



The Absence of the Resurrected One

TEXT
1 Corinthians 15:12–25

May 17, 2015 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

In this series, “Faith That Is Not in Vain,” we have been reflecting on the resurrection. The Bible talks about resurrection a great deal. It does so in part because the resurrected Jesus didn’t stay with us. He ascended to be with God.

I don’t know the mechanics of ascension any more than I know the mechanics of how any of us go to heaven, but I know what it means. It means that God refuses to let go of his life; that God lifts up his life as truth. His life is what it means to be human. Or to use church language, Jesus is Lord. Jesus is King.

The kingship or lordship of Jesus peppers our best hymns: *Joy to the world! The Lord is come: Let earth receive her King.* We sing that at Christmas, but it’s as much a resurrection hymn as anything. *He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the ... wonders of his love.*

To say that the way Paul says it, Jesus is the first fruits of resurrection. Or think of it this way: Jesus is resurrected, and he is resurrecting us.

But some doubt this. It’s right there in the text: “Some

of you say there is no resurrection from the dead.” We understand their doubt. They doubt because the resurrected one is absent.

Paul says, “If Christ is not raised, then your faith is in vain.” By faith, Paul is not talking about what we think. It’s more than what we believe; it is how we live.

I don’t know how you feel about your faith these days. Perhaps it is strong. Perhaps it is fragile. Maybe you have more questions than answers. Maybe you are wanting to set your questions down for a while and just hold on to what makes sense to you now. Maybe it is something you want to explore deeper. But no matter the state of your faith, I doubt you would say it is futile, that your faith is in vain.

We welcome the confirmation class today. They are welcomed into this church family today. It is worth noting that these days, they are not the norm. All of them, I imagine, will have good friends who have nothing to do with the church.

It was in the news this week. Among mainline churches, young adults like these are less and less Christian. In the

last generation, this age group has decreased in church membership by 50 percent. At the end of World War II, only 11 percent of young adults would claim to be without faith of any kind; but today that figure has grown to 36 percent.¹ And yet, here you are, swimming upstream. I wouldn’t blame you if — even on the day of your confirmation — you are asking, “Does my faith matter?”

I want to talk to you today about why your faith is not in vain. Your faith is not in vain because your faith is the means by which we participate in healing a broken world. Your faith is the place you stand when everything around you has crumbled. Your faith is the word you speak when all around you have lost hope. Or to say it the way Paul says it, Christ is resurrected, and he is resurrecting us.

So I encourage you to remain active in the church for a couple reasons. The first is that you are living in a lonely world. I hope that makes no sense to you for me to say that, but I imagine it does. We can be surrounded by people and still be lonely.

The phone rang in the middle of the night, and my friend

said, “Tom, I’m sorry to call so late; I just didn’t know who else to call.” If you needed to call someone at midnight, would you know who to call? Many would not know.

Our technology allows us to connect with each other all the time, and that is a good thing. But even with connection, there is often a deeper human hunger for community, for relationship, for friendship. I don’t know anyone who doesn’t need a friend. We live in a lonely world.

John Cacioppo is the director of the Center for Cognitive and Social Neuroscience at the University of Chicago. In his book *Loneliness*, he says we are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness. He documented that people who are chronically lonely have higher levels of epinephrine, the stress hormone. Blood tests show altered white blood cell counts.” He writes “When you are lonely, your whole body is lonely.”²

I say faith is not in vain because Christian faith is something we live together. It is a faith of friendship. I would urge you to remain active in the church because we all need friends. The church is not first a connection of beliefs. It is not even first a list of mission efforts. The church is first a network of relationships.

There may be some midnight when you need to talk to somebody, and I want you to know who to call. But there is something else that needs to be said.

Many people — and young adults in particular — have said

they can’t be part of the church because the church is judgmental. They reject a church that is hostile to their gay and lesbian friends. They reject a church that fails to care for the poor.³ They reject a church because so often the leaders of the church show up in the media because they have been criminal or mean-spirited or idiots. This is one reason so many younger adults have nothing to do with church.

But if I could speak to them, I would say: “Don’t lower your expectations. Your critique of the church is often exactly right. Too often the church has failed to live up to the gospel we proclaim. And the thing about the church is that when we fail, we do it big. We were on the wrong side of slavery. We belittled women for generations. We have been pejorative in our care for the poor.”

And while that is a part of our story, it is only a part. We have also been a community of beauty and love and extraordinary courage.

I would say to those young adults: “Don’t fall victim to the same kind of prejudice that you claim to reject. Don’t paint the whole church with one broad brush of brokenness.” Because the church they reject is not the church I recognize. I would say: “Yes, there are churches where scandal and self-righteous exclusion are the way of life; but that’s not the life most congregations offer. And you certainly would not hear that here. Just because

you see the church is broken somewhere, don’t assume it is broken everywhere.”

I would say to these confirmands, “Stay active in the church — not only because you will find friends here, but because here you will find people who will love you at midnight and people who will inspire you.”

Do you know who Dorothy Day is? She began what is called the Catholic Worker Movement. She spent most of her adult life working with the poor. She hosted a soup kitchen that fed as many as 1500 people every morning. She started hospitality houses that offered nearly 50,000 nights of lodging in the years of the Depression. She lived simply and sought each day to see the humanness in the least of these. She sacrificed more than most of us, I would venture.

But as a youth, she thought the church was silly. She rejected the church, but she found that life was lonely — and she found that something was missing. She found her way into the Catholic Church.⁴

Now the Catholic Church, like the Presbyterian Church, is not a pure vessel of the gospel — not by a long shot. And yet, it was there that she found the community and the teaching that made sense of her life. And if you asked her why she lived the way she did, she would tell you: “Because Jesus is the resurrected Lord, and this is how he is resurrecting me.”

I could talk about Albert Schweitzer, the musician, theo-

logian, medical missionary. I could talk about Grandma Moses, the midnight miracle of freedom. I could talk about Martin Luther King. I could talk about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who lived with courage in the face of the Nazis. I could talk about Oscar Romero, who lived and, in the end, died for the poor in El Salvador.

I could keep you here all week talking about the saints of the church. They show us that faith is not in vain. And to look at them causes us to trust that Christ really is alive, and he is resurrecting us.

But it's not just the people who make the news. It's people like Cindy Wilcox, who told us a few weeks ago of her journey of resurrection; how she faced the most tragic, evil moment of her life and, by God's grace, refused to let it define her. She will tell you faith is not in vain.

It's people like Stormy Shank. She's about 200 years old now. She joined this church at Christmastime in 1951. When I moved to Village, I noticed Stormy right away. She was in the choir, and the choir at that time processed down the aisle. I remember Mark Ball and I would follow the choir — Mark in his robe, me in my robe. We were a picture of dignity, I tell you, singing our hymns as if God might be disappointed if we smiled. That was a long time ago, and we have both changed a lot.

I tell you this because I want you to appreciate the contrast. Right in front of us, Stormy was coming down the

aisle like she was running for office — shaking hands with everyone on the aisle, laughing, welcoming people, giving hugs — sometimes to people she knew.

I don't think she had any idea what the hymn was. But she was in worship, so she was joyful — which was remarkable. To look at her, you would have no idea she had buried two husbands. To look at her, there was no evidence that her son died in Vietnam, his name etched in black granite in Washington, DC. Her family battled illnesses. And yet, almost as an act of defiance, she was joyful. Now, unless Jesus Christ is alive and is resurrecting us, can you explain that to me?

I could tell you about John Hall. He is a dermatologist and one of the finest people I know. You never have to wonder what John is thinking because he will tell you. But if I have known a man with more compassion, I cannot think of who that might be. Like Jesus, who healed lepers, he spends his day battling diseases of the skin and, with a profound compassion, he spends his free time at the health clinic for the poor.

If you ask him why, he will tell you straight up it is because that's where he more often than not finds God. He has gone to Kenya to be with people in need. He delivered a baby there. You know you are in need if you are having a baby, and they bring you a dermatologist — and you are happy about it.

If you ask me how I know Jesus is raised from the dead and that he is raising us from the dead, I would introduce you to Cindy or to John or to Stormy.

I could tell you about Patsy Shawver, who helped start Front Porch Alliance.

I would introduce you to Ellene Hoffman and to Peggy Adair, who taught children in Sunday school for decades; to Charlotte Davidson, who shepherded young at-risk girls into strong young women; to Mark Ball, who teaches our choirs not only how to sing, but how to love each other; to Inez Simon, who set up for more memorial service receptions than I can count; to Henry Sewing, who mentors young boys in the inner city; to Ruthie Kline, who checks on the hospitals to make sure we know who is there; to Joe and Grace Zimmerman, who opened their home to folks driven from theirs by Katrina.⁵

Oh, I could go on and on.

What I am saying is, if you stay with this faith, you will discover not only that Christ is alive, but that he is bringing you to life as well.

I wish I could have been there when they read this letter from Paul to the Corinthians; when he said, "If Christ is not alive, then your faith is futile." What? He said, "Your faith is futile." I don't know, but I imagine they looked at each other, and then they shouted out: "No, you are wrong. Our faith has guided us in the journey. Our faith has given us courage in the storm. Our faith

has brought us to life. We know in our marrow that Christ is alive because of what we have seen in each other.”

Look around at each other. Do you see it? That’s what you would say, isn’t it?

¹This is common information, but was reported in *The Kansas City Star* on Wednesday, May 13, 2015. “A Secular Shift Widens as More Are Unaffiliated.”

²“Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” the *Atlantic Monthly*

³The best source for data on this is David Kinnaman, *UnChristian* (2007).

⁴Information on Dorothy Day is easily found online, but I also appreciate the reflections found in David Brooks’ *The Road to Character* (2015), p. 74f.

⁵It is important to say that in many of these situations, just one person of many was identified. The choice was made to lift up a person from various ministries, rather than identify all connected to a single ministry.

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.