

April 1, 2018  
Easter Sunday  
National Presbyterian Church  
**"On Trial for Life"**  
Acts 22:1-16; 30, 23:6-10  
David A. Renwick,

The Apostle Paul – the greatest missionary and ambassador of the Christian faith in the years just after the life of Jesus – is in Jerusalem.

He's facing a large crowd of angry people who think he has desecrated the temple. He's being screamed at, and threatened, and soon, he'll end up in prison, and be shipped off to the city of Rome at the heart of the Roman Empire.

As he stands now before this large angry crowd, he shares the ultimate reason why he believes he's there. He says, "*I'm on trial, I'm being judged, concerning the hope of the resurrection of the dead.*" This is why he's there: because of a conviction so strong about the resurrection of the dead that he's willing to face any consequences to hold on to it.

Now this is quite a statement – quite a conviction. One that surely forces us to probe a little bit into

- what Paul means when he thinks of “resurrection”
- and the place the idea has within his life
- and why it's so critical for him to hold on to at all costs.

So what's Paul talking about here?

Well, first of all, not surprisingly, what he's talking about, is the first Easter Day: the event that had happened 25-30 years before this moment, when, in the same city, Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified and killed, and then, according to the testimony of many witnesses, came back to life again – not just in the spirit, but in some type of a recognizable body.

At the least, Paul was so convinced of the truth of this Easter event in the past, that he was willing to stake his life on it – something, I suspect, not too many people would be willing to do today and actually (I think it's important to note), not, even, back in Paul's day!

For example, our passage in Acts mentions a group in ancient Judaism, known as *the Sadducees*, and what we know of the Sadducees, not only from the Bible, but from the Jewish historian, Josephus, is that these Sadducees were not only the upper class guardians of the temple, and the status quo, but they had no belief at all in the afterlife, and therefore no belief at all in the resurrection of the body – and therefore no belief at all in the resurrection of Jesus!

Of course, in the ancient world, as today, some people certainly believed that there was some form of life after death. But for most of these people, the idea that would have dominated their thinking more than any other would have come from Greek philosophy and the Stoics: a belief that after death our individual existence is snuffed out, and in some form we simply blend back into the vast cosmos.

And even today you find this kind of idea surfacing in all kinds of places

- Think, for example about the movie “The Lion King,” and the idea of “the cycle of life.”

- Or think about the words of William Shatner (the original *Star Trek* hero and *Priceline* promoter!) in an interview on public television last year. He described his view of life-after-death

like this:

“You see – I know consciously that when we die, our bodies decay – and we enter the flow of energy which is the universe. In many years to come, it re-forms, and forms other material. I know that consciously. That’s what I believe.”

<http://www.tvguide.com/tvshows/tavis-smiley/episode-102-season-14/william-shatner/194986/>

and if that sounds familiar, it’s because there are many in the same camp today who believe exactly the same thing

AND back in Jesus’ day this wasn’t uncommon: either believing in nothing, or in this vague kind of post-death existence. **If this is what was at stake in Paul’s trial, lots of people might have been on his side.** But they weren’t – and it wasn’t.

NO! When Paul speaks about resurrection – and the resurrection of Jesus in particular, he’s thinking about the resurrection of some kind of body that can be seen. So he writes the words in our first reading to Greek Christians, people who breathed the air of Greek philosophy, in the Greek city of Corinth (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). And he says:

For I handed on to you as of first importance – what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared

→ to Peter,

→ then to the twelve (the inner circle of disciples).

→ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.

→ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles.

→ AND, last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

It’s this life-changing encounter with the Resurrected Jesus that Paul describes in Acts 22: an experience that was to him the incontrovertible evidence that something happened on the first Easter Sunday that he could not and would not refute or deny: The Resurrection of Jesus in the body!

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So here was a conviction about the past for which he was willing to go on trial – be beaten up and die for! A conviction so strong that it permanently changed the direction of his life in the present: so that, in the present, *the central reality of Paul’s life was an ongoing relationship with the same Jesus who had risen from the dead in the body.*

Some of the words Paul writes to his churches over the years provide a consistent picture of the power of this ongoing relationship for Paul.

To one church, for example, he writes

"I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer “I” who live, ***but Christ who lives*** within me." (Galatians 2:20)

In other words, to Paul, the risen Christ was alive and well and active *inside his life*, empowering and influencing the moral and spiritual direction of his life.

It is no longer “I” who live, but Christ – the living, resurrected Christ, raised from the dead – who lives within me

Can you say that? Is the resurrection of Jesus in the past, a powerful reality for you in the present?

OR, to another church he writes

"For the love of Christ, urges us on. He died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who died - **and was raised** for them."

(2 Corinthians 5:15)

What Paul is describing here is a relationship with a living person, not with a dead person, and not just (and this is really important to add) with a person whose teaching “lives on” after their death. Paul DOESN’T say

"He died for all so that those who live might *pay full attention to Jesus’ teaching because I now believe it’s the best religious teaching in the world*

This may be true – but it’s not what he says! Rather, what he says is that

He died for all so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died **and who was raised** for them.

Many people live for some-THING, or some-THINGS. But when you dig deep, what you find is that most people live for SOME-ONE (not some “thing”). So, Who is the “some-ONE” you live for most? Is it the risen, living Jesus Christ? You were made for this relationship!

For Paul there was nothing that compared in importance. So to another of his churches he writes

I regard everything as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. (Philippians 3:8-10)

KNOWING! NOW!

So, Paul believed in the resurrection with utter conviction because it led to a relationship in the present with the risen Jesus, made possible because of a unique event in the past: Jesus’ bodily resurrection on the first Easter.

BUT THEN, there’s one more thing that Paul had in mind when he shared that his conviction about the resurrection was so strong that he’d go to trial for it: (1) Not just an event in – *the past* by itself; (2) nor just an event in the past that profoundly shaped *his present* life, but for Paul, belief in the resurrection was about *the future* –

(3) a profound conviction about the future, that there would be an experience of bodily resurrection in the future, that the Risen Jesus would give as a free gift to Paul, and all who trusted in him.

A few moments ago, I quoted William Shatner. I have to admit the interview has haunted me because of its bleakness. Here’s a longer excerpt

Tavis Smiley, the interviewer, says:

Tavis: You said that you’re looking around and you’re losing friends here and there. How do you process that?

Shatner: Death?

Tavis: Yeah.

Shatner: Well – it scares the [bleep] out of me. You see, I know consciously that when we die, our bodies decay and we enter the flow of energy which is the universe. In many years to come, it reforms – and forms other material. I know that consciously. That’s what I believe. (And then he adds). I think you just die, so you’re alone. Loneliness has been my enemy for many years.

As a kid growing up, and when I was doing regional theater work as I started a career, I was always lonely, deeply lonely, and I think of this loneliness as akin to what I think about death. So when I die, I’ll be alone. So you’re alive, you’re conscious. And here’s death – I’m dying.’ *Now what happens? That’s the scary part.*

My word! What a bleak picture! All alone at the point of death. All alone at the point of death – with nothingness ahead: no relationships: nothing!

BUT (thank God!), to Paul, this wasn’t the true picture at all! Because of Jesus’ resurrection in the past and a living relationship with the risen Jesus in the present, there was rarely if ever a hint of loneliness in Paul, or any fear of the future at all. So that if the outcome of his trial in Jerusalem was death: so be it! Indeed – What Paul believed was – that at the moment of his death, the risen Jesus would be standing right there to lead him into a new “resurrection life” forever.

To put it crassly, it was as if Jesus was an elevator, saying to us with arms wide open “Come on in, Hold my hand, Step inside. Just as I was raised from the dead by God the Father, trust your life and death to my care, and I’ll take you up with me to the top!

And Paul was so confident about this eternal future that he was willing to give his life away in Christ’s service in the present, no matter what it took.

Again, to the church of Corinth, he wrote this:

- Five times I received the forty lashes minus one.
  - Three times I was beaten with rods.
  - Once I received a stoning.
  - Three times I was shipwrecked;
  - for a night and a day I was adrift at sea;
  - on frequent journeys, I was in danger from rivers and bandits, in both city and wilderness,
- (2 Corinthians 11:24-27)

And when pressed to answer why? – he spells it out

<sup>32</sup>If w/ merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it?

If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink – for tomorrow we die.”

(1 Corinthians 15:32)

In other words, if there’s no Act II to life, then “Sure,” Paul would say, “Go Ahead: grab it all in Act I!” But if you’re sure there’s a second half, Act II, then you can risk your life: why not? Live it as an adventure, and even suffer, and be treated unfairly at a trial and it’ll be ok! SO to the church in Rome he writes powerfully:

I consider the sufferings of this present time

not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us

(Romans 8:18)

For Paul, belief in the resurrection, was a belief in a future hope that empowered the present.

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My Friends – it's Easter day. Jesus' closest friends, the disciples, met Jesus alive that day. The same Jesus that Paul would meet alive some months later – on the road to Damascus. So that for Paul the resurrection was not just "some dogmatic theology" he held on to in the back of his brain, but a conviction he believed in with a passion, and for which he was willing to stand on trial and even suffer and die.

**A PROFOUND BELIEF IN THE RESURRECTION:**

A conviction about a historical event in the past – on that First Easter Sunday – when the crucified Jesus rose from the dead

A conviction about a relationship in the present, based on the Easter belief that Jesus was very much alive and close by: no need for loneliness here. Ever.

A conviction about the future – that Christ's resurrection in the body, was God's assurance that we too, in the future would be raised from the dead bodily; a conviction so strong that Paul was empowered to live life as an adventure and "give himself away" in service to Christ and others.

"I stand on trial," he says, "for this hope, the hope of the resurrection."

May God help us – so that if we were to face such a trial – we like Paul would be found GUILTY, of such a life-giving conviction.

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