of hundred years ago, with the birth of the Mormon church. But while I have no intention of becoming a fan-boy for that particular practice any time soon, I am struck by the fact that Paul—in his argument about the resurrection...

...Paul's point—the role it plays in **his** argument—is that getting baptized on behalf of a dead family member makes no sense whatsoever, if you then turn around and say you don't believe in the resurrection...

...what strikes me, this morning, is that Paul—in citing that practice—never pauses to condemn it. And that is important to me...and it should be important to you...for the same reason that I paused earlier to note Paul having spoken of what God intends to do not just for some, but for **all**. You see: love him or hate him, the Apostle Paul is the single most important Biblical voice when we are yearning to hear the authentic proclamation of the universal hope—the boundless universal hope—to which we are invited to cling in and through the risen Christ. And it is a tragic loss anytime we as Christians impose legalistic boundaries on the love of God: insisting that those who fail to say the right things or do the right things prior to drawing their last earthly breath are not only lost to us but lost to the light and life and love of God. Nonsense!

And if it takes the ancient echoes of the weird practice of baptising the dead, to remind us that death is no barrier to the love of God, then may we continue to hear those ancient echoes resounding through the corridors of this and every Christian place of worship. Whatever else it means to follow Christ—whatever else it means to place our trust in our risen Saviour—it means that we institute the spiritual practice of giving up on no one. We give up on no one. Miraculously, we even refuse to give up on ourselves, knowing that the God who came to us in Jesus, who died for us in Jesus, who lives again for us in Jesus, is far from having given up on any of us.

Friends in Christ. Hear good news! *Christ has been raised from the dead, the first-fruits...**the first-fruits...the first-fruits** of those who have fallen asleep. **Christ is risen! Christ is risen indeed! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Thanks be to God!!***

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<sup>i</sup> verses 12 - 19

<sup>ii</sup> verses 29 - 34

<sup>iii</sup> verses 20 - 28