

“The Chief Article of Faith”

*Grace and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ. Amen.*

During the season of Easter we hear again stories of the resurrection. In the resurrection we hear good news that death is not final, rather that God has raised Christ, and that humanity is included in this resurrection reality. Nowhere during the church year do we find ourselves challenged more deeply than at Easter. We are challenged to believe the unbelievable – that Jesus was raised from the dead and appeared to his followers. Paul reflected on his experience in 1 Corinthians, writing, “*Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.*”

Paul’s experience is a remarkable Easter experience. The risen Christ appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus while he was actively persecuting the church. As the risen Christ gave peace at the empty tomb, as he replaced doubt with Thomas, and appeared to the disciples, the risen Christ gave Paul a new identity as the church’s first great missionary. It was this experience of the risen Christ that caused Christianity to begin to spread and flourish in spite of religious and cultural persecution.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul makes it clear that the risen Christ appeared in turn to the disciples, to new followers, and finally to himself, someone who had been a persecutor of the church. Paul had been changed by an encounter with a reality beyond his control. What is at stake for Paul is the historicity of the resurrection and the living presence of Christ which brings about faith. For Paul, faith is a historical reality and power that is as convincing as other forms of empirical and historical data. Paul is able to assert this because he experienced it, and what he experienced was also verified in the experiences of others. In Paul’s testimony, we realize that faith is another way of knowing. In his letter, Paul places both historical evidence and the evidence of faith alongside one another.

However, Paul’s concern doesn’t end with his own experience of faith. Paul is also concerned with the significance of Christ’s resurrection for others. Paul’s experience of being made alive in Christ, along with the testimony of others, leads him to think about the universal meaning of faith for humanity. It is therefore not surprising that Paul addressed the issue of skepticism about the resurrection. The existence of doubt is present in the gospels and Paul also mentions it in his letter to the Corinthians. Doubt is not difficult to understand, because empirical evidence is weighted heavily against someone rising from the dead. What Paul is concerned about, rather, is the experience of faith in one who has been raised from the dead, and what this gives to those who believe. For Paul faith is the key to understanding and knowledge about the risen Christ.

As you reflect upon your own life, what is the most central aspect of Christianity for you? If you were asked to explain Christianity, as Paul does from his own experience of it, what would you tell someone? Paul’s experience, of course, predates imperial Christianity, the history of colonialism and Christianity, Christendom, and the historical theology of the church. In a sense, the categories of theology and doctrine as we understand them, had not yet developed; rather, they were developing through the experience of faith. So without “theology” to fall back on how would you share your Easter faith with others?

Like Paul, Martin Luther also thought that Christ’s resurrection is the central aspect of the Christian faith. In his “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15,” Luther wrote, “Paul stakes everything on the basic factor with which he began, namely, that Christ arose from the dead. This is the chief article of the Christian doctrine.” For Paul and Luther it is the risen Christ whose living presence

animates and gives life through faith. According to Paul, without faith Christianity is a futile enterprise. Many of the historical outcomes of the church such as mission, theology, social ministry, education, etc., would not have existed were it not for the faith that brought them into being – faith that is evidence of the risen Christ.

Admittedly, the world in which we live is very different than the ancient world of Paul and the late medieval world of Luther. The Enlightenment and its heritage have distanced many from any sort of religious faith, and have often led to open suspicion about religion in general. As modern people we also have a great deal of faith in both humanity and progress. Our starting point for solving problems often begins with faith in rationality, science and technology. Facts and evidence are viewed as value free, neutral, and therefore reliable. Aspects of existence such as birth, illness and death have lost much of their mystery as we have come to view them as biological-sociological processes. A sense that history is moving toward a divine purpose and *telos* - an end - has been replaced by the idea that humanity initiates purpose and meaning through planning, research and development of human institutions and technologies. As a modern person schooled in the Enlightenment tradition, I completely understand this.

Yet as a person of faith, Luther's words are also compelling for me, "If you believe that God is God, you must also not doubt that you will rise from the dead after this life." Faith in the resurrection means believing in and paying attention to the reality of God's presence already alive within me. The evidence of the resurrection for us is, like for Paul and Luther, a matter of trusting that as the risen Christ appeared to the disciples, to Paul, and gave life and hope to others. This Christ is also alive for us.

Our world, and perhaps some of our confidence in humanity's ability to solve problems, has been shaken a bit during the global pandemic for which we continue to seek a solution. Recent events have reminded me of how much we have in common with our ancient forbearers. We continue to remain subject to illness and death. We cannot escape our own frailty and weakness. Luther lived in a time during the history of Europe of the Plague, writing, "The world is so hostile to us; it begrudges us our very life on earth. Daily we must be prepared for the worst that the devil and the world can inflict on us." We have made incredible strides scientifically and medically, yet the fragility of human life continues to haunt us.

The season of Easter amidst a pandemic reminds me to breathe deeply and give thanks for the sheer unmerited gift of life. In the midst of struggle, fear and death Paul also witnessed to hope in a reality that he was only learning to express: "for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ." There is still a mystery to life that the hope of the resurrection helps us to understand. I am grateful for faith that gives us access to the infinite love of God; faith that gives us hope for tomorrow; and faith that empowers us to look outside ourselves to live for others.

The resurrection is the chief article of the Christian faith. As Luther wrote, "For our confidence is built entirely on the fact that He has arisen and that we have life with Him already and are no longer in the power of death." The gift of faith means that "we have life with him already" and that the risen One lives in us *as a present reality*. Because of this we live with confidence that we "are no longer in the power of death." The Easter faith of Paul and Luther is also the same faith in which each day, Christ invites us to walk toward what we cannot see, with a faith that is alive and real inside of us giving us courage and vision to continue to change and shape our world. Amen.

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**Easter Week 3 midweek meditation reading:** Martin Luther (1483-1546)

“Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15” (*Luther’s Works*, Volume 28)

“With these words St. Paul explains and repeats the essence of His Gospel, which he preached to them, the Gospel in which they stand and by which they must be saved. Thus he composes a whole sermon on the resurrection of Christ, which might well be read and discussed on the Day of Easter. For from this flow the basis and the reason of this article on the resurrection of the dead which he is elaborating. And his sermon substantiates this doctrine most forcefully, both by proof from Scripture and by the witness of many living people, etc. He wishes to say: “I gave you nothing but what I myself received, nor do I know anything else to proclaim as the basis of our salvation than the Lord Jesus Christ, as He most certainly both truly died and also rose again from the dead. That is the content and the sum and substance of my Gospel, on which you and I were baptized and in which we stand. Thus I did not steal anything, nor did I spin a yarn, nor did I dream this up; no, I received it from Christ Himself.” With this he pricks those false teachers. It is as though he were to say: “If they proclaim something different, they cannot have received it from Christ. It must represent their own dreams and phantasy. For they obviously did not receive it from us nor from other apostles (since we all agree and are in accord with our message), much less from Christ. Therefore it must be sheer seduction and deception. Thus Paul also boasts in Gal. 1:11, 12, 17 over against the false apostles that he did not receive this doctrine from man nor from the apostles themselves, and that his proclamation was not derived from human reason or wisdom, that no man had invented it or contrived it of himself, but that it was a message which he had to receive through divine revelation. That was something those people could not boast of or maintain. Indeed, his own reason had contributed absolutely nothing to this, nor had he striven to obtain it. In fact, he had once persecuted it and raged against it like a raving, silly dog. God’s Word is so far beyond all reason, also beyond the apostles’ own knowledge or wisdom, that no one can attain it by his own power or understanding, to say nothing of contriving or devising anything better, as those people among the Corinthians alleged to be able to do.” (*Luther’s Works* 28:75-76)

“But here you notice how Paul adduces Scripture as his strongest proof, for there is no other enduring way of preserving our faith than the physical or written Word, poured into letters and preached orally by him or others; for here we find it stated clearly: Scripture! Scripture!” (28:77)

“Paul stakes everything on the basic factor with which he began, namely, that Christ arose from the dead. This is the chief article of the Christian doctrine. No one who at all claims to be a Christian or a preacher of the Gospel may deny that. With this he wants to confront them and force them to the conclusion that their denial of the resurrection of the dead denies even more definitely that Christ arose from the dead; for if the former is not true, the latter must be fabricated also. And since every Christian must believe and confess that Christ has risen from the dead, it is easy to persuade him to accept also the resurrection of the dead; or he must deny in a lump the Gospel and everything that is proclaimed of Christ and God. For all of this is linked together like a chain, and if one article of faith stands, they all stand.” (*LW* 28:94)

“For whoever denies God and His Word, His Baptism and Gospel, will not find it hard to deny the resurrection of the dead as well. If you dare say that God is not God and that the apostles and Christendom do not teach and believe correctly, it is easy for you – and nothing seems better – to knock the whole bottom out of the barrel and say that there is no resurrection, neither in heaven nor hell, neither devil nor death nor sin, etc. For what will you believe if you do not believe that God is something?” (*LW* 28:96)

“Thus if you can believe that God is God, you must also not doubt that you will rise from the dead after this life; for if you were to stay under the ground, God would first have to become a liar

and not be God. But if it is true that God cannot lie or deny or abandon his deity, this article, too, must be true. (LW 28:98)

“The world is so hostile to us; it begrudges us our very life on earth. Daily we must be prepared for the worst that the devil and the world can inflict on us. In the face of this, who would be stupid enough to be a Christian if there were nothing to a future life?” (LW 28:103)

“However, you must fend this off and cling with a firm faith to the fact that your Christ has risen from the dead. He, too, suffered such anguish and fear of hell, but through his resurrection He has overcome all. Therefore even though I am a sinner and deserving of death and hell, this shall nevertheless be my consolation and my victory that my Lord Jesus lives and has risen so that He, in the end, might rescue me from sin, death, and hell.” (LW 28:105)

“And so, the Christians who lie in the ground are no longer called dead, but sleepers, people who will surely also arise again. For when we say that people are asleep, we refer to those who are lying down but will wake up and rise again, not those who are lying down bereft of all hope of arising again...Therefore, by that very word “asleep” Scripture indicates the future resurrection.” (28:110)

“Behold, thus we must view our treasure and turn away from temporal reality which lies before our eyes and senses. We must not let death and other misfortune, distress, and misery terrify us so. Nor must we regard what the world has and can do, but balance this against what we are and have in Christ. For our confidence is built entirely on the fact that He has arisen and that we have life with Him already and are no longer in the power of death. Therefore let the world be mad and foolish, boasting of and relying on its money and goods; and let the devil rage with his poisonous darts in our conscience; and let him afflict us with all sorts of trouble - against all of this our own defiant boast shall be that Christ is our Firstfruits, that He has initiated the resurrection, that He has burst through the devil's kingdom, through hell and death, that He no longer dies or sleeps but rules and reigns up above eternally, in order to rescue us, too, from this prison and death.” (LW 28:111)

#### **Book recommendations:**

Kolb, Robert, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.  
Martin Luther, “Commentary On 1 Corinthians 15,” translated by Martin H. Bertram, in *Luther's Works*, Volume 28. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973.

#### **Martin Luther (1483-1546)**

Martin Luther was an Augustinian monk, university professor, theologian, and reformer of the church. As a professor at the University of Wittenberg, Luther lectured on the Bible and came to discover a loving God. Through Paul's letters Luther discovered “salvation by grace through faith” rather than by works. Refusing to recant his theological positions, Luther was excommunicated in 1521 by Pope Leo X, and branded an outlaw by after the Diet of Worms in the same year. His theological legacy is great: translating the Bible into German, confessional writings, theological writings, hymnody, biblical commentary, and sermons. Luther's translation of the Bible into the vernacular was denounced at the Council of Trent (held between 1545 and 1563), yet in 1963, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) promulgated the “Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy,” which advocated worship and music in local languages. Translation of the Bible, worship, and music into the vernacular has proved to be one of Luther's enduring legacies. In 1999 the “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification” was drafted by the Roman Catholic Church's Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Lutheran World Federation, in essence, ending an almost five hundred year dispute about Luther's ideas about justification by grace through faith.