

**“WHAT IF EASTER NEVER HAPPENED?”**  
**(1 Corinthians 15:12-19)**

Some years ago, a group of distinguished historians got together to discuss an intriguing question: What if some pivotal events in history never took place. From their discussions came forth a book in which each historian took a famous event in history of their choosing and imagined what the world would be like if that event had not happened. Some of the “what-ifs” discussed were:

- What if the south had not lost the battle of Gettysburg? Many think the battle of Gettysburg was the turning point of the Civil War, and the south could very well have gone on to win the war if Gettysburg had gone the other way.
- Another historian pondered what would have happened if John Wilkes Booth’s bullet had missed Lincoln? Lincoln was in a unique position to pull the north and south together, and if he had lived reconstruction might have produced more positive results.
- The list of what-ifs could go on and on: What if Germany and Japan had won World War 2? So much of history would be different if an event or two had turned out the other way.

The biggest “what-if” of history, without a doubt, is the resurrection of Jesus. What if Jesus had stayed dead and buried in His grave? This scenario was actually played out in a movie called *The Body*. In the movie an Arab merchant in Jerusalem discovers a skeleton in ancient tomb beneath his hardware shop. The skeleton showed evidence of a crucifixion, and coins and pottery in the tomb dated to the year Christ died. Also found on the skeleton were faint markings on the skull consistent with a crown of thorns and a nick was found on the ribs – all pointing to the conclusion that this was none other than the body of Jesus. A priest is quickly dispatched by the Vatican to disprove the evidence. When the priest cannot disprove it, his faith begins to waver and he leaves the church. The premise of the movie is that if someone actually found the remains of Jesus, the very foundation of Christianity would crumble.

And that premise is correct – both Bible-believing Christians and skeptics agree that the Christian faith stands or falls on the resurrection of Christ. If the resurrection can be proved not to have happened, everything about the Christian faith unravels. This led the Apostle Paul to write a “what if” scenario in 1 Corinthians 15 spelling out the ramifications had Easter never taken place.

Paul devotes an entire chapter to talk about the resurrection because some of the Corinthian believers were confused about the afterlife and the future of their body and soul. In the first eleven verses he stresses the importance of the gospel that can be summarized in ten words: Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and rose again. He goes on to describe the many appearances Jesus made following His resurrection that proved He was alive. Those who saw Jesus were radically changed and devoted their life to telling the world the good news that Jesus is alive and could save them from their sins.

In verse 12 Paul says, “But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” Paul says, “I and other apostles clearly preached that Christ rose again, and this was the message you believed. If you believe Christ rose again, why do you not believe you will also rise again?” The two resurrections stand or fall together – there cannot be one without the other.

The problem was that most of the Corinthian believers had been saved right out of Greek paganism and many of these ideas and philosophies still lingered in their minds. Philosophers like Epicurus taught that there is no life after death – once you die that’s it – your body and your soul simply cease to exist. You might as well live it up now, because this life is all there is. This is the predominant philosophy of our own culture as people live as though this life is all that matters and they try to fit all they can into this life, check off the items on their bucket list, because once you die you won’t have another chance.

Another Greek philosopher, Plato, taught something a little different. He said that once you die your soul lives on while the body does not. The body, Plato said, is bad and evil – it’s prone to disease and death – who would want a body after they die? Plato taught that once you die your body ceases to be while your soul is absorbed into the spirit world where you’re no longer a tangible person with an identity. This philosophy is still around today in new age religions, all of which deny a future resurrection of the body. The soul just keeps being reincarnated into another body until the soul reaches perfection.

Paul says, “You can’t mix the teachings of Greek philosophy together with biblical, Christian teaching because they teach two different things. Greek philosophy says there is no resurrection of the body, but the Bible does.” For example, Job in the Old Testament, who suffered one tragedy after the other, was able in faith to look up from his ash heap of suffering and say, “After my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God.” What’s he saying? When my suffering is over and my body goes into the ground, there will come a day when I will see God in my flesh – not just his soul, but in his body. In the New Testament Jesus often spoke of a future resurrection. In John 11:25 He said, “I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die.”

Paul goes in in verses 13-19 to imagine the disastrous consequences if there is no resurrection of the dead... “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. 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. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

Paul lays out four life-altering ramifications if there is no resurrection of the dead. The first is **what no resurrection says about Christ**. Very simply, it means that **Christ is dead**. Verse 13, “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised.” And verse 16, “For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either.”

Paul says, “If you say that there is no resurrection for us, you’re saying there was no resurrection for Christ – because His resurrection and our resurrection is a package deal.” Colossians 1:18 says that Jesus is the “firstborn of the dead,” meaning that Jesus is the first human being to rise from the dead, and makes all future resurrections possible.

When Christ returns to earth, 1 John 3:2 says, “When we see Him, we will be like Him.” If Jesus had flesh and bones after He rose again, we too will have real bodies. If Jesus was able to walk through locked doors, we too will have bodies that are not limited to space and time. We won’t just be spirits floating in space, but be real persons with real bodies.

Philippians 3:21 says that when Jesus comes again, He will “transform our lowly bodies to be like His glorious body.” I love that phrase, “Lowly bodies.” Does your body ever feel lowly? They say the moment we’re born we begin to die, and the peak age is 19. If you’re 19, enjoy yourself because after that, it’s all downhill. As Christians we don’t worry too much about our bodies – we take care of it, or should – but we know that any day we’re going to get a brand-new body. Amen? But none of this can happen if Jesus has not been raised.

If there is no resurrection, it also means that **everything Christ claimed about Himself is a lie.** Every other religion in the world can continue on with a founding leader who is dead. Buddha was a teacher who lived and died 500 years before Jesus, but he died and is buried – yet Buddhists still practice their faith. Mohammed lived and died 600 after Jesus and is buried in Medina – yet Muslims continue to practice his teachings. But we can’t do that as Christians because Jesus staked everything – His life, His message, His name – on His resurrection. He claimed that He would rise again and come back to raise us from the dead. Everything hinges on the resurrection.

Not only is Jesus still dead if there is no resurrection, but Jesus is a liar because He kept telling everyone that He would rise again. If Jesus was a liar, then He would not be someone worthy of giving your life to. If He was a liar, He should not even be considered a great man or teacher.

Anyone can make claims, but Jesus backed-up His words by doing just what He said He would do: rise again from the dead. The resurrection authenticates that Jesus is exactly who He claimed to be: the Son of God come from heaven to die for the sins of the world.

Not only would no resurrection tell us something about Jesus, it tells us something about **those who preach the gospel of Jesus.** In verse 14 Paul says, “And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless.” Paul and the other apostles preached the good news that Jesus died for our sins so we could be saved from condemnation. If Jesus is still in grave, there would be no good news to preach and anyone preaching about a dead Savior would be a fool.

Paul and the other apostles gave up everything to preach Christ. All of them, with the exception of the Apostle John, died a violent death. Paul suffered greatly for preaching Christ – he was whipped too many times to count, chased out of town and put into prison, he’d been robbed and beat up, three times he was shipwrecked, he spent one whole night adrift at sea, he went without food and shelter many, many times. Why would he keep preaching if what he was preaching was a lie?

This hits home to me because preaching is what I do for a living, and while I have not been flogged or shipwrecked for preaching, I have pretty much devoted my whole life to preaching Christ. I spent four years in Bible College and another four years in seminary preparing for the ministry – I learned Greek and Hebrew – and wrote hundreds of pages of paper on a typewriter – not a computer, but a typewriter!

I estimated this week that I’ve probably preached close to 2200 sermons, and you’ve heard a good number of them. If an archeologist in Jerusalem found Jesus’ bones and proved that the resurrection was a hoax, then I have completely thrown away the last 40 years of my life and every word I’ve spoken to you up here means absolutely nothing. And you don’t come out looking so good yourself – paying me a salary to talk about stuff that never happened.

What's more, in verse 15 Paul says that we who tell others the good news of Jesus are liars... "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." Paul says that if Jesus is not risen from the dead, he and the other apostles would be frauds and liars. The reason Jesus' body has not been found, some skeptics say, is because Jesus' disciples went to the tomb under cover of darkness and stole the body and claimed He had been raised from the dead. Besides the fact that it would be virtually impossible to sneak past Roman guards surrounding the tomb who were under the penalty of death if anything happened to the body of Jesus, there is the fact that people do not willingly die for a lie. People do not willingly sacrifice everything for something that they know is absolutely false, and certainly not these apostles.

Imagine a conversation like this taking place following Jesus' death: "Hey Peter... Matthew, Philip, John and the rest of us have been thinking that we need to save face. We've devoted three whole years of our life to Jesus and we don't want to look like fools. We thought we'd make up a story that Jesus actually came back to life. We'll probably get beat up and whipped and tortured for saying this – we'll probably lose our families and friends, our homes, our money, and pretty much everything else. – and a few of us might even get stoned to death or beheaded." Peter thinks a moment, stroked his beard, and says, "Sounds like a good idea to me. When do we go steal Jesus' body?" That's what this conspiracy theory would look like. But who on earth would suffer and die for a lie? Perhaps one or two misguided souls, but not the whole crew of disciples.

Not only are all of the apostles' liars if there is no resurrection, but so is everyone else who has preached the resurrection the past 2000 years. John Calvin and Martin Luther were liars. Billy Graham was a liar. Your grandma who loved Jesus with all her heart was a liar. Does anyone really believe that this many intelligent, sane people could all be duped? That's what we would have to conclude if Christ is not risen.

Third, what does no resurrection of the dead say about **those who believe the gospel**? In verse 14 Paul says, "And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless, and so is your faith." He repeats the same thing in verse 17... "And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile." What good does faith in a dead Savior do? If you put all your trust in something that turns out to not be true, then that trust has been all for nothing.

The Wizard of Oz movie comes to mind where Dorothy and the scarecrow and the tin man and the lion all need help – Dorothy needs to get back home, the scarecrow needs a brain, the tin man needs a heart, and the lion needs courage. They are told there is someone who can help them – an all-powerful wizard living in the Land of Oz – and they put all their hope and trust in him. Their hope builds and builds throughout the movie, only to find out, of course, that once the curtain is pulled back the so-called wizard is revealed to be a mere man who has been tricking people into thinking he was great and powerful.

Trust is a very valuable commodity and before you put your trust in someone you should know that they are trustworthy, and if Jesus is still in the grave, He is not trustworthy because He lied about who He said He was.

What's more, Paul says in verse 19, people should feel sorry for us... "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." Years ago, there was a Christian singer named Evie – anyone remember her? One of her songs went like this: "If heaven never was promised to me, neither God's promise to live eternally; it's been worth just having the Lord in my life." Doesn't that sound nice? But Paul doesn't buy it. Why would it be worth it to you put all your hope in something that's not true?

You've all heard of a placebo. When drug companies develop a new product, they test the drug by using two groups of people. One group gets the real medication, and the other group gets a placebo – a pill that looks just like the real medication but has nothing in it to help you. The goal is to see if the real medication is effective or not. Sometimes, those taking the placebo claim to feel better, but it's all in their minds. There is nothing in their pill that actually does anything to help them. If Christ is not rise, then Christians who say, "I have hope! I have a life beyond this life!" are simply fooling themselves.

If you're putting your hope in something that's not going to happen, people should put their arm around you and say, "I'm so sorry you believed such a crazy thing. We're having a party tonight, why don't you come over and start doing some livin'." If this life is all there is, then we might as well like Epicureans and sin away. What does it all matter if tomorrow we die?

Next Paul entertains the question: what does no resurrection of the dead **say about our future**? In verse 17 he says, "If Christ has not been raised... you are still in your sins." The message of the gospel centers on the fact that in order to be right with God and go to heaven, your sins must be forgiven. Sin means that we have all missed the mark of God's righteous standard – we've all sinned and fallen short of His glory – and the penalty for sin is death. Because God is holy, He cannot overlook sin and pretend it is not there. He can't allow any trace of sin in heaven or it would no longer be heaven. God has no choice but to judge sin.

But God in His love made a way for His judgment to be lifted and for our sins to be forgiven – and that is by sending His Son to die in our place and pay the penalty for our sin. The Bible says that Jesus became sin for us – He, of course, was without sin, but He took all of my sin and your sin upon Himself as our substitute – so that when we believe in Him the penalty of our sin is lifted and God no longer holds our sins against us. He takes our sins and buries them in the deepest sea, never to be remembered again. Romans 8:1 says, "There is therefore no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus." But if Christ is not risen, we are still in our sins because without the resurrection Jesus' death on the cross accomplishes nothing. And if we're still in our sins, the judgment of God hangs over us.

Without the resurrection, the future of every believer for the past 2000 years is affected. In verse 18 Paul says, "If Christ has not been raised... then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost." The phrase "fallen asleep" is a figurative way of referring to death, because when a person is dead their body looks as though it is asleep. If there is no resurrection, it means we will never see our loved ones in Christ again because there is no heaven. Without the resurrection, all those who placed their hope and trust in Christ are lost in their sins and are condemned to an eternity without Christ.

One of the most sobering times of life is looking at the body of a loved one who has died and knowing they aren't coming back. One minute they're here – talking, breathing, their heart is beating – and then suddenly they're gone. Ecclesiastes says that God has placed eternity in the hearts of man – we know instinctively that there is more to life than this life. We know instinctively that the effects of sin have robbed us of living a long and healthy life like we want to.

I've officiated a number of funerals over the years, and no funeral is easy, but the hardest are those who think they are saying goodbye to their loved one forever. The loss is overwhelming. But services for believers are altogether different. There are still plenty of tears and there is grief, but underlying it all is a firm confidence that we'll see them again. As Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4, "We grieve, but not as those without hope."

In 1 Corinthians 5:8 Paul says “to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” That means that when we die our spirit leaves our body – the body is dead, but our spirit goes to be with Christ in heaven. When we say goodbye to our Christian loved ones, while it is our greatest moment of grief, for them it is their greatest moment of joy. They are released from the pain and sadness of this life, and enter into eternal glory. And one day we will share in that glory and celebrate a grand reunion in heaven.

The logical question is: if our spirit goes to be with the Lord, what happens to our body? Paul explains in 1 Thessalonians 4 that when Jesus comes again there is going to be a mass resurrection with the dead bodies of saints popping up out of their graves, ashes that have been sprinkled on rivers or mountains will be gathered, and the dead in Christ will instantly receive their resurrection bodies. Our body and spirit will be reunited in a glorified body. Paul wants us to understand that if Christ did not rise, none of this will happen. There is no heaven, there is no future – our loved ones are forever lost in their sins and we will never see them again.

In verse 20, after listing all the awful consequences of no resurrection, Paul very simply but triumphantly says, “But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!” Many skeptics and atheists have set out to disprove the resurrection only to become born again Christians and defenders of the resurrection. The evidence is all there...

- The tomb is empty. Today you can visit the tombs of other religious leaders, but there is no tomb holding the body of Jesus.
- Jesus made at least ten separate appearances, including one before 500 people. They did not hallucinate, they did not see a ghost – they saw Jesus in the flesh and were forever changed.
- The resurrection was the driving force that led the early disciples to give their lives to preaching the gospel, and the resurrection is what brings us together this morning to worship a risen Savior.

If you believe Jesus rose from the dead, then you can believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be and you place all of your hope and trust in Him to be your Savior from sin. And if He rose from the dead, you can be certain that you will one day rise as well and live forever with God in heaven.