

“The Central Mystery, Part One: Witness to Wonder”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for April 1<sup>st</sup> 2018 (Easter Sunday)  
by Foster Freed

1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15: 1-11

It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the letter we now know as 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians. Along with the Resurrection narratives found at the end of the four Gospels—Mark, Matthew, Luke and John, each of which has its own distinctive flavour...

...along with those four Gospel accounts, the profound ruminations into which the Apostle Paul enters over the span of that lengthy 15<sup>th</sup> chapter, marks it out as the fifth great source of information (and arguably the most profound New Testament reflection) on what I am describing as the “central” Christian mystery.

For those of you not familiar with 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, suffice it to say that it offers a wide-ranging series of reflections, offered by Paul to a community he had founded, but a community that had headed in a number of directions with which Paul had no choice but to disagree. Tackling these issues one by one, Paul offers his own perspective and the theological rationale behind those perspectives. Leaving for last the issue that may well be the underlying factor behind many of the others, Paul finally—in the letter’s next to last chapter—tackles the question of resurrection. While it is hard to pin-down with absolute certainty just what it was about the understanding of resurrection held by the Corinthians that was of such grave concern to Paul...

...were they denying Christ’s resurrection?...or was it that they thought that their **own** resurrection had already taken place, meaning that they had nothing more to which to look forward? It’s impossible for us to be certain; nevertheless, uncertainty around the precise viewpoints Paul was here disputing should not obscure the impressive lengths with which he chose to address the question of the resurrection. And since Easter—you’ll be happy to hear—is not merely one special Sunday, but an entire 50 day celebration: we have an opportunity to spend not only this Sunday morning but the next three Sunday mornings, pondering 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15: provided I don’t run out of steam.

What will become clear, I hope, by the end of this little journey, is that the resurrection—for Paul—has profound implications for all believers and (I would argue) for all humanity. And yes: as we work our way through the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians, Paul will spell out at least some of those implications. Which makes it all the more interesting, I think...

...all the more interesting that prior to setting out on his theological and philosophical exploration, Paul directs his readers to a seemingly prosaic starting point. He goes to ground zero, so to speak; he establishes a rock-bottom foundation from which to launch his inquiry. Not by explaining, not by interpreting, not by unpacking

(he'll do that later), but simply by proclaiming that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the heart and soul of the good news. **Paul's Gospel. The Church's Gospel. Our Gospel.**

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*Now I would remind you, my friends, of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved. That's how Paul begins: with a proclamation of the Gospel. And then he continues with words that sound almost like—and may well be—an ancient Christian formula, an early Christian creed.*

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas (we know him as Peter), then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at the same time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James (the James in question here is Jesus' own brother, who became the head of the Jerusalem Church)...then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. At that point Paul simply notes that he was the least worthy person to receive an appearance of the risen Christ, although he can't resist pointing out that he's done more as a result of that appearance than any of the others. Modesty was not always Paul's strong suit...although he was likely doing nothing more than telling the truth. But I digress!*

The key point in all of this, is that Paul grounds the lengthy reflection on which he is about to embark, by sharing a two-sided formula that must have been familiar to most members of the early Church. On the one hand, the formula names that Christ died in accordance with the scriptures of the Old Testament and was then buried, a burial that was likely emphasized as a way of stressing that Jesus really and truly had died. On the other hand, the formula then goes on to claim that on the third day Christ rose from the grave (also in accord with the scriptures of the Old Testament) and subsequently appeared to more than a mere handful of apostles. From there, not surprisingly, Paul elaborates on those appearances, focussing his reader's attention not to Christ's death but to his return from death. That should hardly surprise us; the actuality of death is something with which we are all familiar, hide from it though we are continually tempted to do! Resurrection, on the other hand—the thought of someone rising from the grave—is truly astonishing: and was most certainly as astonishing (and hard to credit) 2000 years ago, as it is today: a claim that met with a great deal of skepticism way back then, much as it meets with a great deal of skepticism here and now. Hence that list of witnesses provided by Paul: prompting me, this morning, to speak of Paul's opening salvo in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15 as a salvo that can rightly be described as a “witness to wonder”. A witness to wonder!

Bear with me...bear with me now, in the time remaining to me, as I speak first of that **witness** and those witnesses...and then as I attempt to account for the fact that I describe their witness as a witness to **wonder**.

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Witness. To bear witness. Paul makes it clear, from the get-go, that resurrection faith is to be grounded on the witness of those—including Paul himself—to whom the risen Christ had appeared.

And it is important to recognize that the word “witness” is a word taken with radical seriousness in the Biblical tradition. When scripture—Old and New Testament alike—speak in terms of witness, the frame of reference is not unlike the judicial frame of reference many of us will bring to mind when hearing talk of a witness. In other words: witness in the world of the Bible takes on the same solemnity a modern-day witness is meant to assume when testifying in a courtroom. No doubt that explains Paul’s eagerness to stress that most of the 500, who had witnessed the risen Christ in mass, were still alive! Paul, in effect, is saying to the initial recipients of this letter that they needn’t take his word for it, because many other witnesses are there for the finding. And yes...yes:

Unlike those initial recipients of Paul’s letter, we don’t have the luxury of tracking down members of that large group of 500; it’s safe to say that none of them are currently granting interviews. That helps explain why someone such as the great New Testament scholar—Rudolf Bultmann—thought Paul to have made a mistake when he chose to speak here of witnesses. For Bultmann—and for many other moderns—the only resurrection they are able to affirm consists in resurrected faith, the profound renewal of faith the early Church experienced in the aftermath of the horror of Jesus’ execution. And yes: to venture that kind of faith—that leap of faith—you don’t need the sort of witness-list Paul provides here; one merely needs to embrace the church’s offer of faith in Jesus, and the impact the Easter faith is capable of exerting in the lives of those who have embraced it.

As Paul will make abundantly clear as he continues to reflect on resurrection in the remainder of this chapter, his own stance is quite different. For Paul the resurrection of Jesus is not limited to the renewal to which it gives birth in those who receive it in faith. For Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is an event which, while it may transcend history, made its mark within history: something abundantly real that happened to the man Jesus who, far from having been left in the grave, had been raised from death. Paul is clear that his own witness—and the witness of the others he cites—would be a false witness, a fraudulent witness, had their account of Christ’s resurrection been fundamentally wrong. Say what you will about the early church in general and Paul in particular: they were not fraudsters! They staked their lives and risked their lives in order to share the message with which they believed themselves to have been entrusted. They may well have been wrong; they may well have been confused; they may well have misconstrued the message. But what they were not doing was playing games. When they spoke of the resurrection of Jesus they were seeking to convey not an idea...not an existential experience...but an event: an event on which they were prepared to stake everything. In short, they saw themselves as

bearing the sacred duty of witnesses, witnesses who I am choosing to describe, this morning, as having bourn witness to wonder. Witness to **wonder**.

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I will freely confess...freely confess that I settled upon that title in fear and trembling! If there are any purists here this morning...

...given that we're in a United Church congregation I rather doubt there will be many purists here, but you never can tell!...

...if there are any purists here this morning, they will be eager to point out that the resurrection of Christ consists in some pretty strong affirmations: affirmations far more substantial than "wonder". Consider! If true, the witness of the early Church to the risen Christ tells us that God's favour fell upon one particular human being, tells us that this particular human being—the man Jesus—has been vindicated, tells us that in this one instance (at any rate) death has not proven to be triumphant and finally—and perhaps most importantly—opens the door to the most ancient (and still one of the most radical) of Christian affirmations, namely that Jesus is Lord! And yes...I won't attempt to deny that it may well appear somewhat anti-climactic to reduce that impressive list to that one word: wonder. But bear with me, friends. Hear me out.

You see: it seems to me, within the context of the world in which we live...

...at any rate, the world in which I live...

...it seems to me, in the context of our place and time, it seems to me that the greatest single obstacle to taking serious stock of the witness of the New Testament to the resurrection of Jesus Christ...

...our tendency to dismiss it the way we might dismiss an especially elaborate April Fool's hoax...

...that tendency holds the often-unexamined prejudice that the world in which we live is not a world in which a reasonable person would expect any one—not even a one of a kind individual such as Jesus of Nazareth—to rise from the grave. It's just not done. It's just not possible. Such things ought not to be countenanced by a person who wishes to be regarded by others, as having grounded their life in reality.

And I am reminded here, of Joseph Chilton Pearce's marvellous phrase: "the crack in the cosmic egg", by which he was referring to our need to overcome—to crack open--our shared tendency to dismiss, out of hand, any account that appears to challenge the tightly bound, nuts-and-bolts world-view to which so many of us cling. I am also reminded of the pride-of-place given to wonder by two of the truly outstanding theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the words of Jewish theologian, Abraham Joshua Heschel: *The surest way to suppress our ability to understand the meaning of God and the importance of worship is **to take things for granted**. Indifference to the sublime wonder of living is the root of sin.* In the words of Protestant theologian Karl Barth: *A quite specific astonishment stands at the beginning of every theological perception....If such astonishment is lacking, the whole enterprise of theology would canker at the root...[A]s long as even a poor theologian is capable of astonishment, they are not lost*

*to the fulfillment of their task. They remain serviceable—as a theologian—as long as the possibility is left open that astonishment may seize them like an armed man.*

And, of course it needs to be said...

...of course, it goes without saying...

...that there is so much more to the life of faith, the life of Christian faith, the life—quite specifically—of resurrection faith, than an affirmation of astonishment, an affirmation of wonder. And yet!

My hunch...my long-held instinct...is that we are notoriously unlikely to go **beyond** wonder unless we **begin** with wonder: unless we are able, at a bare minimum, to share in Hamlet's conviction that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in Horatio's philosophy" or, for that matter, your philosophy or mine. And so while it may well be the case that wonder is not our final destination, it's a heck of a good starting point, a starting point so fine that it may even permit us...

...far from being dismissive of those brave souls of a bygone era, not to mention those brave souls of our own era who, well aware that there may be nothing more than ridicule awaiting them, throw caution to the wind and dare to give voice...

...dare to bear witness to the world of wonder that is our true and abiding home as sons and daughters of the good God: daughters and sons of the God who on the third day rolled away the stone, and raised us—with Christ—to new and wondrous possibilities, to a new and glorious first day.

Christ is risen...Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia! Alleluia! Thanks be to God!!!