Faith in Christ is Not "Have It Your Way"

1 Corinthians 15:12-28

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

As we close out the Church year with a focus on the eschatological coming of Christ who has died, been raised from the dead, and been enthroned on high, it is natural to segway into a focus on your own resurrection that is to come on the last day. But I want to take a little bit of a different approach here, and really focus on why Paul is writing this section to the church at Corinth in our text. There is a group of Corinthian Christians that are denying the resurrection of the dead when Christ returns in glory. They acknowledge Christ's resurrection, yet do not believe there is one to come for them. When it comes to their faith, they want the ability to keep what they like but ignore the parts that make them uncomfortable.

I'm sure most of you have been to that burger joint that prides itself on letting you "have it your way." I love places like that because having it my way means, and I know many of you will not agree, having everything on it, except for that slimy, no good tomato slice. But, every now and then, they put it on there anyway, and being a good sport I just pick it out and throw it away. Just like that tomato is to me, so is the resurrection of the dead to some of the Christians in Corinth. The idea is appalling to them, and they would rather just take it out and toss it away. They want the faith, but without this idea that they have not already achieved the fullness of their spirituality—the idea that there is something more to come.

So, this contingent of Corinthians treat their faith like they are at a sandwich shop, and can build their faith "sandwich" any way they like. But in the realm of faith in Christ, there is only one recipe that can be followed, and it is precise and exact—the inspired and inerrant Word of God, as it is revealed to us by the Holy Spirit in Scripture. This idea of a "personal faith" that can't have boundaries placed on it is in fact the opposite of true faith; it is a fantasy perpetuated by Satan himself. All through the world, and even in many churches, it is considered to be hateful and intolerant to say there is only one way of faith. They want the ability to pick and choose the parts of the Gospel that suit them and build their so-called "faith" upon those things. Yet, Scripture teaches very clearly that faith in Christ is not "have it your way."

The fact is that a denial of the bodily resurrection of Christians on the last day, is a denial of the entire Gospel truth. Our Gospel lesson this morning with the reckoning of the sheep and the goats confirms that all must rise and face the righteous Judge. That is

what Paul is trying to nail home with these Corinthians. There is no option to throw out the tomato and still eat the sandwich "your way." If you remove any ingredient from the Gospel, like the resurrection of the dead in our text, the entire thing is gone, and the sandwich can't be eaten in faith.

If you do as those Corinthians were doing and lean on your rational understandings, it would be easy to see how they might find themselves perplexed by the idea. If you try to wrap your head around the fact that after you die you will ascend to heaven to be with the Father, and that somehow there will still be a longing for what's to come in the resurrection of the body which He has promised, then the temptation of reason that led some of the people of Corinth to just say, "It can't be so," could seem quite feasible. However, Paul's response to their doubt is all too clear, and something that you must always lean on as well in times of doubt and question. He tells them in verses 13 and 14 of our text, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain."

Those are strong words from Paul, and very important ones for you even today. When he says, "then our preaching is in vain," he is saying that if what these Corinthians believe is true, then he has no purpose. And this naturally takes us to a discussion of what exactly he was preaching to them. In verses 3-5 of this same chapter, Paul writes, "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." Through their denial of the resurrection of the body, they have also completely destroyed these Gospel truths that Paul has brought to them. What they have remaining in their denial is not faith at all. They find themselves lost again in the darkness of sin and death, a darkness which even their Greek philosophical minds cannot help them escape. They don't really know it, but they have abandoned all hope. They believed that the mere knowledge of Christ and His resurrection was enough to sustain them to eternity, and they wanted to exclude the idea of the resurrection of their own bodies because, according to their Greek culture, it was madness.

Some of the Corinthians were allowing the Greek philosophy of the age to permeate the faith that was brought to them by the Holy Spirit in Paul's preaching. Through all kinds of perversions and twistings of the Gospel, they had found themselves transforming the church to the culture, instead of leaning on the church to pull them out of the culture. Gregory Lockwood says this in his Concordia Commentary:

> The Corinthians may have woven their new faith into the traditional Greek fabric. On the one hand, they had to admit that faith in Christ's resurrection was central to Christian teaching. On the other hand, they may have insisted, in line with Greek tradition, that the only resurrection they would see was a spiritual one, and that this had taken place already.

It's pretty clear that the people of Corinth were heading down a dangerous path, and Paul's writing of this section is an intent to redirect them back toward the cross and the empty tomb. There is a comfort that lies in the hope of your resurrection on the last day, and Paul is trying to bring them back into the comfort of that Gospel truth; the Gospel truth that Christ died for your sins, was buried, rose again on the third day, and ascended into heaven. That is where you must also keep your hope and find your comfort every day. As Paul says in verses 20-22 of the text, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive." There is a hope of resurrection for all who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and in your Baptisms you were baptized into Christ and share in His death and resurrection. So, what does all that mean for you in the world today?

Logic, reason, philosophy, and the like, are constantly at war with the Gospel in the world today. Human philosophers and scientists believe that they have "finally figured it out," and they don't need the timeless Word of God to validate the faith. These people are placing themselves at risk of being separated to the left as goats. Earlier, I mentioned the basic tenets of the faith that these Corinthians were denying in their rejection of the resurrection of the body, and that rings true so often in churches even today. Think about how many churches minimize Confession and Absolution, The Lord's Supper, and the preaching of the Gospel. These things are the Word of God to proclaim forgiveness to His people, and there are those, even in Lutheran circles, who just remove them in favor of an extra praise song, or belittle them by practicing open communion. When you ignore and/or trivialize the Means of Grace, the very things the Lord has given you to be His presence in your midst, you profane the faith that He has blessed you with. To be strong in your faith means to hold fast to all that the Gospel brings to you in the pure and inerrant Word of God. It is the Holy Spirit who strengthens your faith through that Word and through the reception of His holy Sacraments.

There is no option to keep the burger without the tomato. If you "have it your way" and throw out the slimy tomato, the sandwich doesn't become better. It is no longer theirs to claim. They have abandoned the Gospel in favor of a better taste, and instead find nothing but emptiness in their mouths. But for those who have the true faith,

and come to the Lord's Table with repentant hearts, you receive forgiveness, life, and salvation in your mouths. In the very body and blood of Jesus Christ given and shed for you, you are pointed to the reality of your resurrection that is to come—the resurrection when you will be joined in body and soul with all of the Lord's sheep whom He has called into His loving care.

The entirety of your faith in Christ is wrapped up in the full and complete revelation of God given to you by the Holy Spirit in His Word. And when you find yourselves overwhelmed with the slings and arrows of the devil, masquerading as logic and reason, take heart dear friends, for the armor of God has been put on you in your Baptisms, and it is reinforced in the reception of God's Holy Supper. It is easy for anyone to succumb to the pressures of society, and you as Christians, no matter how faithful, are poor, miserable sinners just like everyone else. You NEED the Word of God to bring you the forgiveness that Christ won through His death on the cross, and He ratified your assurance of eternal life with Him in His resurrection, an assurance that carries you beyond death, as you await the resurrection of your bodies on the last day. And that is a fact in which you rejoice greatly, just as David proclaims in Psalm 16:8-11, "Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. You make known to me the path of life; in your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore."

This is a battle that we as Lutherans are well prepared to face. Through the foundation of "Sola Scriptura" we can say with fervor that we believe the words given to us by the Holy Spirit. You do not have true faith in Christ without the fullness of the faith, which is revealed to you in the Scripture by God Himself. You can say without a doubt, that you are forgiven for your sins on account of Christ's death on the cross, a forgiveness that was ratified in His resurrection on the third day, and a forgiveness that you continue to receive in His appearance to you in His body and blood in Holy Communion. And because of these Gospel truths, you can say with absolute certainty, that along with the saints that have gone before you, you joyfully await the day when you will enter into that "Sweet and Blessed Country," and Christ returns to reunite all Christians with their bodies, to live resurrected with God for all eternity. Faith in Christ is not "have it your way." Faith in Christ is having it His way, and His way is to welcome you into the light of His glory as His righteous sheep who have been given life everlasting. Amen