

At Risk

A Sermon on First Corinthians 15: 12-20 by Rich Holmes

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I want to tell you something that I did last week. I've been working on this philosophy paper for about two years now and I am trying to get it published, so last week after proof reading it for about the hundredth time, I finally sent it in to a journal for publication. Now, I won't tell you what it's about because I promise you would be bored if I did. But I will tell you, I don't enjoy this publishing process very much. Because this is a risk. It could very easily get rejected, in fact, most of them do. Now, you may say to me, "Pastor Rich, didn't you write a book?" Yes I did, but that was easy. My book was self-published. The only risk about my book was that I would reject it myself. But this is riskier for me, because I know that while it is true that if my paper gets accepted I will be ecstatic, if it gets rejected I will be disappointed. I would even say profoundly disappointed. Now, I am sure that in time I will get over it, but there is just no getting around the fact that if gets rejected, it will hurt. And that scares me.

My new favorite person in the world is a man called Karl Popper. I love Karl Popper because these days, and I hope I don't get in trouble for saying this, but these days there are a lot of conspiracy theories out there which pass for science, and these conspiracy theories happen to sell a lot of books, but in my opinion they aren't science. They are fake science or what Popper calls pseudoscience. And Karl Popper says that the difference between science and pseudoscience is this. If you read these conspiracy theory books, what you will find, is that there is nothing, absolutely nothing you can say to someone who supports them that would prove their theory to be wrong. If they try to tell you that the moon is made of green cheese, for example, and you ever go to them and say here's proof that your theory is wrong and the

moon is not made of green cheese, they will say well, your proof is fake or your so-called proof is just another part of a vast conspiracy. But Popper says that what makes real science different from conspiracy theories and pseudoscience is that real science doesn't do that. Real science takes risks, and it takes the risk of being proven false. Real science starts out as a theory or a hypothesis and it goes through rigorous tests to see if it is false, and if it passes those tests it then has the status of real science. And Popper says, the more tests it passes, the more scientific it is. But fake science doesn't do that.

Now, I get that you may not know the name Karl Popper, but you certainly know the name of Albert Einstein. In fact, you know him so well, I could show you his face or a cartoon of his face and you would instantly recognize him as Einstein. In fact Einstein is so well known that his name is an adjective. We say he's no Einstein, he's a real Einstein. And you know his name because Einstein is regarded as one of the most if not the most ingenious people who ever lived. But just like all true scientists, Einstein submitted all his ideas to tests. One idea or hypothesis that Einstein had was that light is attracted by gravity in the same way that objects are attracted by gravity, and that was a hypothesis that could be put to the test with observations, observations which Einstein predicted would go a certain way, and they did. But had they gone another way, had they not gone as Einstein predicted, you see, you wouldn't even know Einstein's name. And you certainly wouldn't recognize his face. He would have just been one more person who tried something and failed and there are millions of them.

And just as science involves risks, and just as I have embarked on a risk with this paper I'm trying to publish, Paul tells us that our faith involves a risk. Today in our New Testament lesson, Paul is talking to the church in Corinth in the first century and apparently there are some

people in the Corinthian church who were saying there is no resurrection. Now, I don't know why they were saying there is no resurrection, we aren't told. But Paul wants to know why they call themselves Christians, because he tells them that the entire Christian faith stands or falls, it stands or falls on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He says Corinthians, don't you know if Christ is not raised, you are still in your sins, and if it is for this life alone that we have hoped in Christ, then we are a people to be most pitied.

Paul says our Christian faith stands or falls on the idea that something which doesn't normally happen, happened. Now, I know that yes, people are sometimes medically resuscitated after their heart stops and their brain waves cease, and so you may say what's the big deal. But the difference between this medical resuscitation and the resurrection of Christ is that they all eventually died for good. But Christ died never to die again and that is a big deal. Our faith stands or falls on the idea that a dead person came back to life and will never die again. And if that didn't happen, Paul says, Christianity is wrong. And people sometimes say to me, well, is the resurrection really all that important, Rich, what about all the values and the morals we teach in the church. Aren't those important? Of course they are. I believe in all those values and morals, and I'm sure you've heard me preach on them all the time. I believe in loving my neighbor and helping the poor. I believe in peacemaking. I believe in honesty. But you can believe in all those things without Christianity. Rotary has great values. I love to read Aristotle. With the exception of some of his ancient views about women and slaves, Aristotle who was no Christian, had wonderful Ethics. If you have never read Nicomachean Ethics, you are missing out on a masterpiece. You don't have to be a Christian to be a good person, you don't even have to be a Christian to be a beautiful person and to live a beautiful life. What makes us

unique is that we believe in a savior who after dying on the cross, we claim is really and truly alive. Really and truly as alive as you and me.

To put your faith in Christ is to take a risk, but like most risks, it is a risk that is worth something. It is a risk that means something. It is the risk that is about delivery from sin and death to eternal life. And maybe to take a risk that you may be wrong is scary. But, life is scary. I remember when I asked my wife to marry me. It was a risk. She could have said no. Now, I had a pretty good idea that she was going to say yes, but she could have said no, and I would have been heartbroken. It was scary. Later on, when we decided to have a child, it was a risk. We said what if there is something wrong with the baby, what if I lose my job and I can't feed it and the baby grows up in poverty, what if, what if we drop the baby on its head. Bringing a child into the world is a risk. But just as Popper says that science which doesn't risk is not real science, anything in life that is safe and that does not involve a risk usually doesn't have much value.

You know, I don't know if you have ever met someone for whom you've said that person just might know everything, but when I was a Seminary student that is what I decided about Walter Brueggemann. Now, a lot of people like to pretend that they know everything, those kind of people are a dime a dozen, but Walter Brueggemann may just know everything. He certainly knows just about all there is to know about the Old Testament. In fact, I am told that you can walk up to Professor Brueggemann as he is walking across campus and you can take any passage from the Old Testament and say "Dr. Brueggemann what do you think this passage is about, what does it mean?" And it doesn't matter what it is, you can take a passage from the book of Nahum, for example, when do we ever read Nahum, and you can say "Dr.

Brueggemann what do you say about this passage?" and he would tell you, and as he was telling you, he will say "If you look in the Hebrew, it will say this and that?" So not only does he know the entire Old Testament, he knows the entire Old Testament in the original language. Who do you know who can do that? Well, I bring this up, because I can remember what Dr. Brueggemann used to always say in his classes. He used to say that the problem with the middle class American church these days is that our faith traffics in nouns, it is all about nouns, and that kind of faith is not really biblical, because the bible is all about verbs. The bible in other words is all about drama, and we twenty-first century middle class Christians are not all about drama. We are about a God who never changes, a God who is in his heaven, who has always been in his heaven, and for whom everything is all right with the world. There is no drama in that kind of faith, but the bible is all about drama, and there can't be anymore drama than what we find in the central story of our faith, in the passion of our Lord. For though the Lord Jesus Christ was divine, his divinity did not mean he wasn't also human, and in his humanity I hope all of us know that he went through everything that we would go through in his suffering and death. The pain he went through the humiliation he went through, the sense of shame that he went through, being divine did not save him from any of that. All of that was just as real as it would be for you and me. Well, if it was just as real as it would be for you and me, how great do you think his temptation was just to walk away from it all. How great would his temptation have been to let the devil win. It is like those cliff hangers you saw when you were a kid where the Lone Ranger is tied up to the train tracks and the train is headed down the tracks, and some posse with the white hats are on their way to rescue him, and it's a race to see who can get there first, but you got to stay tuned for next week to see how it all turns out. Biblical faith does

not say God is in his boring heaven and he has always been in his boring heaven, it says my heavens, what if our Lord would have lost. Look how closely he came to losing.

If it doesn't risk anything it doesn't mean anything. That's the way it is in every aspect of our lives. Why should it be any different for our faith. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.