

Date: November 20, 2022

Texts: Gen. 18. 10-14 / I Cor. 15. 12-20

Title: "Against All Odds"

Intro -

cf. - all four gospels report that, after Jesus lived among us...

after he was condemned... after he was crucified...

after he died and his body was placed in a tomb...

all four gospels report that - after all this...

the tomb was found empty

the stone that guarded it was rolled away

He was gone

now... there were those (there still are those...) who say this was just

a little bit of deception... maybe even grave robbing

but -

then his followers started to see him... to meet with him...

to talk with him... to share meals with him

then... his followers began to show changed behaviour...

going about with boldness and conviction

(where before - they were cowering in fear)

as God had reached into Egypt and brought a people out of slavery and

into freedom -

so here - God reached into the greatest enslavement of all: death...

and wrought a new freedom

as God had long ago conquered Israel's enemies -

so here - God conquers the most formidable enemy of all: death

i.e. - is anything impossible for God...?

(so asks an angel of Abraham, when he and Sarai express some doubts...

so affirms an angel, when centuries later, Mary wonders how

it can be that she would be the mother of God...)

against all odds...

God has done - repeatedly, throughout time - what we believed
could not be done

(which does not mean it's easy for us...)

i.e. - sometimes... it seems as though you have to be a bit naive to believe this

... it's easier to approach it with skepticism
as many did... and - as many still do

- is this really true...?

Paul says it is...

we hope that - against all odds - it is...

the Bible is all about how it is - how God works wonders...

against all odds

- how nothing is impossible for God...

- how life and victory are ours

I) The Need for Resurrection

cf. - this was a message that the people of Paul's day desperately
needed to hear...

because - at the time he was preaching, the dominant
philosophy (Greco-Roman, should you want to know...
presented only a pale and insubstantial portrait of eternal life.

The shades of the dead who inhabit Hades spend eternity
miserably longing for the lives they once knew.

While a lucky few could aspire to be raised by the gods to
dwell in the paradise of the Elysian Fields,

(there's a movie for that - with Matt Damon...)

that was a reward reserved only for the rare, heroic mortals
who did the bidding of the fickle residents of Mount Olympus.

and - as for the classical Judaism Paul knew equally well, Sheol —

the realm of the dead —

was no more cheery a place than Hades.

*which is why the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body
that Paul advances here brought such hope.*

Writing to Christian believers who may have forgotten the
bleak philosophy of the religions they've left behind,
Paul takes them with him...
on a thought-experiment so they may remember
- *who they now are.*

*"If Christ has not been raised from the dead,
our faith is futile..."*

cf. - per the holiday favorite - "It's a Wonderful Life"
as we all (hopefully...) know - an angel named Clarence
gives the depressed small-town banker, George Bailey,
a precious gift:
the ability to glimpse his world as though he had never been born into it.

As anyone who's seen this movie can attest, the town of Bedford Falls is
a much worse place in George's alternative vision —
the scenario in which he had never been born —
than in reality, where his many small kindnesses over the years
have borne fruit in the lives of others.

cf. - it's been observed that it's probably no accident that the angel's name
is Clarence.

His gift to George through the thought-experiment he offers
is the ability to see his own life with clarity.

in the same way - Paul's thought-experiment about the resurrection asks:
"What would the world be like, had the resurrection never happened?"

Would we even want to live in such a world?

In how many ways would our lives be poorer without it?

*"If Christ has not been raised from the dead,
our faith is futile..."*

II) The Grounds for Resurrection

but, Paul asserts -

Christ is indeed raised
against all odds...
against all expectations...
against all experience...

this “impossibility” has happened
and - what we saw as “the end...”
is now - just the beginning

but more than that - and against the setting of an overly “spiritualized”
view of the afterlife -

Paul makes the bold claim that our hope is substantial...
our hope has form...
our hope is solid.

Jesus resurrection was not just some “spiritual appearance” -
ephemeral and misty...

beckoning us to some idealized dream to help us
make it through night...

rather -

it was physical... it was real... it was every bit as connected to the
nitty gritty of daily living as when Jesus ministered among
them before he was crucified

i.e. - it is a reality that you can wrap your arms around - literally...

cf. - per N. T. Wright:

The bodily resurrection of Jesus isn't a take-it-or-leave-it thing,
as though some Christians are welcome to believe it and others are welcome
not to believe it. Take it away, and the whole picture is totally different.

Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of
ignoring the problems of the material world.

Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is
a wish-fulfillment religion.

Take it away, and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that Christianity is a religion for wimps.

Put it back, and you have a faith that can take on the postmodern world that looks to Marx, Freud and Nietzsche as its prophets; you can beat them at their own game with the Easter news that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Those who celebrate the mighty resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, therefore, have an awesome and nonnegotiable responsibility.

When we say "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" we are saying that Jesus is Lord of the world, and that the present would-be lords of the world are not.

When we sing, in the old hymn, that "Judah's Lion burst his chains and crushed the serpent's head," are we ready to put that victory into practice?

Are we ready to speak up for, and to take action on behalf of, those even in our own local community, let alone farther afield, who are quietly being crushed by uncaring and unjust systems?

Are we ready to speak up for the truth of the gospel over the dinner table and in the coffee bar and in the council chamber?

because...

Christ has been raised -
our faith is anything but futile
evidences for his resurrection abound -
does it call for faith to believe in it - (yes...)
(but naivety need not accompany it...)

rather - as Lee Strobel writes:

"I used to consider the resurrection to be a laughable fairy tale. After all, Yale Law School had trained me to be coldly rational, and my years of sniffing for news at the Chicago Tribune had only toughened my naturally cynical personality.

But intrigued by changes in my wife after she became a Christian, I spent nearly two years systematically using my journalistic and legal experience to study the evidence for the resurrection, and the credibility of Jesus' claims to being God.

I emerged totally convinced and gave my life to Christ."

because...

Christ has been raised... and our faith is anything but futile

but -

is it incarnational?

cf. - In a radio sermon, Thom Long poses a hypothetical question first advanced by Frederick Buechner. What if God were to rearrange the stars in the sky one night, to spell out the words, "I REALLY EXIST"?

The reaction, Long says, would be dramatic:

"Churches would spill over into football stadiums, crime would cease, wars would suddenly stop, an uncanny hush would fall over the world -- for a while. But, then, there would be the message in the stars night after night, month after month, year after year. Every night the sky would proclaim "I REALLY EXIST," and it would become a normal part of nature."

(what we really need, Long argues, is something more...)

"What we really want in our deepest need is not proof that there is a God somewhere who exists, or even scientific evidence that a resurrection happened some time ago in history.

What we need is a God who is right here, knee-deep in the mud and mire of human existence -- a risen Christ who comes to us every day to give life and hope.

That is a God who comes not in evidence

but in the relationship of trust we call faith."

who - against all odds -

does for us... and - gives to us... what we truly need

Christ has been raised... and our lives are forever changed.