



His Excellency,
The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Diocese of Belleville

Second Sunday in Ordinary Time
February 16, 2025, 9:00 AM Mass
St. Luke Parish, Belleville

(This is the text as originally written. During the actual delivery, some passages were omitted and other comments were added spontaneously. *Nota bene*: This text has not been thoroughly proofread. Therefore, there may be errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.)

“The Resurrection of the Dead: The Challenge of St. Paul”

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

When American Airlines flight 5342 collided in midair with a military Black Hawk helicopter and plunged into the icy waters of the Potomac River on January 29, 2025, bringing to a sudden end the lives of all 67 people on board, most people were stunned by a deadly, rare major airline crash in the United States. Responding to the disaster that befell such remarkable people, who had no idea that they had “an appointment in Samarra,” some said, “Our thoughts and prayers are with their grieving families,” or “May their memories be a blessing!” Some friends of those who perished lamented, “They are in a better place,” or “She is united with her husband,” or “They are at peace.”

A few days later, I heard a radio interview with a Bible preacher from Macon, Georgia, who said, “Most Americans have nothing to say beyond platitudes after such a horrible accident because they are not Bible reading, Bible believing Christians, and so they cannot offer any real comfort to the heartbroken relatives of the dead. The only true comfort can be found in the Word of God.” Then, he recited words from our second reading, from Chapter 15 of St. Paul’s first letter to the Christians living in Corinth.

“If Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some among you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If Christ has not been raised, your faith is vain. You are still in your sins. If we have hoped in Christ, for this life only, we are the most pitiable of men.” The preacher continued, “Most people have never truly listened to St. Paul’s words. Or if they listened, they did not believe what they heard. If they did, instead of blandly saying, ‘Sorry for your loss’ to the relatives of those who were killed in the crash, they could offer true Christian hope.”

Corinth was a wealthy cosmopolitan city in Greece, and St. Paul wrote this letter because Chloe's people had informed him that the small Christian community had been influenced by the philosopher, Plato, who believed our human bodies are less important than our souls. Plato taught that the human body was like a prison from which our spirits long to escape. Plato completely rejected the idea of the resurrection of the dead. St. Paul was deeply disturbed by the Corinthians questioning the Resurrection, since for him, the Resurrection of Jesus Christ was the foundation of his faith - a faith that was born when, as a Pharisee and fierce persecutor of the Christian sect, he had a vision of the risen Christ saying, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?"

Because of his deep convictions, St. Paul thought the resurrection of the dead was the hope of all human history. If there is no Resurrection, St. Paul believed there is no gospel, no good news. All you have is a dead street preacher!

St. Paul tells the Corinthians, "You cannot say, I am a Christian, I just do not believe Christ was raised from the dead." He argues that a Christian cannot say Jesus Christ rose in a spiritual way in the minds and hearts of the disciples. When speaking about the glorified body of the risen Christ, the gospels do not attempt to explain the Mystery of the Resurrection. The central point is that God raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead to confirm that He is the Messiah, God's anointed one, His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased. And to those who believe in Him, resurrection is promised. Yet even the resurrection is not a guarantee of sharing in the Life of the World to Come. That will only be known at the Last Judgment.

The radio Bible preacher continued, "If Christ was not raised, then Christian preaching is a waste of time and your faith is also in vain. If Christ was not raised from the dead, the Christian faith is based on a lie. If Christ was not raised from the dead, all the preaching and all of the lives of Christian faith lived through the centuries, and our own faith-filled lives are meaningless. If Christ was not raised from the dead, we have no hope of life beyond our deaths. If Christ was not raised from the dead, our church life is not much more than a social club!"

The radio interviewer takes another call for the Bible preacher who says, "Pastor, I, like many Christians today, doubt the physical Resurrection of Christ, I doubt that anyone can be raised from the dead, and I doubt the existence of and immortality of the human soul. I think when I die, that is the end of my life. But I STILL have faith in Christ because His teachings give guidance and meaning for my daily life. Love your neighbors. Give to the poor. Be faithful in your marriage. Treat people the way you would like to be treated. Do what you can to bring justice and peace to the world. I like going to church for the experience of community, enjoyable social activities, and the good work the Church does for others. I see much to admire in Christ, even if modern people, like me, who understand science, know well that no one can be raised from the dead, not even Jesus. There is no life after death." The Bible preacher, deeply annoyed, replied, "I feel really sorry for you and pity you because, if what you say is true, you have placed your faith in history's greatest liar! Can't you see that the Resurrection of Jesus is the cornerstone of Christian faith and the source of our hope?"

Later, another listener called in and asked, “Isn’t the main reason for believing in the Resurrection our hope that we will all be united with our relatives and friends, and even our pets after we die?” The preacher answers firmly, “No, it is not! Neither the gospels nor the writings of St. Paul say a word about being personally reunited with our family and friends in the resurrection. Scripture is completely silent about this. Scripture says, ‘Eye has not seen, nor has anyone even thought of the good things God has in store for those who love Him.’ However, it may be that in the presence of the blinding Light of the Divine Essence of God, our joy will infinitely surpass the joy of a family reunion.” It may be that in the fullness of life that comes from seeing God face to face, we will have a vision that sees not something less than our families and friends, but something incomparably more. Still, we must remember St. Paul’s words, “We see now through a glass, darkly. But, then face to face.”

The interviewer then asks the Bible preacher, “Why is your belief in the Resurrection of Jesus and our hope to experience the resurrection so central to your personal faith?”

“Well, if I didn’t believe in the Resurrection, I would not be a Christian. I might be a Buddhist or an agnostic. I hold with St. Paul that the Resurrection is the foundation for Christian hope in God’s abiding providence in our world, the source of my confidence that good ultimately triumphs over evil, that the moral arc of the universe does bend toward justice, no matter how slowly. This faith is the only light I have to shine on the darkness of shocking death in that terrible plane crash. In the end, ‘thoughts and prayers’ don’t go very far. More than that, without the Resurrection, there is no forgiveness of sin. Without forgiveness of sin, we have no hope for a proper relationship with God. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christians are ‘most pitiable,’ because we have staked our lives on a lie.” This would ultimately make the entire history of Christianity the world’s greatest tragedy.

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

Our gospel reading this morning contains St. Luke’s version of the “8 Beatitudes,” in which he modifies the version found in St. Matthew’s gospel. He gives us only four “blesseds” and replaces the other four with four “curses” or “woes.” More than that, he changes St. Matthew’s rather abstract, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” to a much blunter, “blessed are you who are poor” (Matthew 5:3-12, Luke 6:20). Many preachers confronted with this gospel and the passage from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians might choose to preach on the gospel reading instead of St. Paul’s texts because the gospel reading is far easier to understand and far easier to explain. A preacher might avoid speaking about this dense chapter from St. Paul’s letter to Corinthians because it is very difficult to understand and because it might confront the Christian Faithful who are listening to the homily with ideas and questions about the depths of their faiths, about which they would prefer not to think.

What do you make of this Bible preacher’s meditation on Paul’s letter to Christians living in Corinth? Do you agree that we are false witnesses if Christ was not raised? Are you like the caller who thought, as Thomas Jefferson famously wrote, “the story of Jesus Christ is wonderful and inspiring as long as you remove everything that is miraculous from the story, especially the unbelievable myth of the Resurrection?” Or do you understand

that if there is no risen Lord, there is no gift of the Holy Spirit, no Presence of Christ in the Sacraments, no grace in the Eucharist, the Priesthood, Christian marriage, and no confession for the forgiveness of our sins?

President John F. Kennedy said, “Here on earth, God’s work must truly be our own.” For our assassinated first Catholic President’s words to be true, the risen Christ must be working through women and men striving to uproot injustice and prejudice in the United States; the risen Christ must be working through us to preserve the worldwide humanitarian work that makes America great; the risen Christ must be struggling through us for just and comprehensive immigration reform; the risen Christ must be fighting through us to protect the dignity of every human life; the risen Christ must be pressing through us to end deadly wars in Ukraine, Sudan, and Israel (ensuring the Palestinians of their rightful homeland). The risen Christ must be anchoring our confidence that true Christians must always strive to care for those most in need in whatever political situation they find themselves. It is a great challenge to affirm beliefs such as this. But only such belief in the abiding presence of the risen Christ can give us the hope to proclaim that, ultimately, God is the Lord of history!

In 1 Corinthians, Chapter 15, Verse 21, St. Paul declares, “Since by man came death, so by man came the resurrection. As in Adam all die, so in Christ all are made alive...

O death, where is your sting? O death, where is your victory?”

Praised be Jesus Christ. Both now and forever! AMEN.