

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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What's Essential?

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

What's essential? That's one of the most frequently asked questions during the coronavirus pandemic. I know one answer that we can all agree on—toilet paper. From the moment we became more aware of COVID-19's potential impact on our daily lives, toilet paper and other necessities have been flying off store shelves. Many folks have turned to online shopping, where they've also run into the dreaded "Out of stock" or "Item no longer available" messages. A few retailers have faced situations where disagreements over toilet paper hoarding escalated to the point of confrontation. I even read of a church in England whose toilet paper was stolen during the coronavirus panic.

What's essential? It's certainly a question that encompasses more than just paper products. For instance, significant debates continue about what constitutes an essential business. There's widespread agreement about health care services, grocery stores, auto maintenance and repair shops, and gas stations. But beyond these, and a few others, things get more fuzzy. In some states, florists can stay open. In others, liquor stores can operate. In some, golf courses can remain open. As time goes on, more and more of us will probably keep a closer eye on the classification of barbershops and hair salons. Every time I look in the mirror, I wonder when the doors of my local Hair Cuttery will be open again. Actually, here in Maryland, and in many other states, barbers and salons can provide services to essential employees, by appointment only. Last time I checked, clergy aren't considered essential personnel.

Though the question of religious services has come up a lot. Should churches, particularly their worship gatherings, be considered "essential"? Governors in some states have designated houses of worship as providing essential services and thus exempt from shutdown orders. But even in cases where places of worship have not been forced to close, public officials have supplemented their policies by calling upon congregations to take into account the well being of their members and their surrounding community. Plus, we have options beyond meeting face-to-face. Right now, in this very moment, you and I are using technology as a means of transmitting and experiencing something we consider absolutely essential, namely, the gospel.

This good news has always been regarded as essential in the life and mission of the church. No one knew this better than the apostle Paul. Paul was so devoted to Christ, and to communicating the news of his life, death, and resurrection, that he maintained steady contact with the gospel communities he had planted around the Mediterranean basin. In order to teach, guide, encourage, exhort, and form these congregations, Paul had to stay connected to them. He didn't have Facebook or Zoom, or any other application of the digital highway. But Paul did have a network called the Roman road system. And he utilized that network to send letters across great distances to his churches. Geography would not hinder him from his God-given commission. As one person has put it, Paul "took the technology he had and worked remotely."¹

In today's Scripture passage, we hear Paul interfacing with the Christians in Corinth. Paul deeply loved this community of believers, but that love was put to the test by divisions, disagreements, and disputes within their fellowship. After spending the opening section of his letter urging the Corinthians toward unity, Paul has taken up some contested issues where the congregation needs his guidance, namely, sex in marriage, meat offered to idols, and disorder in worship gatherings. And now, in today's text, Paul turns to address another hot topic, the resurrection of the body.

Word has gotten back to Paul that some in the Corinthian church are denying the resurrection of the dead. Note that these members of the congregation aren't disputing the resurrection of Christ. They're not contending that Easter should be cancelled. They still believe Jesus was raised from the dead. But they've apparently abandoned the conviction that believers will also be bodily raised from the dead. In other words, they're trying to break the indissoluble link between what happened to Christ and what will happen to those who belong to Christ. So as the chapter unfolds, Paul reminds them that in due time, at the coming of the Lord, the dead in Christ will be raised and given new bodies, animated by the Holy Spirit and fit for life in God's eternal reign.

What Paul says about what's ahead is built on what he says about what has already happened. That's how he begins chapter 15: "Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve" (vv. 3-5). In the ensuing verses, Paul speaks of other resurrection appearances, which enables him to weave his own personal salvation story, and the Corinthians' salvation story, into the big picture. But what matters most is that Paul has now laid the foundation of his argument, and restated the bedrock of our faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus. Nothing is more essential.

I got an email from someone who wrote about how, the day after Easter, she asked some of her colleagues about how their Sunday went. The response was basically the same as the one she had gotten from virtually everyone else she had asked. They sighed, shook their head, and said, "It was ... different." Every Easter is different, especially Easter 2020. Even that is an enormous understatement. But no matter what the circumstances, the context, or the outcome of each Easter, our essential message remains the same—Christ crucified and risen. God at work in Christ, in reconciliation and resurrection, in liberation and restoration. What's happening, in our lives and in the world, shapes the way that we interpret that essential message. But the way we apply that message to what's happening is always grounded in what has already happened. Christ died for our sins and was raised from the dead. Essential.

Times of crisis are often the atmosphere in which we rediscover and recover what's really essential. As you've been sheltering in place, maybe you've been able to refocus on the things that matter most, especially relationships and the interconnectedness of human life, within your household, your community, the nation, and the world. During the coronavirus pandemic, our eyes have been opened to daily activities, rhythms, practices, and gifts that we ordinarily overlook or take for granted. We've paid more attention to people whose lives are precious, and whose presence and work in the world is essential to the fabric of society. As one person has put it: "We would all be dead if not for the grocery-store stockers. The farm workers. The maintenance staff. The nurses, the intake staff at hospitals and doctors' offices. Without the tech support people. The novel coronavirus has cast the mighty from

their offices and lifted up the dignity and irreplaceability of those we thought were lowly workers.”²

Jedd Medefind writes about the novel *A Gentleman in Moscow*, which tells about Count Alexander Rostov. According to Medefind:

As communists tighten control of Russia in 1922, Rostov’s aristocratic blood virtually guarantees he’ll be executed. But during his trial, the Court recalls a poem Rostov wrote years before on behalf of the working class. Rostov’s life is spared, but he is sentenced to spend the rest of his days confined to Moscow’s Metropol Hotel. If ever seen beyond its walls, he’ll be shot on site.

And so Rostov embarks on a lifetime of limitation. The man who previously ventured across continents now cannot walk to the corner market. Accustomed to soaring ceilings, he now resides in a cramped attic.

Yet day by day, a marvel unfolds. Rostov doesn’t only survive. Amid the constraints of his new life, he thrives. He forges deep friendships and grows beyond himself. He loves and is loved. He transforms others’ lives and is himself transformed. One cannot help suspecting that three decades of boundedness did not shrink Alexander Rostov. If anything, limitation made his life larger.³

Medefind goes on to say, “For people all over the globe, COVID-19 has dramatically shrunk much of what we view to be essential, from free movement to public gatherings to financial resources.”⁴

And yet, as Alexander Rostov discovered, the shrinking of our lives can also enlarge our lives by making us refocus on the most essential matters. With the struggles and challenges of this time come opportunities as well. Opportunities to reclaim and grow further into our core convictions, and to deepen our faith and our hope, which are grounded in the undying and inextinguishable good news of Jesus Christ. This gospel, says Paul, is “of first importance.” In other words, foremost, top priority. It’s what we’ve received, and what we’re supposed to pass on and spread.

In particular, Paul calls us back to the centrality of the Easter message. God raised Christ from the dead, and has promised to do the same for those who belong to Christ. That’s the firm foundation of our hope. Without it, we have no solid ground to stand on in life. If Christ has not been raised, then all our forms of proclamation, including this sermon, are useless. I should just stop preparing these messages and posting them online. If Christ has not been raised, we’re just propagating an illusion. If Christ has not been raised, then your faith and my faith are futile, empty. If Christ has not been raised, then we’re just deceiving ourselves and living a lie.

But no, as Paul announces, and as we continue to announce, “Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep” (15:20). In Christ’s resurrection, the life of the world to come has broken in upon the life of this present world that’s passing away. In Christ’s resurrection, God has defeated death, our greatest enemy, and has overcome the sin that alienates us from him. In Christ’s resurrection, God has created a new humanity, made in the image of Christ. In Christ’s resurrection, God’s reign has dawned, and we’ve been given the Holy Spirit to empower us for faithful living while we wait for God to finish what he has started, when the risen Christ comes again to restore all things.

For now, we live at a time when lots of things are rising. The number of coronavirus cases is rising. The number of deaths is rising. The number of closed businesses is rising. The rate of unemployment is rising. The level of anxiety is rising. The uncertainty about the future is rising. But for those who receive, take their stand on, and hold firmly to the gospel, there's another rising that grounds our hope and gives us peace, consolation, and joy. It's the rising of Christ. God brought him up from the dead, and his resurrection life is already at work in those who believe. In Christ, we experience a past that's redeemed, a present that's purposeful, and a future that's filled with his glory. At a time like this, nothing could be more essential than that.

¹ David W. Peters, "See, I Zoom You with My Own Hand." Christianity Today website. April 16, 2020. Accessed April 22, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/april-web-only/zoom-facebook-church-technology-epistles-apostle-paul.html>>.

² Natalia Imperatori-Lee in "The Church after Coronavirus: Crisis Exposes What Is Essential." National Catholic Reporter website. April 2, 2020. Accessed April 23, 2020 <<https://www.ncronline.org/news/parish/church-after-coronavirus-crisis-exposes-what-essential>>.

³ Jedd Medefind, "The Case for Sheltering in Place Without Screens." Christianity Today website. March 20, 2020. Accessed April 23, 2020 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/march-web-only/coronavirus-sheltering-in-place-without-screens.html>>.

⁴ Medefind, "The Case for Sheltering in Place Without Screens."