

Affirming the Resurrection

The man in my office had just turned forty. Though both his parents were still alive, this had suddenly and deeply impressed him with his own mortality. Taking me to the cemetery behind the church, he asked, “Can you tell me there is anything more than the grave?”

Yes, I could, and I did. We talked for a long time about the resurrection of Jesus Christ and about it being the promise of our own, and we prayed for the grace to believe. Grace was granted. The man believes in the goodness and power of God and in God’s victory over death in the new life of the resurrection.

I share this to emphasize the importance of our preaching, teaching, and affirming the resurrection, and most of all to emphasize the importance of the truth and reality of the resurrection itself. The Bible in general and the New Testament in particular teach the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is the witness of the disciples that the risen, crucified Christ confronted them. They put it in the only language they knew, that they saw him, heard him, and were commissioned by him. There is nothing in the New Testament to support the Willi Marxsen’s contention: “The declaration that Jesus has risen came to be made” as “an inference derived from personal faith.” Quite the opposite: the resurrection was the foundation for their faith, not an inference from it. If any would deny the resurrection, or decline to affirm it, or refuse to teach or preach it, he or she bears the burden of going against the teaching of scripture.

Moreover, it has always been the claim of the Christian church that the resurrection of Christ really happened and that it has implications for our own. Belief in the resurrection stands at the heart of the Christian faith. As John Calvin wrote in his commentary on the Gospel according to John, chapter 20, “The resurrection of Christ is the chief article of our faith, and without it the hope of eternal life fails.” And as recently as “A Brief Statement of Faith”, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has affirmed: “God raised this Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.” Without the resurrection, there would be no Christ and no Christian faith. If any would deny the resurrection, or decline to affirm it, or refuse to teach or preach it, he or she bears the burden of going against the faith of the church.

Paul wrote long ago of the absurdity of denying the resurrection:

Now if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is

no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied. (1 Corinthians 15:12-19)

It is clear that if Christ had not been raised from the dead, he would not be alive, and we would have no good hope for the future. Moreover, death would be given the final word about who we are and what our lives mean. Death would be Lord instead of Christ being Lord. The whole Christian faith would be rendered null, void, and meaningless. Without the resurrection, nothing else in the Christian faith would make sense. There would be no reason to believe, or to worship, or to have churches, seminaries, theologies, or theologians. It is unconscionable that any who are responsible for the teaching, preaching, and leadership of the church and who do not believe in the resurrection could draw their salaries and their livings from the gifts and the institutions of those who do believe.

It is essential for the church, not only on Easter and at funerals but also every day of the year, to teach and emphasize the reality of the resurrection. The disciples were encountered by the risen and living Christ, who stood over and against them as the reigning Lord of the universe. It is our responsibility and privilege to continue to tell people this good news. God raised Jesus Christ to new life as the first fruits of a large harvest of resurrection. It is especially important to share words not of empty comfort but of truth and power as we stand with people at the grave.

Affirming the resurrection does not commit one to particular theories about the resurrection body. Modesty is appropriate in areas where we have such limited knowledge. But affirming the resurrection does mean affirming that the God and Father of Jesus Christ is not only Creator, Sustainer, and Judge, but also Redeemer. It means affirming that the power of God is greater than the power of death, that death is a broken power, and that God has purposes for our lives which even death cannot destroy.

Though eventually death will claim us every one, it shall not hold us long. We do not belong to death. We belong to God in life. We belong to God in death. We continue to belong to God in the new life beyond death. So we rejoice in the resurrection. This is the faith by which we live. This is the good hope by which we face the future.

Affirming the resurrection is essential to the Christian faith. It is essential to the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and it is essential to the pastoral care of the people. If there are teachers and preachers in the church who are unwilling to affirm it clearly and unequivocally, they should step aside and let those who do affirm it teach and preach. If there are ministers, elders, or deacons who are unwilling to affirm it, they should have the integrity to step down from office.

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