

FACT AND NOT FABLE**1 Corinthians 15:1-11**

Intro: Back in late January, when riots in Washington, D.C. were in the past and a new president had been inaugurated and there wasn't an old president to provide fodder for the kind of shrill headlines we had come to expect over the past 4 years, and the supply of news must have practically dried up for major news outlets. At least that's what it seemed when this headline from NPR or something similar to it showed up on CNN and AP and other outlets.

Yep – a Sasquatch Hunting season! With what we hear every day, it didn't seem all that far-fetched. It definitely fell into the “You can't make this stuff up!” category. Truthfully though, after years of these being available for just about every state, the lawmaker who proposed it, thought it was a good way to promote tourism for Oklahoma. But there are people who believe with all their hearts that Bigfoot lives and lurks in the forests of North America. Big Foot is a myth. It ranks right up there with other fables like Elvis sightings and a faked moon landings.

Some people think the resurrection is a fable. It is indeed a “you can't make this stuff up” candidate – and it is because it is exactly what makes it a fact.

For the next 5 Sundays, concluding on Easter Sunday, we are going to continue our study of 1 Corinthians with a study of chapter 15. As we look at BEING THE CHURCH IN CHALLENGING TIMES we need hope and this chapter is oozing with hope. Listen to the first 11 verses, (Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-11)

Paul begins with *Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, 1 Corinthians 15:1a. The Gospel, literally means GOOD NEWS and Paul is reminding the church in Corinth of the good news. F. B. Meyer says of Paul's intro, “The gospel: Christ died and rose again. If the thirteenth chapter is a psalm of love, this chapter is a psalm of hope - a hope that cannot be ashamed.”*

That is why this chapter is a key passage for sermons at the funerals of godly people. The resurrection is something that makes Christianity the only answer for a lost world. Meyer goes on to say *“It is the most memorable argument in existence for the resurrection of the body. Notice that the resurrection was primarily not a doctrine, but a fact. It is not necessary to argue it, but simply to say that Christ arose and therefore all will arise, because Christ is the son of man. Other religions rest on foundations of philosophy and metaphysics, but the empty grave in Joseph's garden is the keystone of the arch. If that cannot be maintained, as in the primitive church, the whole superstructure crumbles like a mass of clouds.”*

It continues to be a fact, much more than a doctrine. It is what the entire faith rests on.

We've seen over and over again in this series that the Corinthian church were people who had belonged to other religions, with varying beliefs on the afterlife, from heaven to no life at all after death. Paul didn't have Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, the four Gospels, to teach the Good News – they had not been written yet, so Paul was passing on the Gospel to people who were wondering about the eternal destination of their loved ones.

Kenneth Foreman tells us, *“Paul begins where he nearly always does: with the gospel which he preached. As he sums it up here, the gospel begins with the death of Christ. But Paul, in this short, summary says much more about the resurrection than about the cross. He emphasizes the resurrection of Christ as a fact, not a symbol, myth, legend, or some idea or vision created by faith. Christ was really raised from the dead; that is his basic fact. The story of the cross without the story of Easter would not be the gospel.”*

Paul's message of incredible hope encourages the Corinthians to . . .

Hold firmly to the word preached to you

- This Good News is by which we are being saved. And the message is that Christ died for us – in our place, for our sins. Paul is drawing this from the Greek Old Testament rendering from Isaiah 53, which reads, *because his soul was delivered to death: and he was numbered among the transgressors; and he bore the sins of many, and was delivered because of their iniquities.* Isaiah 53:12 (Septuagint) – which Jesus had quoted at the Last Supper. Jesus died for OUR sins.
- Paul adds in here that there is much more than his own testimony of the resurrected Lord. He points out that Peter (Paul calls him Cephas here) saw him first. The very person who denied Jesus three times right before the Crucifixion was the very first man to see the risen Jesus. Then he showed himself to the disciples – Paul refers to them as The Twelve – and they were no longer that since Judas was dead, but THE

TWELVE was their designation. Then he appeared to 500 others and James – his brother, who had rejected him as Messiah prior to the crucifixion. And then, Jesus appeared to Paul – on the road to Damascus. This one who had been a persecutor became a proclaimer because Jesus Christ himself had appeared to him. Paul didn't do anything normally – he tells the Corinthians his birth was an abnormal birth.

- He had seen the Risen Christ – with his own eyes. The very one who had been persecuting the church for believing in a person he believed to be dead and no longer making trouble, had a plan for Paul. He became an apostle – the least of all the apostles, but one nevertheless. In his words, *But by the grace of God I am what I am* 1 Corinthians 15:10. Gordon Fee says “*Frequently when Paul mentions God's grace on his behalf he refers to himself in this way. While a persecutor, of course he thought he was doing God a favor; for him this was zeal for the Lord and advancement in Jerusalem and Judaism. But on this side of his encounter with the risen Lord he saw himself for what he really was, the chief of sinners and persecutor of the Church of God, thus standing over against God himself and what he was doing in the world through Christ. Out of this encounter comes the basis of his theology of grace. Since God was gracious to him, God's enemy, he came eventually to realize that this is the way God is toward all, Jew and Gentile alike, making no distinctions. Since all alike are sinful, all alike are potential recipients of God's grace.*” So hold firmly to the gospel of grace and to . . .

The reality of the resurrection

- Paul points out, *For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.* 1 Corinthians 15:3-4. It is of the greatest importance – as we pointed out a bit ago – Christ died for OUR sins, then he was buried.
- Yes, he was buried. Pointing out that Jesus was buried, verifies the reality of the death. Dead people are buried. The visual Paul is painting is emphasizing the fact that a corpse was laid in the grave. In so doing he ensures that the resurrection that follows will be recognized as an objective reality, not merely a spiritual phenomenon. Jesus didn't come back as a ghost, Jesus came back as a living being in a living body. It was a given for the early church – yes, Jesus had died, but YES Jesus had then risen again on the third day. This is a reality, and it is the source of joy and hope that makes the celebration of Easter the most wonderful time of the year. *Because he lives, we can face tomorrow. Because he lives, all fear is gone. Because we know he holds the future and life is worth the living, just because he lives.*
- Let me take you on a little aside using a powerful thought from Gordon Fee that is helpful for us to hear as we seek to impact the world for Christ. Fee writes, “*To deny the objective reality of Christ's resurrection is to have a faith considerably different from Paul's. One wonders whether such faith is still the Christian faith. On the other hand, there are those who use this passage to try to prove the resurrection to unbelievers. (A case in point is a devotional I just finished this week by Josh and Sean McDowell based on Josh McDowell's book MORE THAN A CARPENTER, that made this very claim using this very scripture) What they fail to recognize is that such proofs are valid only to those who believe. Either one believes the witnesses or one does not. But the resurrection of Christ itself finally lies outside the ordinary categories of historical proof. What one may prove is that they believed in the bodily resurrection of Christ, and that such belief took an extraordinary, indeed a miraculous event, in order for it to have come into being. Nonetheless, our calling is to proclaim the resurrection as those who, with Paul are absolutely convinced of its reality and significance. Such conviction leads also to the proclamation of the gospel itself, the good news that God loves sinners and has made provision through Christ's death and Resurrection to overcome their alienation, so that they too may know divine forgiveness and have a sure hope for the future. This it would seem, is the lasting significance of this argument and its contents for today.*”

Conclusion: So is it a fact or is it a fable? Too many believers to count, many of them martyrs, who gave their lives while standing on the message of a sinless Christ who had died in their place, for their sins and the rest of humanity, and then rose again victorious over sin and death; have faithfully gone before us because it is fact. In the end, you need to decide. But facts are facts. Amen.