

Second Reading 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time C Exegesis

Reading II

[1 Cor 15:12, 16-20](#)

Brothers and sisters:

If Christ is preached as raised from the dead,
how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead?
If the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised,
and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain;
you are still in your sins.
Then those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.
If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,
we are the most pitiable people of all.

But now Christ has been raised from the dead,
the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

(ii) If *Christ has not risen, the apostolic preaching is a waste of time and Christian faith is fruitless* (15:12-28). Christ's resurrection is the crowning event of salvation history and man's victory over sin, Satan, and death. As Adam brought death, Christ brings resurrection from the dead. The Christian who is incorporated in Christ by baptism shares in his risen life. This final fruit of redemption in Christ will be realized for the Christian at the Lord's parousia when the dead rise in glory.**20. first fruits:** This denotes more than first in time. It is a Jewish cultic term. The offering of the aparchē (first fruits) was the symbol of the dedication of the entire harvest to God. So, the resurrection of Christ involves the resurrection of all who are in him.¹

Douay-Rheims Scripture followed by Haydock's Commentary

12 Now if Christ be preached, that he arose again from the dead, how do some among you say, that there is no resurrection of the dead? 16 For if the dead rise not again, neither is Christ risen again. 17 And if Christ be not risen again, your faith is vain, for you are yet in your sins. 18 Then they also that are fallen asleep in Christ, are perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. 20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, the firstfruits of them that sleep

¹Brown, R. E., Fitzmyer, J. A., & Murphy, R. E. 1968]; Published in electronic form by Logos Research Systems, 1996. *The Jerome Biblical commentary* (electronic ed.). Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, NJ

Ver. 13-23. He brings many reasons to convince them of the resurrection. 1. If *there be no resurrection* for others, *Christ is not risen again*: but his resurrection (as he tells them ver. 4) was foretold *in the Scriptures*. 2. *And if Christ be not risen again, ... your faith is also in vain*, this being one of the chief articles of your belief. 3. We shall be found guilty of lies and impostures; and yet we have confirmed this doctrine by many miracles. 4. It would follow that you are not freed from your *sins*; i.e. unless Christ, by his resurrection, has triumphed over sin and death. 5. Without a resurrection we Christians, who live under self-denials and persecutions, would be the most miserable of all men, neither happy in this world nor in the next, for the happiness of the soul requires also a happy resurrection of the body. 6. Christ is *the first-fruits*, and the first begotten of the dead, of those *who have slept*: and by his being the first-fruits, it must be supposed that others also will rise after him. 7. As death came by the first man, (*Adam*) so the second man (Christ) came to repair the death of men, both as to body and soul; and without Christ's resurrection, both the souls of men have remained dead in their original sins, and their bodies shall not rise again. (Witham)

The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (non-Catholic)

The Importance of Bodily Resurrection

(15:12–19)

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? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. (15:12–19)

As Paul reminded them in verses 1–11, the Corinthian Christians already believed in Christ's resurrection, else they would not have been Christians. That affirmation of the reality of the resurrection formed the basis for his double-edged argument in chapter 15: Because Christ was raised, resurrection from the dead obviously is possible; and, on the other hand, unless men in general can be resurrected, Christ could not have been raised. The two resurrections stand or fall together; there could not be one without the other. Furthermore, if there is no resurrection, the gospel is meaningless and worthless.

It seems strange that some of those believers could have accepted one part of the truth without the other. The cause of this confusion, as of many of their other problems, lay in the continuing influence of the pagan philosophies and religions out of which many of them had come. The philosophical and spiritualistic thought of Paul's day, just as in our own, had many erroneous ideas of what happens to human beings after death.

Some religions have taught soul sleep, in which the body dies and disintegrates, while the soul or spirit rests. Materialists believe in utter extinction, total annihilation. Nothing human, physical or otherwise, survives after death. Death ends it all. Some religions teach reincarnation, wherein the soul or spirit is continually recycled from one form to another—even from human to animal or animal to human. Others believe in what is generally described as absorption, in which the spirit, or at least a certain part of the spirit, returns back to its source and is absorbed back into the ultimate divine mind or being. That belief is reflected in a statement of the contemporary philosopher Leslie Weatherhead: "Would it really matter if I were lost like a drop of water in the ocean, if I could be one shining particle in some glorious wave that broke in utter splendor in perfect beauty on the shores of some eternal sea?"

In all those views, human person-hood and individuality are forever lost at death. Whatever, if anything, survives is no longer a person, no longer an individual, no longer a unique being.

A basic tenet of much ancient Greek philosophy was dualism, a concept generally attributed to Plato. Dualism considered everything spiritual to be intrinsically good and everything physical to be intrinsically evil. To anyone holding that view the idea of a resurrected body was repugnant. For them, the very reason for going to an afterlife was to escape all things physical. They considered the body a tomb or a corpse, to which, in this life, their souls were shackled. For those Greeks, their bodies were the last things they would want to take along to the next life. They believed in the immortality of the soul but strongly opposed the idea of a resurrection of the body—as Paul had experienced when he preached on the Areopagus: "Now when they [the Athenian philosophers] heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer" (Acts 17:32). The typical view of dualism was expressed by Seneca: "When the day shall come which shall part this mixture of divine and human here where I found it, I will leave my body, and myself I will give back to the gods."

It is possible that even some of the Jewish members of the Corinthian church doubted the resurrection. Despite the fact that resurrection is taught in the Old Testament, some Jews, such the Sadducees, did not believe in it.

In the ancient book of Job we read, "Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God" (Job 19:26; cf. Ps. 17:15). Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones (37:1–14) pictures the restored nation of Israel but also suggests the bodily resurrection of God's people. Daniel's prediction of resurrection is clear, speaking of the resurrection of

cf. *confer* (Lat.), compare

the lost as well as of the saved. “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2).

But whereas the Old Testament teaching about the resurrection was limited and incomplete, the New Testament teaching is extensive. Though the gospels were not yet written, Jesus’ life was well known and the Corinthians doubtless had learned of His teaching from Peter and others. “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:44), He proclaimed to some of His Jewish critics near the Sea of Galilee. To Martha He said, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me shall live even if he dies” (John 11:25).

The foundation of apostolic teaching was that Christ rose from the dead and that all who believed in Him would also be raised. As Peter and John were preaching in Jerusalem soon after Pentecost, “the priests and the captain of the temple guard, and the Sadducees, came upon them, being greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:1–2). Paul had written the Thessalonians several years before: he wrote 1 Corinthians, “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first” (1 Thess. 4:16). He doubtlessly had taught the Corinthians the same truth, and in his next letter to them he says, “He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will present us with you” (2 Cor. 4:14).

In spite of the fact that the resurrection of believers is taught in the Old Testament, in the teaching of Jesus during His earthly ministry, and in the teaching of the apostles, serious doubts about it had infected many of the Corinthian Christians. It is those doubts that Paul forcefully counters in 1 Corinthians 15.

His first argument is simple and logical: **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?** The construction here (*ei* with the indicative) implies a condition that is true. The Corinthians believed in Christ’s resurrection (1 Cor. 15:1, 11) and that He was presently alive (emphasized by the perfect tense of *egeirō*, **has been raised**). How then could they logically deny the general truth of resurrection? If Christ has been raised, resurrection obviously is possible.

In verses 13–19 the apostle demonstrates that the resurrection is not only possible but essential to the faith, by giving seven disastrous consequences, four theological and three personal, that would result if there were no resurrection: (1) Christ would not be risen; (2) preaching of the gospel would be meaningless; (3) faith in Christ would be worthless; (4) all witnesses to and all preachers of the resurrection would be liars; (5) all men would still be in their sins; (6) all former believers would have eternally perished; and (7) Christians would be the most pitiable people on earth.

THE THEOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF NO RESURRECTION

But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. (15:13–15)

CHRIST WOULD NOT BE RISEN

The first and most obvious consequence of there being no resurrection would be that **not even Christ has been raised**. “As anyone should easily deduce,” Paul argues, “if the dead cannot rise, Christ did not Use.”

It is likely that the disbelieving Corinthians got around that problem by claiming that Christ was not really a man, or was not fully a man. Because of their dualistic orientation, as discussed above, they assumed that because Christ was divine He could not possibly have been human, and therefore only appeared to be human. Consequently He did not really die but only appeared to die. According to this view, His appearances between the crucifixion (an illusion) and the ascension were simply continuing manifestations that only *seemed* to be bodily.

That view, of course, cannot square with what the gospel writers, Jesus Himself, and the apostles taught. The gospel accounts of Jesus’ earthly life and ministry are of a person who was entirely human. He was born to a human mother, and He ate, drank, slept, became tired, was crucified, was stabbed, bled, and died. At His first appearance to the twelve after the crucifixion, Jesus made a point of having the disciples touch Him in order to prove that He was not simply a spirit, which “does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” He next asked for something to eat and then “took it and ate it before them” (Luke 24:39–43).

At Pentecost Peter proclaimed that “Jesus the Nazarene [was] a man attested to you by God” and that “this Man delivered up by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross” (Acts 2:22–23). Later in the same message he proclaimed that Jesus was still alive, not merely in spirit but in body. He told of David’s speaking “of the resurrection of the Christ, that He was neither abandoned to Hades, nor did His flesh suffer decay. This Jesus God raised up again” (Acts 2:31–32). In his opening words to the Romans, Paul makes it dear that “the gospel of God” for which he was set apart was “concerning His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:1–4). Jesus’ resurrection evidenced both His humanity and His deity.

In His vision to John on Patmos Christ declared, “I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev. 1:17–18). In his second letter John points up the crucial

importance of believing that Jesus was born, lived, died, and was raised up a human being: “For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist” (2 John 7).

The Corinthians could not fall back on the pagan notion that Christ only appeared to be human. He was fully human; He physically lived and died and lived again. Therefore, if there is no such thing as physical resurrection, **not even Christ has been raised.**

PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL WOULD BE MEANINGLESS

The second consequence of there being no resurrection would be that **preaching** of the gospel would be **vain**, completely meaningless. As Paul had just said, the heart of the gospel is Christ’s death and resurrection on our behalf. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures” (15:3–4). Apart from the resurrection Jesus could not have conquered sin or death or hell, and those three great evils would forever be man’s conquerors.

Without the resurrection the good news would be bad news, and there would be nothing worth preaching. Without the resurrection the gospel would be an empty, hopeless message of meaningless nonsense. Unless our Lord conquered sin and death, making a way for men to follow in that victory, there is no gospel to proclaim.

FAITH IN CHRIST WOULD BE WORTHLESS

Just as no resurrection would make preaching Christ meaningless, it would also make faith in Him worthless. Faith in such a gospel would be **vain** (*kenos*, empty, fruitless, void of effect, to no purpose). A dead savior could not give life. If the dead do not rise, Christ did not rise and we will not rise. We then could only say with the psalmist, “Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure” (Ps. 73:13), or with the Servant in Isaiah, “I have toiled in vain, I have spent My strength for nothing and vanity” (Isa. 49:4).

If there were no resurrection, the hall of the faithful in Hebrews 11 would instead be the hall of the foolish. Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Moses, Rahab, David, the prophets, and all the others would have been faithful for nothing. They would have been mocked, scourged, imprisoned, stoned, afflicted, ill-treated, and put to death completely in **vain**. All believers of all ages would have believed for nothing, lived for nothing, and died for nothing.

ALL WITNESSES TO AND PREACHERS OF THE RESURRECTION WOULD BE LIARS

Moreover we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that He raised Christ, whom He did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. If there is no such thing as resurrection of the dead, then every

person who claimed to have witnessed the risen Christ and every person who preached the risen Christ was a liar, including Paul and the other apostles (**we**). They would be pseudo-witnesses, claiming falsely to be from God and witnessing falsely **against** [concerning] **God that He raised Christ**.

To deny the resurrection is to call the apostles and every other leader of the New Testament church not simply mistaken but willfully mistaken, that is, liars. There is no possibility, as many liberals claim, that such a mistake could have been innocent or naive. Those witnesses could not have been honest men who unwittingly gave bad advice. If Christ was not raised from the dead, they not only were not sent by God with a message from Him, but were liars who would have had to conspire together in order for their lies to have been so consistent and harmonized.

If the apostles, the prophets, and the New Testament writers lied about the heart of the gospel why should they be believed about anything else? Why should their moral teachings be considered inspired and lofty if they so blatantly falsified their teaching about Jesus' resurrection? All New Testament truth stands or falls together based on the resurrection.

Not only that, but those witnesses would have testified, preached, and taught a lie for which they were maligned, beaten, imprisoned, and often martyred. Such self-sacrifice, however, is not the stuff of which charlatans are made. People do not die to preserve a lie.

Although Paul does not mention it specifically, it clearly follows that if the resurrection were not true, Christ Himself lied, or at best was tragically mistaken. In either case, He hardly would have qualified as the divine Son of God or the world's Savior and Lord. Jesus would not have been Victor but victim. Or, if the New Testament writers completely misrepresented what both Christ and the apostles taught, then the New Testament would be a worthless document that no reasonable person would trust.

THE PERSONAL CONSEQUENCES OF NO RESURRECTION

For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied. (15:16–19)

Next Paul gives what may be described as three personal consequences that would result if there were no such thing as resurrection from the dead. Like the other four, these consequences have serious theological significance, but they also state much more directly how believers would be affected.

ALL MEN WOULD STILL BE IN THEIR SINS

In verse 16 Paul restates his major argument: **If the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.** A dead Christ would be the chief disastrous consequence from which all the other consequences would result.

The next consequence Paul mentions is both personal and serious: **if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins.** After repeating the consequence that believers' faith would be **worthless**, or vain (v. 14), the apostle points to the obvious additional result that believers would be no better off spiritually than unbelievers. Christians would **still** be in their **sins** just as much as the most wicked and unbelieving pagan. We would all be in the same boat as the unbelievers to whom Jesus said, "You ... shall die in your sin" (John 8:21).

If Jesus did not rise from the dead, then sin won the victory over Christ and therefore continues to be victorious over all men. If Jesus remained dead, then, when we die, we too will remain dead and damned. "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), and if we remain dead, then death and eternal punishment are the only prospects of believer and unbeliever alike. The purpose of trusting in Christ is for forgiveness of sins, because it is from sin that we need to be saved. "Christ died for our sins" and "was buried, and ... raised on the third day" (1 Cor. 15:3–4). If Christ was not raised, His death was in vain, our faith in Him is in vain, and our sins are still counted against us. We are still dead in trespasses and sins and will forever remain spiritually dead and sinful. If Christ was not raised, then He did not bring forgiveness of sins or salvation or reconciliation or spiritual life, either for now or for eternity.

But God *did* raise "Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification" (Rom. 4:24–25). Because Christ *does* live, we too shall live (John 14:19). "The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross. He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:30–31).

ALL FORMER BELIEVERS WOULD HAVE ETERNALLY PERISHED

If there is no resurrection, **then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished.** **Fallen asleep** does not refer to what is often called soul sleep but was a common euphemism for death (cf. vv. 6, 20; Matt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 2 Pet. 3:4). Every saint, Old Testament or Christian, who had died would have forever **perished**. Obviously the same consequence would apply to every saint who has died since Paul wrote. Paul himself, the other apostles, Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, D. L. Moody, and every other believer of every other age would spend eternity in torment, without God and without hope. Their faith would have been in vain, their sins would have been unforgiven, and their destiny would be damnation.

v. verse

CHRISTIANS WOULD BE THE MOST PITIABLE PEOPLE ON EARTH

In light of the other consequences, the last is rather obvious. **If we have hoped in Christ in this life only** [and we have; *ei* with the indicative] **we are of all men most to be pitied**. Without the resurrection, and the salvation and blessings it brings, Christianity would be pointless and pitiable. Without the resurrection we would have no Savior, no forgiveness, no gospel, no meaningful faith, no life, and no hope of any of those things.

To have **hoped in Christ in this life only** would be to teach, preach, suffer, sacrifice, and work entirely for nothing. If Christ is still dead, then He not only cannot help us in regard to the life to come but He cannot help us now. If He cannot grant us eternal life, He cannot improve our earthly life. If He is not alive, where would be our source of peace, joy, or satisfaction *now*. The Christian life would be a mockery, a charade, a tragic joke.

A Christian has no Savior but Christ, no Redeemer but Christ, no Lord but Christ. Therefore if Christ was not raised, He is not alive, and our Christian life is lifeless. We would have nothing to justify our faith, our Bible study, our preaching or witnessing, our service for Him or our worship of Him, and nothing to justify our hope either for this life or the next. We would deserve nothing but the compassion reserved for fools.

But we are *not* to be pitied, for Paul immediately continues, “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” (15:20).

THE REDEEMER

But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep. For since by a man came death, by a man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. (15:20–22)

First Paul reaffirms Christ's resurrection: **But now Christ has been raised from the dead**, a truth his readers already acknowledged and believed (vv. 1–2). The words “and become,” found in some translations (e.g., the KJV), do not come first in the original text and are misleading. Christ did not become the **first fruits** at some time after His resurrection, but at the moment of His resurrection, by the very fact of His resurrection. His being raised made Him the first fruits of all who would be raised.

Before Israelites harvested their crops they were to bring a representative sample, called the first fruits, to the priests as an offering to the Lord (Lev. 23:10). The full harvest could not be made until the first fruits were offered. That is the point of Paul's figure here. Christ's own resurrection was **the first fruits** of the resurrection “harvest” of

the believing dead. In His death and resurrection Christ made an offering of Himself to the Father on our behalf.

The significance of the first fruits, however, not only was that they preceded the harvest but that they were a first installment of the harvest. The fact that Christ was **the first fruits** therefore indicates that something else, namely the harvest of the rest of the crop, is to follow. In other words, Christ's resurrection could not have been in isolation from ours. His resurrection *requires* our resurrection, because His resurrection was part of the larger resurrection of God's redeemed.

The resurrection of which Paul speaks here is permanent resurrection. Both the Old and New Testaments tell of persons who died and were miraculously brought back to life (1 Kings 17:22; 2 Kings 4:34–36; 13:21; Luke 7:15; John 11:44). But all of those persons died again. Even those whom Jesus raised—the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus's daughter, and Lazarus—eventually died again. Christ Himself, however, was the first to be raised never to die again.

As in 15:6, 18 (cf. Matt. 27:52; Acts 7:60; 2 Pet. 3:4), **those who are asleep** refers to the dead, in this instance to the righteous dead, whose spirits have gone to be with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8; cf. Phil. 1:23) but whose remains are in the grave, awaiting recomposition and resurrection.

Through Christ, as a **man, came the resurrection of the dead**, just as through Adam, the first **man, came death**. Paul's point here is that Jesus' humanness was inextricably involved both in His resurrection and in ours. It was because Jesus died, was buried, and was raised as a **man** that He could become the **first fruits** of all other men who would be raised to glory. As already noted, the first fruits and the harvest were from the same crop.

cf. *confer* (Lat.), compare