

We celebrated last week, like Pastor Randy said, the Resurrection of Christ from the dead, from victory over death and the grave. We had an Easter celebration and that's fitting for the church of Jesus Christ. We do that every Sunday, and we know that here, but we thought that it would be good, fitting, and appropriate that following Easter to take a look at 1 Corinthians chapter 15. That's where we'll be today and Lord willing, for the coming weeks, at least the month of April. Many of you know that this is the chapter in the Scriptures that Paul lays out a very comprehensive doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and the bodily resurrection of all who follow Christ, all believers in him. And so that's what we're going to do today and for the weeks to come. And in preparation for this message I recalled a time from my seminary days when a very good seminary friend of mine called me and asked if I would go with him to meet with two men that he had been sharing his faith with. Both these men were skeptics of Christianity, very much opposed to Christianity, and one was clearly—once we sat down—one was clearly more knowledgeable about why he was antagonistic toward Christianity than the other. This was a hard-core, four guys apologetically duking it out, you know, two seminary buffoons and these two skeptics. There wasn't any coffee. It was just talking. And at one point I remember well into probably the second hour, the guy who I'm going to describe as just the less knowledgeable one said something to this effect, and again, these aren't direct quotes, but this is the way I recall what was going on. He said, well, listen, we'll concede for the sake of argument a bodily resurrection from the grave, we'll concede a bodily resurrection, but that still doesn't mean that Christianity is true. And immediately I saw the more knowledgeable critic of Christianity basically turn to his friend, visibly upset, to stop him from saying anything else, to stop him from saying these words. And these I recall a lot more clearly. He said something to this effect: If we concede the bodily resurrection, we must concede everything. Everything hangs on that point. That's why Christians make such a big deal about Easter. He was really upset with his buddy. And my friend Craig and I sat back and watched the two skeptics go at it for a bit, because we could have spoken no truer words in defense of our faith than the knowledgeable skeptic had just uttered from his mouth. He knew, he knew deep down inside, that this makes all the difference. If we serve a good teacher who was killed and stayed dead, our faith is to be most pitied of all religions on this planet. But we do not serve a dead teacher. We serve the Almighty Son of God who took on flesh to rescue his people from their sins, who was crucified, who died and was buried, and on the third day rose from the dead, spent time with his disciples and others, and then in majesty ascended to the right hand of the throne of Almighty God, where he now continually intercedes for the people he came to save. That's who we serve. And that's what the apostle Paul knew--the importance of the doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead was imperative for the church to grasp, to understand, and to live in. He wanted the churches he interacted with to see and to savor the truth of the resurrection.

And one of the churches that Paul was extremely fond of, very close with, was the church in Corinth. We have a letter, this first one, and we have a second letter—no doubt Paul had a lot of interaction with them. But in this one Paul longs to see the gospel believed and lived out in the church in Corinth. It was a church whose people who had, by Paul's own admission, had embraced the gospel. They were following Christ as Lord. Paul refers to these people as the church of God, the sanctified in Christ Jesus. They were enriched in speech and in knowledge. These are all things that he talked about them. They were not lacking in any spiritual gift. This church was walking with the Lord. That's a church I'd like to be a part of. And Paul goes on, we also know, because we've probably read this letter, maybe, that Corinth was a church that was also infamous for its division. They choose sides among their leaders, they were a church marked by self-centeredness, by shortsightedness, and the tendency to look the other way concerning open sin among their members. They were a church--not to mention a general arrogance because of the giftedness that God had bestowed on them and the members there. But that's still a church I'd like to be a part of, because a church that is that honest about where they are and their need is a church that gets to go to the cross for forgiveness. It's a church that gets to revel and rejoice in a Savior who didn't leave us in our sinful condition.

And so for the previous fourteen chapters before we get to this one--this is the fifteenth chapter in this letter--but for the fourteen chapters prior to this point Paul has admonished his people, he has encouraged these people, he has instructed these people, he has rebuked these people. People just like you and just like me. The people who are in humble reliance on God's grace, attempting to live out the community of faith known as the church or the bride of Jesus Christ. People just like you and me trying to live out by faith what it means to be God's covenant people. So at this point Paul turns his attention in this letter to the foundation of our faith, the basic idea of what it means to believe and to live out the good news that Jesus Christ lived and Jesus Christ died in the place of sinners, as well as the glorious truth that Jesus Christ didn't stay dead, he is risen--indeed he is--and that's the glorious news that we attempt to get into this month of April.

So let me read from 1 Corinthians 15, the first seven verses. God's word for us today.

Now, I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 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, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. God's word for us.

I want to try to draw our attention to what I'm going to call 'resurrection resources.' These three points in the sermon that you see in the outline before you I think are the things that Christ's victory over the grave has afforded to us, his people. And so, three points hopefully derived from this text. And we'll see that Paul is fairly exercised about wanting the people of God to get these basics inside their hearts and minds. The first resurrection resource for the people of God is that we get to be part of the fellowship of those who are guarded by the gospel of grace. We're brought into a covenant family, we're brought into a community of faith where our lives are examined, our doctrine and our life are closely scrutinized, and we are then approached and lovingly corrected, and by God's grace we freely repent and trust and grow. That's the guarding of the gospel of grace, the guardian grace that we've become a part of now, Paul says, now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel that I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. So Paul is saying to those who are aware of their sin and their sinfulness, to those who openly acknowledge their inability to live for God and to do things that are pleasing to God in and of themselves, to those who feel deeply the weakness of their own strength--to those people, Paul says, God has given to you the good news, the gospel of grace, and the fellowship of like-minded followers so that you all together can lean hard into Christ and grow in your knowledge and the grace, being guarded by the gospel, the gospel of God's grace to sinners. Paul is essentially saying to the church, listen, up until this point we've covered a lot of ground. I've said a lot of things, a lot of instruction. Tonight Pastor Randy is going to take us through a portion of 1 Corinthians 11. And Paul is instructing here, as the kids say, we've got up in your grill on some things, we've kept it real. He's been really honest about stuff, but before I close this letter I want to remind you, brothers, of the gospel that I preached to you. Paul emphasizes the word 'brothers' there. He says we're not joined together because we all found ourselves in the same community at the same time, the same economical—we're not the same wealth—we're not in the same neighborhood. Paul says we are joined together because Jesus Christ shed his blood and then he called us into the same family. We're brothers, we have fellowship with him and fellowship with one another. And dear sisters, in the first century setting in this letter the word 'brothers' had grand application to all who gathered at that church. It's for us, he says, the family of God. So I want to remind you of the gospel I preached, the good news on which we stake our eternal souls, which joins us together in fellowship, Paul says, can be summarized by looking at the person and the work of Jesus Christ--

the eternally existent second person of almighty Creator God, the triune God, stepped into human history through the virgin Mary in the town of Bethlehem. He lived a sinless life, he died a sacrificial death, he was buried in the ground, he victoriously rose from the grave, he majestically ascended to the throne. And like I said before, he graciously intercedes for the sins of his people, never letting accusation or condemnation stick because he has covered that with his forgiving blood. That is a wonderful fellowship. Paul says he provides that to all who humbly cry out to him for mercy. Paul says the gospel is all you really need to know. If you keep this priority number one, Paul says, everything else has the potential to work itself out according to God's plan, God's will for your life. Keep this of first importance, your greatest need among all other needs, wants, desires that you have, that I have-- that you are secure in the day of coming wrath. That's the greatest need that we have. Don't be fooled by imitation needs that draw our attention away from the deepest need of every created soul. Am I right with my creator?

D.A. Carson reminded me of this with a quotation that I came across this week. He says, "The rapid pace of life often squeezes what is important to the periphery. The urgent displaces the important. The digital displaces the personal. The mass media affect our thinking whether we like it or not, leaving us entertained, titillated or ironically, bored, while Madison Avenue establishes our self-identity in many things as long as none of them has eternal significance. The pressures of secularization allow us to be religious provided our religion does not really matter. Even Christian faith is funneled into privacy," he says. But Paul says, I've called you into a fellowship. He writes to a church, a church of sinners, a church of people in need of a Savior and he says you need each other. If you don't think you do, try going it on your own. So to the beloved of God, Paul says, despite all your divisions, your self-centeredness, your posturing as it relates to your spiritual gifts--you have a common bond, and I want to draw your attention back to that bond. It's the gospel, the good news of God's grace. And then he says this, it's the gospel you have received, it's the gospel in which you also stand, and it's the gospel by which you are being saved. The gospel message is the great equalizer. It's the thing that levels the playing field. The truth of the gospel communicates to us that there's only one distinction that we can make: there is a holy Creator God and there's the rest of us. That's it. That's what we read in Romans 3. There is no distinction--all have sinned, we are his creatures--and apart from his gracious intervention we are objects of his wrath, righteous wrath. Paul says, listen, let me call you back to the gospel. It's good news. It's the great equalizer. It helps with all the stuff you're dealing with as a church there in Corinth. Imagine, if you will, dream with me just a little bit, long together with me for a community who have received the truth. They've received the truth that there is no one righteous, no, not one. A group of people who have received the truth that there is no way to earn or achieve the righteousness that God requires, or that's pleasing to him. A group of people who have received the truth that forgiveness and the cleansing of guilt from our sin has been purchased fully and freely by the shed blood of Jesus Christ and Christ alone. Imagine that community that has received that truth. They've received the truth that God opposes proud hearts, but he gives grace in abundance to the humble. He welcomes those who acknowledge their need of him. Imagine that group of people who have received that truth, and now continue to dream with me about a people who have not merely received those precious truths, but a people who have committed to stand in those same truths. They will stand firm, they will not yield the gospel to another ideology. A people who have committed themselves to stand firm that the gospel is all of God's grace. It's all grace, and we don't contribute to it except that we bring our need. A people who stand together to protect the unprotected, to ensure that those who are broken down due to the weight of their sin are pointed to the Savior, not a to-do list--a Savior who would never break off a bruised reed nor snuff out a flickering flame. Imagine the people who stand in that truth that even though God's ways are ancient ways, they are God's ways, nonetheless, and they reveal the best way for people to interact with their creator, to interact with one another, and to interact with the world they live in. A people who stand in the gospel. Paul said, this is the gospel you've received, this is the gospel in which you stand, and this is the gospel by which you are being saved. It's the preserving power of our lives. We can't generate something that would keep us the way the gospel message keeps us. We can't construct something that would be satisfying enough to our souls that would compete with what the gospel does for us

to get us to the end of our days with our faith intact. In fact, as we grow as God's people we're supposed to become even more deeply aware of our need for the gospel. You've probably read biographies like I have of some of the saints that have gone before, and without exception their testimony of how desperately wicked their heart is, is much more profound at the end of their life than at the beginning of their walk with Christ. But just as profound and even more so is their view that Jesus Christ has covered all of their sin. That's what we're supposed to be growing in. The gospel uncovers our hearts and then it enfolds our hearts. And it renews our minds—it challenges our minds and renews our minds in such a way that we become more and more thinking God's thoughts after him. We see clearly. So Paul describes this people who have received it, who stand in it, and are being saved by it--and he says, if you're holding fast to the word that I preached, if you're holding fast to the word which I preached, unless you believed in vain. Paul says we should be holding fast. That should be the experience of the readers in Corinth, the hearers of this letter. It should be our experience--those of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ--this should be our experience, Paul says, listen, unless you're showing that your faith is without effect. Paul isn't saying that a true believer, one who has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit of the living God, can fall away from that faith. What Paul is saying, does your faith resemble one who has been regenerated by the living God? These words send a chill to our bones. I know they do. It's the kind of faith that Paul is describing in Philippians 2:12-13. It's the kind of faith that Paul's says causes us to diligently work out with humble fear and trembling our salvation, knowing that it is God who is at work in us to bring about his good pleasure in and through our lives. That's the kind of faith that he's calling us to. Statements like this aren't supposed to be passed over lightly. They're supposed to be mulled over and reflected upon. They're to be swirled around in the palate of our thought processes, and internalized, if you will, for those of you in the wine-tasting business. These statements are to be considered and not walked lightly over. It's not to disrupt our spirit and cause our Sunday afternoon to be a mess. It's to challenge us and to wake up to know that these days are brief, and this time on this planet is brief, and we waste time if we are not receiving the gospel, standing in the gospel, and being saved by the gospel. That's what Paul is pleading with these people to do. He says don't take this lightly. That's the purpose for which we join a fellowship. I joined myself together with you, you joined yourself together with me in fellowship so that the gospel of God's grace can guard our hearts.

And we see Paul go to this next point, and he says the guardian fellowship of grace which the church is grounded on is not a bunch of collective opinions of people who sat around and came up with a story to tell. He says this is based on the sure and certain reliable Scriptures of the living God who revealed himself through the Old and New Testaments. The unfathomable riches of the Word of God is the second, if you will, resurrection resource that has been made available to us. God's word. He says, for I delivered to you as of first importance that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scripture, he was buried, and he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. Paul knows that no one can deliver something that they have first not received. That's what that phrase is all about. He says, listen, I received this message just like you received this message. We didn't write this message. We didn't come up with this message. This is the revelation of God to mankind, and we deliver it. We deliver this message. I didn't make this stuff up, I'm merely the messenger. We order a lot of stuff online. Most recently, maybe, some tennis shoes. And when the UPS man comes up the street or the Fed-Ex truck or whoever's bringing that delivery we get really excited to see the UPS guy. But we don't invite the UPS guy in to become a part of our family, to sit down to dinner, to graduate from high school and college as a part of our family. We just want the gift that he's bringing. When we take and deliver the message that we've received, we present Christ to the world. Paul says what I received, I delivered to you. That's why we stick to God's script. It's his message. If we encounter persecution for what we proclaim, then by all means let us make sure that what we proclaim is the sinless Savior who died, the sinless Savior who was buried after death, and the one who victoriously with his authority as God rose from the grave. And that's going to unsettle hearts. It's not what we want to hear initially. But Paul says, this is what we preach. Paul says it's got to be the first importance, it's the top priority, emphasizing our faith is based in historical context--the nation of Israel, the foretold Messiah, a setting in early

Palestine during the reign of Caesar Augustus, and all the things that we know historically are accurate. Paul says, listen, that Messiah, that awaited anointed one, died for our sins according to the Scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. The Greek verb tense, I think, is very helpful here. Because in those first two statements it's in the past tense, it simply denotes an action that occurred. But in the third one it's in the perfect tense, which denotes for us, if we're translating properly, that this is a completed act with ongoing eternal significance. Paul says he was raised on the third day; we dwell in the power of that resurrection. This is the one we serve. He is Jesus Christ victorious over the grave. That scares us, that terrifies us.

Paul also says it's according to the Scriptures. The pastor who married Dana and me, he was fond of one particular illustration, and I haven't used it in all my ministry, but I'll use it today. He talked of a farmer who was trying to plow his field. So he set his tractor where he needed it to be, and he fixed his attention on a point way off in the distance on the horizon and he drove straight toward that point until when he got close enough to see what it actually was. To his shock and horror, it was a Jersey cow that had been set free from the pen. And so he did what you think he did--turned around to see that every jig and jag of that cow's wandering was reflected in the pathway that he thought was going to be a straight and narrow path. We need a guide that is sure and certain, that's not our opinion, that's not the way our hearts flee and flutter and go with everything. We need God's Word that is time-tested truth, revelation to us by the God who made us and knows what's best. And Paul doesn't directly reference the Scriptures, but he could easily clearly demonstrate according to Isaiah 53 there was a Savior who was sinless and who died and was buried. According to Psalm 22 he was crucified, they cast lots for his clothes, they pierced his hands and feet. He was counted as one of the transgressors but he had never committed any sin nor had done any violence, nor was any deceit found in his mouth. The Scriptures foretold that Christ would be crucified, just as he was. The Scriptures speak of his burial. Jesus himself said, just as Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights, so will the Son of Man be in the heart of the earth. And they stood in the temple courts--Jesus said, destroy this temple, and in three days I'll raise it back up. And the Jews said it took 46 years to build this temple. And John the gospel writer says, just so no one has any misunderstanding for all of eternity, it was his body to which he was referring, and three days in the tomb he burst forth in victory. Psalm 16 describes that bursting forth, that he wasn't going to be abandoned to Sheol, the place of the dead. He wasn't going to encounter corruption, he was going to be seated at the right hand of God, enjoying eternal pleasure on high. That's the resurrection. All these things are foretold in the Scriptures. It's a reliable Scripture. It's the standard to which we must hold to. The church that preaches and teaches and lives according to the Word of God is a church that's going to be living in line with the gospel. That's where we're at. That's really all we've got.

But then Paul goes on to say, you're in this fellowship of guardian grace, you've got the authority and the reliable Scriptures, and now there is this reliable 'rumor' of the resurrected Redeemer. He says after he arose from the dead he appeared to Cephas--that's the Aramaic version of Peter--and he appeared to the twelve, then to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep--that was a first century Christian way of saying 'death' because they believed it was simply a passage--so he talks about that some have fallen asleep. And then Paul goes on, then he appeared to James and then all of the apostles. Paul doesn't pull the topic of the resurrection out of thin air. We see in verse 12 that the church in Corinth has proclaimed Christ as raised from the dead, but some of them were actually saying there is no resurrection from the dead. Paul was fearing that they were in grave danger of actually walking away from the only faith that was possible to save their soul, and it hinged on the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Some of you know I'm a big movie buff and this past week, I was saddened to see that Roger Ebert, maybe you don't know that name, but he was one of the 'thumbs up, thumbs down' guys on the PBS show "At the Movies" for two decades. He was the Chicago Sun-Times movie critic, and this past Thursday after a recurrence of cancer he succumbed and passed away. So I was interested to read the obituaries and some of the history of things surrounding Roger Ebert, but I was certainly saddened and sobered to read, among other

things, in a 2010 book that he wrote, he said these things. It said he did not fear death because he didn't believe that there was anything on the other side of death to fear. And then he went on to say, I was perfectly content before I was born and I think of death as the same state. What was startling about that for me is that I believe the Bible teaches us that there is something on the other side of death to fear and to be terrified of. It's the judgment of a holy God righteously administered against sinners. There's something to fear on the other side of death. Paul knew that. Paul also knew that it is only when we rest in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ from the dead, that we can find confidence in the valley of the shadow of death for ourselves and for all of those to whom we proclaim or deliver what we've received. This is imperative for us, believers. It's imperative for me, for you. And I just want to say to you that just because I happen to be preaching a sermon today and you happen to be hearing a sermon today doesn't mean that I've got all this worked out and I don't need the fellowship of the guardian grace community or to be continually informed by the Word of God. We all need that. And we need these reliable witnesses, the reliable witnesses who were real people who Paul described, and the reliable witnesses of the cloud of witnesses that Pastor Randy referred to last week from Hebrews 12--all those saints who have gone before. Paul told the Corinthian church, the resurrection 'rumor' is true. We've seen him and we've talked to people who have seen the resurrected Christ. And although it's subjective proof, the fact that the church of Jesus Christ has grown over the last 2000 years is stirring testimony to the power and the reality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. The skeptics claim that the resurrection was a hoax and a concocted lie. But critics of the resurrection are dumbfounded to try to account for what is the church of Jesus Christ. We need one another. I need your faith to shore up my faith when it's weak, and Lord willing, I want to be able to do that for you, as well, because nothing can produce what is the church of Jesus Christ if it's just the followers of a dead teacher. The only rational conclusion to draw from those witnesses is that he has risen from the dead.

So my plea to you, beloved, fellow brothers and sisters, is have you received that, and is that the gospel in which you stand and by which you being saved, and are you making every available opportunity that you can to be trained by, corrected by, loved by, guarded by that which God has given to us. Let me pray for us. Father in heaven, we pray that you would meet us here at the point--each of us have a different point of need--and I know that you are the God who made all things, and can meet each one of us where we need you to. Lord, take your word preached, please use this testimony of the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth and make it particular and precisely relevant for our hearts today. And we'll trust you with the results, and we'll give you the glory, and we thank you for the grace. And in Christ alone, we pray. Amen