

QUESTIONS CHRISTIANS ASK:  
“WHAT IF THERE WERE NO EASTER?”

1 CORINTHIANS 15

APRIL 4, 1999 – SUNDAY, 11AM – DR. JACK GRAHAM

And we sing of the victory of the cross because after that dark day on Friday when our Lord was crucified, on the morning of the third day Jesus came out of that grave signifying His victory over death and our victory in Christ forever. He said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He that believes in Me, though he be dead, yet shall he live.”* And the cross is transformed from an ignominious symbol of death and torture to the glory of the cross and Calvary comes through again and again and again because of the risen Christ.

Would you take God’s word and turn with me to 1 Corinthians, the 15th chapter? We’ve been asking some questions lately... questions that Christians ask, because we do have questions. And there are times that we need clarification on the Scripture. We need resolution of our own doubts. And so we’ve been looking at some important questions for Christians. But there is no more important question for any of us, than the one that the Apostle Paul poses for us in 1 Corinthians, chapter 15.

What if there were no Easter? Can you imagine that? Think about the difference of history. Think about the difference in your own personal history. If there is... if there were no Easter?

Have you ever played the mental game of “What If?” What if I had been born in a different time and a different place? What if I went to a different school? What if I had chosen another career? What if I had married a different person? (Now this is the time you should turn to your spouse and say, “I would marry you all over again, honey.”) What if? And some of us wouldn’t change a thing. But frankly there are some who live in the world of would’ve, could’ve, should’ve. If only... what if... And they live a life of regret; regretting decisions of the past, and choices made and so forth.

But when you come to this question of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the question “What if?” is an incredible question. What if there is no resurrection? What if Easter is a myth? What if Christ is still in the grave? What if the disciples deceived us and made the whole thing up? These are questions that the Apostle Paul himself offers in 1 Corinthians 15 and in offering these questions, he leads us to an honest examination of our faith and comes to a glorious conclusion. Look at verse 12:

- 12 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?*  
*13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen.*  
*14 And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty.*

*15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up...if in fact the dead do not rise.*

*16 For if the dead do not rise then Christ is not risen.*

*17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins!*

*18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.*

*19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*

*20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

Yes, the Apostle Paul affirms... the Scripture says it again and again and again... the Christian faith rests upon the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everything we believe is bogus if Jesus Christ is not alive. What if there were no Easter?

If there were no Easter, then our message is meaningless. That's what the Apostle says. He says our preaching (verse 14) is empty, your faith is empty, we are false witnesses. If Jesus Christ is not alive... if Easter is a myth, then our preaching has no power, it certainly has no purpose, the Bible is a myth.

Begin by casting away ... throwing away your New Testament, all the stories of the New Testament... the Sermon on the Mount, the miracles of Jesus, the testimonies of the apostles... eliminate that portion of the Bible. And while you're at it, you might as well go ahead and eliminate the Old Testament as well because the Old Testament with the commandments and the prophecies certainly makes little sense apart from the coming of the Messiah. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament testify to the coming of the King... the coming of Jesus. And if Christ is not come and if He is not risen, then our message is meaningless. We would have to conclude that the disciples... the early followers of Christ perpetrated the greatest hoax in human history.

Read the book of Acts... read the New Testament and you will discover the constant theme of scripture is the reality of the resurrection. Jesus is alive and those apostles... disciples were transformed from cowards to courageous, bold witnesses of Jesus Christ. But to preach without the resurrection is to simply make a religious speech. The Corinthian Christians believed in the resurrection, but they were doubting and there were some among them in their community and the culture around them which doubted the resurrection; the resurrection of anyone much less the resurrection of Christ.

And so Paul is dealing with this entire issue of what is the resurrection and what is it like, and he's saying: If Christ is not risen, what's the point ... what's the point... if Christ is still in His grave? There would be no power to keep the commandments of God, there would be no driving motivation to live by the Ten Commandments, or the law of love... the law of Christ, if Christ is not risen. But Jesus came out of the grave to live in us... to empower us, and by His presence to enable us! But without the resurrection, you have nothing but a dead Savior... and a dead Savior is no Savior! That's why Paul said, "You are still in your sins if Christ be not risen."

I'm so glad to stand before you on this resurrection morning and declare that Jesus is alive! That the message is good news! That His death now makes sense! That the cross has a purpose! That He was not simply a martyr, but that He is, indeed, the Messiah! And our preaching is powerful because His Spirit lives! Christ is alive! We shout it! He is risen! He is risen, indeed!

William Sangster, one of the great preachers of the 20th century, lost his voice near the end of his life. He suffered from muscular atrophy and in his last days he was unable to speak. And on his last Easter he awakened... his daughter was there to attend to him and he wrote on a piece of paper, "How tragic to wake up on Easter morning and not be able to shout Jesus is alive!" But then He added another sentence. He said, "But more tragic! To have a voice and not shout, "Jesus is alive!" And God has given us a voice, and as long as I have life and breath and strength, I intend to keep on saying, "Jesus is alive!" The message has meaning because Christ has come out of the grave!

But there's something else Paul questions in this great mind... his logic moves us through. He says, "Not only... if there were no Easter, if Christ is not alive... not only is our message meaningless and we are false witnesses, but he says our faith is false, our faith is phoney! He says our faith is empty! Look down in verse 17:

*17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins.*

You see, Christian faith stands upon the Person of Christ, not upon religious tradition or teachings, but upon the Person and work of Jesus Christ... who He is and what He did. The identity of Jesus is the imperative of the Christian faith. And some of you through the years have heard the trilemma of Christ: Who He is? Is He Lord, is He liar or a lunatic? That's our choice because the Christian faith is built upon Jesus Christ; who He is and what He did! So you have a decision to make. Was Jesus a bad man? Was He a mad man? Or is He the God-Man?

The resurrection of Jesus Christ forever demonstrates that Jesus was not a bad man who claimed to be God but was not God. Nor was He was mad man who thought He was God and was not. But He is, indeed, the God-Man! He is dramatically different from any other, including all the religious leaders of time and the founders of world religions. Because you see, Jesus Christ claimed not to be merely a man sent from God, but God sent to man! And He came and lived and died and rose again.

Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:

*1 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel... (What is the Gospel? Here it is...)  
3 ...how that Christ died for your sins according to the Scriptures, He was buried, and on the third day He rose again, according to the Scripture.*

He claimed to be the Christ, the Savior, the Messiah, the God of the universe and the Lord of heaven and earth and of history! But if He is not risen, that's all a false claim. What a cruel joke to think that we could spend our days living for Christ... and some have even died for Christ and

poured out their blood for Him... and yet think that it is all for nothing!!? [flip tape] That if Christ is not risen, it means nothing, it is nothing, it is empty!

It is the message of Jesus Christ and His resurrection that lifts the Christian faith out of the graveyard of dead superstition and archaic religion, and makes it a living faith for millions! We come with living faith. The truth of Easter is history, but it is beyond history! It is the fact of the resurrection that we believe, but the fact of the resurrection becomes the force of the resurrection and we live with confidence and certainty and peace and hope because we believe in the meaning of Easter... the message of Easter... that Christ is alive!

The world would be a different place if people realized the reality of the resurrection. Can you imagine? Thousands and thousands and thousands of people go to church on Easter Sunday, but sometimes I wonder how many truly believe Jesus Christ is alive? That He is alive!

What if... we asked the question: What if there were no Easter? I now ask you the question: What if you truly believed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ? How would it change your life? How would it change your marriage? How would it change your family?

It would change everything! It would change the world. The world with all of its conflict and war! About the time we think we've got it figured out in the 20th century, it comes apart at the seams again! The greatest news the world has ever heard... as we've been looking back at the 20th century and all the advances of science and technology, we see the mass communication that takes place now. And yet, the greatest communication... the greatest message that was ever heard came out of a graveyard two thousand years ago when the angel announced, "*He is not here! He is risen!*" And the impact of those words have changed lives and changed history, and brought hope to the hopeless, and forever gives life meaning and purpose and fills the hole in the soul with hope... as David Gold spoke a moment ago.

We have all the science and technology and we have every expectation that this will advance more into the 21 century. We are discovering the secrets of the universe, but is the world a better place? Not as long as the human heart is empty. Not as long as we live with the predicament of sin and the problem of sin. The resurrection means that we can be forgiven of our sin! That we can be saved from death!

As I have lived on this earth nearly 50 years now, I've seen many dead men and women walking. Watching last evening a presentation on the first world war; they showed the trenches of Europe with our soldiers there and the soldiers of Europe, stacking bodies to stand upon, stacking bodies in those trenches... bodies of death perished in war... to protect themselves. And the announcer said those who were alive described those trenches as living graves.

Many people are living in death because, you see, death is not so much physical... it is physical... but there is the living death. There is separation from God and the emptiness that so many people feel.

John Mellencamp sang, "But life goes on after the thrill of living is gone." And many have lost the thrill of living. They're burned out and bored and exhausted.

And yet I've watched as people put their trust in Christ and experienced the joy of Easter and the reality of the resurrection. I've watched people put trembling hands into the hands... the nail-scarred hands of the risen Christ and to discover the joy of Easter every day and the power of His presence! Why? Because the Christ who lived, still lives today! And He is alive forevermore giving eternal life and hope and promise and meaning to those who believe! And we can know the forgiveness of sin. And we can know meaning in life and the mysteries of death in Jesus Christ. "Life is miserable", Paul said. *"If Christ is still in the grave, then we are of all men most miserable."*

You know, there is a sense in which I could say to you I would be a Christian... if there were no heaven, if there were no hell, if there were no resurrection. There's the sense in which the life that I have in Christ is so meaningful, and yet, to be absolutely honest, if there is nothing but a fable here... if our faith is futile... if Christ is not risen, "then eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die." In Christ there is meaning!

In his novel *The Lock* Lewis Carroll pictured a lock running around frantically. And someone asked the lock, "Why do you run at such a harried pace?" And the lock said, "I'm looking for a key to unlock me! I'm looking for a key to unlock me!" That's what people are looking for... a key to unlock them. To unlock them from the chains of their past. To unlock the future and the hope. Jesus is that Key that unlocks the lock!

The disciples were locked behind closed doors fearful for their lives... after Christ was dead, crucified, gone... they were locked in that room! And Jesus came into the room, alive and showed Himself alive, and those disciples were changed. And their lives were unlocked... their lives were leashed with a message of hope and eternal life to all who would believe the message. They became witnesses of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Paul says in verse 20:

*20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

That means... "Christ, the firstfruits"... that means this life is just the hors d'oeuvres 'cause get ready! Something better is coming! This is just the beginning because in Christ we have life!

One final thing... Not only is our message meaningless if there were no Easter, and our faith foolish, but our future is final. I mean, there is no future! That's why he says in verse 19:

*19 If in this life only we have hope... we are all men pitiful.*

And this says in verse 17:

*17 If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!  
18 Those who have fallen asleep... they have perished.*

They're gone... don't expect to see them again, don't expect to see your loved ones again if Christ is not risen.

Now death is described as the final enemy. Some people face death with stoic resignation. Others are paralyzed by the fear of the prospect of death. But the fact is death is democratic... everybody participates. One out of one dies. Sort of like that notable coach Bum Phillips said, "There's two kinds of coaches in the world: them that's fired and them that's gonna be fired!" Well, there's two kinds of people in the world: them that's dead and them that's gonna be dead! And if Christ is not risen... if there is no Easter, then we die and we're done! No future, no hope, no life! But His resurrection is the guarantee that if He lives, we also shall live.

As a pastor I've stood with families at gravesides, I've walked with them in grief. And I'm so grateful that I've been able to remind them of the hope and the promise of heaven in the future in Jesus Christ. If I did not believe in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I would resign my position as pastor immediately! I wouldn't know what to say to people. What would you say... what could you say, if there is no resurrection?

For centuries the people in Europe looked at the sea that we know as the Atlantic Ocean and they wondered: "What is beyond? What's out there beyond?" And the scientists of the times concluded, "There's nothing beyond. Sail to the edge as far as you can see, and you will fall off the square earth into oblivion. Nothing more." they said. And so on the Spanish coat of arms the words were written: "*Non pluse ultra*... 'There is nothing beyond'".

But then a young man by the name of Christopher Columbus sailed westward and disappeared in the distance. And the people wondered will he ever return? Will he come back? And sometime later with sails flying high, Christopher Columbus and his crew returned. They came back and they spoke of their discoveries and the unbelievable sights and sounds and the discover of a fantastic land out there. They said, "Yes, there is more beyond." And so the Spanish coat of arms was changed from "*Non pluse ultra*" to "*Plus ultra*... 'More beyond... more beyond'".

There was another young Man and He sailed into the darkness on the cross. He sailed westward into the pit. People wondered, "Is there anything beyond the dark waters of death? Will Jesus ever come back?", because He sailed to the edge and plunged into the pit. But that glorious Easter morning He came back and He said, "I have been beyond and back, and there is more... there is more! I am alive forevermore!" We have hope, we have the promise of the future because Jesus Christ is alive!

If Easter be not true,  
Then faith must mount on broken wing;  
Then hope no more is mortal Spring.  
Then love must lose her mighty urge;  
And life prove a phantom and a dirge,  
If Easter be not true.

We come today to say, "It is true, it is true, it is true." And I just love to tell that story. I love to tell the story of Jesus Christ... of who He is and what He has done. It just rings my bell everyday to be able to speak and to say He is alive, He is alive, hallelujah! Jesus is alive! Easter is real because the resurrection is real and Jesus Christ is Lord! Would you stand with me?

I want to invite you to know Christ the Lord. What would happen if you truly believed? How would your life change? How would your future look? What would your marriage be like? What would the next day of your life be like if Christ Jesus came into your life? If the living Lord took charge and command of your life? I invite you to trust Him today. Let me ask that no one be leaving or moving because this is the most significant and important and sensitive time of the service... when people are coming to Christ... when the miracle takes place. And so I invite you right now from where you stand to put your trust in Jesus Christ.

Here's what the Bible says. *"If we confess with our mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in our hearts that God has raised Him from the dead, we shall be saved."* Not hope so, think so, maybe so. We shall know that we are saved!

And so our ministers will be standing here to receive those who will come forward in confession of your faith. And I invite you to put your trust in Jesus. We'll take an open Bible and explain to you what it means to know Christ, and you can walk out of here knowing that it's real... it's real, praise God, the doubts are settled. I know, I know it's real! Christ will live in you. Come to Him.

And there are others as believers in Christ, you want to come in profession of that faith and uniting with this church. You know, immediately after the resurrection the church of Jesus Christ was formed and the church was established as a testimony of the resurrection. I want to be a part of everything that Jesus is a part of, and Jesus loves His church and gave Himself for it. Come and be a part of His church today. Take that step of faith and commitment and join with us here in the minister of Prestonwood.

Father, thank You for the joy of proclaiming the Good News! That our message has meaning, that our faith is real and that our future is secure because of the power of the resurrection. And now we pray that during this invitation that You would give strength and hope and faith to those who will come to You. In Jesus' name. AMEN