

EASTER, 2008

Edith Burns was Dr. Will Phillips' favorite patient. He always enjoyed Edith's appointments because she bubbled over with joy. Everyone in the office called her Easter Edith because Edith would always introduced herself to people by saying, *Hello, my name is Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?* As you can imagine, Edith's forthright question often caught people off guard. If they hesitated at all or admitted that they really didn't know the meaning of Easter, Edith would take a few moments to tell them about the true meaning of Easter. Yes, Dr. Phillips usually looked forward to seeing Edith because she made his day so much brighter.

But today was different. The good doctor was not looking forward to seeing Edith today. For Edith's lab report had just come back confirming her malignancy. Edith's tumor was in an inoperable place. Dr. Will had to break the news to Edith that she would have only months to live.

As Edith walked into the room, she could read the gloom on the doctor's face. After she quickly coaxed the news out of him, she scolded him saying, *Why Dr. Phillips, shame on you. Why are you so sad? Do you think God makes mistakes? You have just told me I'm going to see my precious Lord Jesus, my husband, and many of my friends. You have just told me that I am going to celebrate Easter forever, and here you are having difficulty giving me my ticket.* The doctor could only shake his head as Edith was leaving. She had done it again. He felt so much better after talking with her.

After the tumor had spread for a couple of months, the end of her earthly life was near for Edith and she was hospitalized. But despite her pain, Edith still greeted every person who came into her room by saying, *Hello, I'm Edith Burns. Do you believe in Easter?* Whenever the door of opportunity opened, Edith would share her faith with whoever had come into the room. Dr Phillips visited her every day and tried his best to alleviate her pain. But she always requested the minimal amount for she wanted to be as alert as she could be to talk with her visitors. One Friday, the doctor noticed that she was in special discomfort. He reminded Edith that it was Good Friday and wished her a blessed one before he administered his medications.

Dr. Phillips couldn't make his rounds the next day but came in early Sunday morning before leaving the hospital for church. Edith was lying peacefully in bed with a smile on her face. An open Bible was lying across her lap. Her right hand was on the Bible with her finger pointing to John 14:2: *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you.*

The doctor could not help but smile, thinking of the irony of Edith passing away on Easter morning. As he was standing there in silence, an orderly pushed his way into the room. Immediately sensing that the woman in the bed had just passed away, the orderly began to apologize for the intrusion. *No, that's alright.* the doctor assured her. *I'm Dr. Will Phillips. By the way, do you believe in Easter?*

The attitude and belief that a person has towards Christ's resurrection should affect every single aspect of his or her life. That is the reason for this day being such an important one. The importance of Easter is not found in the fact that it signals the beginning of spring; the importance of Easter is not found in the candy and eggs and bunnies that make children so nostalgic; the importance of Easter is not even found in the traditions that bring people to church and to family gatherings. The real importance of Easter is found in what happened on that first Easter Sunday morning almost 2,000 years ago and the continuing impact that this event has in the lives of millions of people today. I am going to address the importance of Easter in a backwards way this morning. Sometimes in life, we find the true importance of something when we suddenly miss it. This happens with conveniences that we have in life. How often do we take electricity for granted, not even realizing its importance to us, until it's gone. This past Wednesday evening, I drove home to find the electricity was off at my house. I still don't know the reason, but it didn't come back on until the middle of the night, around 2:00 in the morning. I must admit that I hadn't even thought about the subject of electricity while I was here Wednesday night, eating the scrumptious meal, having our Bible study in Ecclesiastes, meeting with some young people preparing for their baptism. There wasn't any storm or apparent reason why there would be an electrical issue. The problem only dawned on me when I pulled in my driveway and hit the garage remote. Nothing happened and I thought "oh, oh". But the rest of the evening was altered dramatically. There were no lights to read by, there were no showers to take, there was no music to listen to, there was no computer for my son to finish his homework. We just all went to bed early that night. Probably none of us was thinking about electricity here this morning before I mentioned it, but if the flow of current stopped right now in our church, our worship would be dramatically affected. The church would be dark. The sound system would be silent. The screen behind me would remain blank. The blowers of the furnace would not run. If the current of electricity were to be cut off right now, we would all be thinking about the importance of the electricity that we normally just take for granted. And that's the way it is with so many things in life - we really don't recognize their importance to us until they are gone. Only then do we understand how important they were to us.

The resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ is something that many people take for granted. They have heard about it most of their lives. They have come to assume it to be true. So they never really seriously think about it.

Now it is true that many people question whether Christ's physical body actually did rise from the dead. A recent poll revealed the fact that about 35% of Christians who claim to be born again admitted that they didn't believe that Jesus physically rose from the grave. And the vast majority of people who wouldn't consider themselves to be Christians don't believe in the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. There

are many areas of the Christian faith that most everyone in the world admires and respects. The idea that God is love is a welcome thought to most even though this is a truth that comes straight out of the Bible. The idea that all human beings are really one gigantic family, ultimately related to one another and that we, therefore, should show respect towards one another is a very popular concept today. The Bible gives to us the basis for this view. The idea that there is forgiveness from sins and release from guilt is also a wonderful concept that is embraced by many today. But when we come to the belief that Jesus actually rose from the dead in bodily fashion by his own power, many people would look upon this in the same way that they might view the legend of Santa Claus. It's a nice story; it is certainly warming to the heart; but I seriously question whether it actually happened like the Bible says it did. According to this recent poll, even many who would claim to be born again Christians question whether Christ's bodily resurrection was an historical fact. But I am sure that the vast majority of people have never thought through the necessary conclusions that must result if the resurrection of Jesus Christ did not occur like the Bible says it did.

WHAT IF? WHAT IF JESUS CHRIST DID NOT RISE FROM THE GRAVE? What if this is all just a fabrication, a legend, a story that someone made up. The Apostle Paul addressed this very question in the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians - the passage of Scripture that is often called the resurrection chapter in the Bible. And in this passage, Paul came to 3 conclusions that would be necessary if the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ never really happened. I would like to discuss these with you this morning.

1. First, if Jesus Christ didn't rise from the grave OUR PREACHING AND TESTIMONIES WOULD BE USELESS FOR WE WOULD BE FALSE WITNESSES. IN FACT, THE BIBLE COULD NOT BE THE WORD OF GOD IF JESUS CHRIST DID NOT RISE FROM THE DEAD.

13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.
(1 COR. 15:13-16)

According to the words of the Apostle Paul, if the Lord Jesus Christ did not rise from the dead, I am wasting my time up here this morning. In fact, I am not only wasting my time, but I am doing a bad thing, an evil thing. For I am being a false witness, I am telling lies. I am talking about something that never happened as if it really did happen. And each of you, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, you are spreading false rumors by telling others that he did. And when we sing the songs that we sing, we are hypocrites.

*I serve a rise Savior - He lives within my heart would be some kind of cruel joke.

*Because He lives, I can face tomorrow would be some kind of psychological crutch.

And even more than the personal ramifications that Christ's non resurrection would have on our lives, if Jesus didn't rise from the dead, the Bible couldn't be the Word of God. For if the Bible is the Word of God, it must have God as its author. And if God is the author of the Bible, its content must be true. For God knows all things and cannot lie. And we get this whole idea about Jesus rising from the grave from the Bible. If He really didn't rise from the grave, then the Bible contains a huge error in it - it couldn't be the inspired Word of God. And since it claims to be just that, the inspired Word of God, then the Bible isn't a good book at all. Any book that would make the claims that the Bible makes as the inspired Word of God purposefully intending to deceive people would not be a good book. It would rather be an evil, treacherous book. Yes, if Jesus Christ didn't actually rise from the dead, all of our preaching is a waste of time and the Bible is not the good book after all.

2. But let's move to a second reason that Paul brings out. If Jesus didn't rise from the grave, OUR FAITH WOULD BE FUTILE FOR WE WOULD HAVE NO FORGIVENESS FOR OUR SIN.

17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. (1 Cor. 15:17)

Now notice that Paul doesn't say that if Christ hadn't risen from the grave that we wouldn't have any sin. He doesn't say that because we all know the reality of sin personally. We all know our hearts. We know the thoughts that race through our minds at times. We look around us and see the evil and wickedness that is in the world. We can't escape the realities of sin - it's all around us and within us.

No, Paul doesn't say that Christ's nonresurrection would remove the idea and reality of sin - he simply says if Christ didn't rise from the dead, there wouldn't be any solution for sin, there would be no forgiveness, there would be no remedy. We would have a massive problem that is totally destroying the human race with absolutely no solution.

One of the blessings that is most overlooked when the resurrection of Jesus Christ is considered is its connection with God's atonement for sin. As human beings, we like to pigeon hole our thoughts so that we can get a better handle on them. We connect payment for sin with what happened on that Friday that we now call Good. As the Lord Jesus Christ gave His life as the spotless lamb of God in atonement for sin, forgiveness for sin was achieved, we think. And it is certainly true that Jesus Christ came as God's sacrificial lamb, and that His death upon the cross provided the basis for our sins to be paid for in full, for God's righteousness to be satisfied.

But just because Christ's death upon the cross provided the sacrifice doesn't mean that the resurrection had no part to play in the forgiveness of our sins. Listen to Paul's words recorded in Romans 10:9,10: *9 That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are **justified**, and it is with*

your mouth that you confess and are saved.

You see, the resurrection proved that Jesus Christ was the Son of God. Paul opened the Epistle to the Romans with the words: *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God--² the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures³ regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David,⁴ and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord.* (Rom. 1:1-4)

If the resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ never happened, then Jesus really wasn't the Son of God after all. He was just a mere human being like we are. He might have been smarter. He might have been more loving. He might have been a better leader. But he was just a man after all. And if he were just a mere human being, his death upon the cross couldn't have provided any sacrifice for our sins. His death might have been tragic. His death might have been a travesty of justice. His death might have been a low point in human history. But it wasn't atoning. If Jesus Christ weren't God but was just a mere human being, he couldn't have died for us any more than I could die to pay for your sins or you could die to pay for my sins. You see, Christ's atonement all hinges on His claim to be the Son of God, equal with God. And that claim was proved beyond a shadow of a doubt when He rose from the dead by his own power according to Paul's opening paragraph in his epistle to the Romans. If the Lord Jesus Christ never rose from the grave, then He really wasn't who He claimed to be, the Son of God. And if He wasn't the Son of God, His death upon the cross might have been noble and exemplary, but it wasn't atoning, it didn't provide for any forgiveness for sin. So we don't have a remedy for sin. We don't have any forgiveness. We are doomed forever to just live with the guilt and shame and penalty of our sin.

3. Finally, if Jesus hadn't risen from the grave, OUR FUTURE WOULD BE HOPELESS FOR WE WOULD HAVE NO RESURRECTION.

17 And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost.¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Cor. 15:17-19)

You see, if God's Son came into this world and death conquered him, then there is no hope for any of us. How could we possibly think that we could ever defeat death if Jesus Christ couldn't defeat it? No, if Christ really didn't rise from the dead, then this life is all that there is. Once we die, we cease to exist. This kind of belief leads to a hopeless life.

Listen to Bertrand Russell's description of life. Russell could well be presented as an eloquent spokesman for those who do not believe that Jesus Christ rose from the grave:

The life of a man is a long march through the night, surrounded by invisible foes, tortured by weariness

and pain, toward a goal which few can hope to reach and where none may tarry long. One by one as they march our comrades vanish from our sight, seized by the silent orders of omnipotent death. Brief and powerless is man's life. On him and all his race the slow, sure doom falls pitiless and dark. Blind to good and evil, reckless of destruction, omnipotent matter rolls on its relentless way. For man, condemned today to lose his dearest, tomorrow himself to pass through the gate of darkness, it remains only to cherish, ere yet the blow falls, the lofty thoughts that ennoble his little day.

That's a pretty honest and accurate description of human life if Christ never rose from the grave. Without His resurrection, there is no hope for any of us to rise again. Death becomes god. Russell calls it omnipotent death - and that's exactly what it would be. For nothing could defeat it. Death would finally conquer all.

But both the Bible and historical evidence testify to the fact that Jesus Christ did rise from the grave. *But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. (1 Cor. 15:20)* In fact, the church started within short walking distance of the empty tomb. The people living at the time when Christ rose knew exactly where He had been buried. The tomb was owned by a man named Joseph from Arimathea. He along with Nicodemus had laid the Savior in that tomb and rolled the stone before its mouth. Some of the female followers of Christ had been eyewitnesses of his burial. The Jewish leaders and Roman rulers knew where the tomb was because they had placed the soldiers in front of that tomb to guard it. When the church started, the tomb was empty - the body of the Lord Jesus Christ was gone. And the only reasonable conclusion was that He had risen from the dead. The early Christians certainly didn't take His body for they believed with all of their hearts that He was raised. These early Christians were willing to endure great persecution and suffering, some even dying for their faith. People are not willing to die for that which they know to be a lie. The enemies of Christ, the Temple leaders and Roman authorities, couldn't have taken his body. For they were opposed to the church. All they would have had to do to stop the growth of the church was produce the lifeless body of Jesus. But they couldn't do it - because they didn't know where He was. And just to confirm His resurrection so that there would be no doubt, the Lord Jesus Christ made some post-resurrection appearances to people in various places and times and numbers. Listen to Paul's record in the first 8 verses of this chapter:

Now, brothers, 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.

^{1CO 15:3} 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 Peter, and then to the Twelve.⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers 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.

The gospel message is that Christ died for our sins, that He was buried and that He arose from the grave. Those who do not believe the gospel are left to the consequences of that unbelief - that the Bible is not the Word of God; that there is no such thing as forgiveness for sins; and that there is no hope of any life past this present earthly existence. But those who believe and accept the gospel message are saved, born again into God's family - *By this gospel you are saved.* They have the Word of God to be a lamp for their feet and a light for their path to guide and direct them through life; they have assurance of forgiveness for their sins; and they have the hope of living forever with God in heaven after they die.