

Almost every time I write an email, before I press send, I scan through to make sure I didn't use too many exclamation points. You see, I tend to overdo it on the first draft, not necessarily because I'm so excited about the message, but because I'm always worried about sounding too serious, or even angry. The exclamation points are an overcorrection and I nearly always end up changing a couple of them to periods. Perhaps some of you have encountered this challenge, too – especially in the last two decades as our most common modes of communication have become faster and more accessible– in written correspondence, it can be very hard to convey tone. It's hard to know what tone the writer intended. When I'm on the receiving end, it's very tempting to assume the writer's tone and apply it, but that assumption often benefits me and my point of view, which isn't really fair. I suppose this has been a challenge of the written word long before digital communication – it was likely one of the struggles of the many churches to whom the apostle Paul wrote his epistles.

Another challenge we've named over the last few weeks as we've explored some of these letters from 1st Corinthians together, is that it's like listening in on only one side of a telephone conversation – there are gaps we can't fill in; we rely on a lot of context and scholarship of others to piece together what Paul was addressing in these letters. And it's true, we don't know everything about what was going

on in Corinth or in Paul's mind as he writes to the members of this community, but I have found myself reading into *these* words a tone of frustration, even exasperation with this new community of faith in the diverse cosmopolitan Greek city of Corinth. And I could be wrong, but each time I read Paul's words, they keep coming out like he's tired of explaining these truths to his readers. Maybe here in the month of May, some of the educators in the room can relate to this sentiment – maybe you, too, have repeated instructions for the fourth or fifth time and find yourself starting those sentences with, “Yes, as I said...” or “Okay, again–”. And I'm sure that Paul, just like our dedicated educators, is overjoyed at the privilege of teaching, of leading, of guiding this group of people through challenging times as they learn and grow and become who they will be. But even those most joyful and grateful in their vocational work get frustrated and might invoke a tone similar to the one that I have inferred and interpreted in this letter from Paul to the Corinthians. Because when the lesson is this important, even the most exasperated teacher will do whatever they can to help drive the point home. And for Paul, it is just that important. Listen now for these words from 1 Corinthians 15, beginning with the 1st verse.

The Resurrection of Christ

15 Now I want you to understand, brothers and sisters, the good news[a] that I proclaimed to you, which you in

turn received, in which also you stand, **2** through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

3 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 **4** and that he was buried and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures **5** and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. **6** Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died.[b] **7** Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. **8** Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. **9** For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. **10** But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God that is with me. **11** Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you believed.

The Resurrection of the Dead

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? **13** If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised, **14** and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation is in vain and your faith is in vain. **15** We are even

found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. **16** For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. **17** If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. **18** Then those also who have died[c] in Christ have perished. **19** If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.[d] **21** For since death came through a human, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human, **22** for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. **23** But each in its own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. **24** Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. **25** For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. **26** The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

51 Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die,[a] but we will all be changed, **52** in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. **53** For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. **54** When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then

the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

55

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”

56 The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. **57** But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is the Word of God for the people of God. **Thanks be to God.**

This is our fourth and final Sunday reading scripture from 1 Corinthians and the ones we’ve read together over the last few weeks are what some might call Paul’s greatest hits – these letters are key points of his written ministry to guide the Corinthians through their divisive struggles as a new community of faith. We’ve read letters in which Paul minces no words in setting them back on track to bear witness to the good news of Jesus Christ, encouraging them to be imitators of Christ in all things. When he learns that the community is in a season of deep conflict, he urges them in the way of unity – to bear, above all, the name of Christ– not the name of the leaders behind whom they had aligned in various factions. In another letter, he names and affirms the centrality of love to our faith in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection – and therefore, the crucial centrality of love in everything we are called to do as the body of Christ. Today,

we turn to another section of Paul’s correspondence to this same community in Corinth – in response to yet another division among them that is distracting them from proclaiming the gospel. Who can even imagine a body of people dealing with this much disagreement?

Word has made it back to Paul, who is believed to be writing from Ephesus, that some people in Corinth are not on the same page about Christ’s resurrection. Some of them, he writes, believe there is no resurrection of the dead – a notion that is not impossible to conceive of, especially given its recentness and the infancy of the church to proclaim it. Paul, however, has no room for these excuses. He doesn’t specify in this letter what those hangups with resurrection were – one possibility might be that those doubters denied the physical, bodily nature of resurrection, particularly concerning what will happen to us and our bodies in death and when Christ returns. It’s not an insignificant scruple that some of the Corinthians are making – if they’re struggling with the truth of our physical bodies being raised to life in Christ’s second coming, I get that. Or maybe they were leaning into Gnostic thought and were concerned about being stuck with a physical body when what they really wanted was freedom from the material and an enlightened mind. Makes sense given the philosophical ideas in the air at the time. Or maybe they just wanted to think of the whole thing as powerfully meaningful but ultimately symbolic --a direction even

some prominent and regarded modern theologians take. The whole thing brings up a lot of questions. But Paul points out the danger of their logic, ultimately naming that there is no value in trusting in Christ without the hope of resurrection. In Paul's eyes, resurrection is absolutely central to the life of Christian faith and it is crucial for the life of their church that they understand and agree upon this.

He begins the letter by reminding them of what he has already proclaimed to them, the good news by which they have been saved— that, according to the scriptures, Christ died for their sins, was buried, was raised on the third day, and then began appearing to followers and to many more in a resurrected physical form. Paul reiterates his credentials and authority to testify to this truth, saying that he also had an encounter with the risen Christ— even he, who had once been antagonistic to the Jesus movement, even Paul has received the grace of Christ and bears witness to the truth of his resurrection.

This next part is where I start to hear that tone, as if to say, “Let's go over this *again*, shall we...” Paul's rhetorical style is argumentative. He is making a case, refuting those who have denied the truth of resurrection. And his tone may or may not sound like a teacher who's tired of repeating him/herself, but I also think Paul just really, really needs them to get this. For Paul, belief in resurrection is at the absolute core of what it means to be people of God, and for the health of the body of this church

in Corinth, he is urging and persuading those in doubt to get on board. He takes the Corinthians by the hand and walks them step by step - if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can you say the dead aren't raised? And if the dead aren't raised, then Christ hasn't been raised. And if Christ hasn't been raised, then what are we even doing here?

As far as I can see, belief in the resurrection isn't one of the top issues dividing congregations these days – the church has grown and spread tremendously since Paul's time and I'm sure many of us still hold different beliefs about the specifics of life after death as we await Christ's second coming and what will happen when he does return. But despite our great diversity in theology and our tendency toward disagreement in the big C-Church, I don't see this topic as one of the big issues causing division. Paul's letter covers a lot of theological ground in this argument and there are lots of places we could explore and possibly get lost in the weeds of what it means to experience the fullness of God's glory in death.

But when we zoom out from all those theological nooks and crannies that Paul touches on, I hear him asking the Corinthians a question that is needful and guiding for us today: if we, friends, are not living as people of the resurrection, then what is the point? If we shout our Alleluias on Easter morning, proclaiming in awe and wonder and praise that the tomb where

Jesus' dead body had been laid was found empty – then we are people of new life, of healing, of hope, we are children of an almighty God who has shown us that death does not win. This is our story. It is a story of love that is stronger than hate, light that is stronger than darkness, hope that – even in times of deep despair and fear – comes in the morning, shining bright and true like the rising sun.

Paul uses the word “death” or one of its variants 20 times in this excerpt from his letter to the Corinthians. I’m guessing that’s not the uplifting theme you were hoping for when you were getting yourselves ready to come here this morning. Twenty times, and that’s not even counting the “perishing”s and “destroying”s. This letter is Paul’s testimony to the power of the resurrection and what that means for those who call themselves Christians. If you’re like me and feel slow to engage in so much death talk as a means for finding our way as the church, I’ll give you a clue – it’s really all about life.

If we believe what we say we do, that God came to live with and among us as Jesus Christ, was betrayed, tried, and executed and laid, dead in a tomb for us, only to be raised to life again days later – if we believe that great mystery of our faith, that Christ died, was risen, and will come again, then we know that death is not the driving force in Christ’s story or in our own. This is a story about new life. Hope in the morning, and in the next morning and in the one after that because, church, God has shown us

what God can do and death and division and despair cannot stand up to it. God has shown us the power of resurrection, not just in the gospel story, but in every budding springtime flower after a cold and bleak winter; when, in the midst of a long season of grief, you hear someone laughing and you look around and realize it’s you, surprised by the lightness of joy finding its way to you again. God shows us the power of resurrection in healing our broken relationships, finding ways to be truly at peace with one another when peace seems far too tall an order. So if we believe and profess and rejoice in God’s gift of new life, we are called to live our lives in light of resurrection hope – not just setting our sights on the future, but letting that vision be the fertile soil in which we take root and flourish here and now.

Paul’s own story is one that testifies to new life, of personal transformation from one who harassed followers of Jesus to one preaching and proclaiming the good news of Christ’s resurrection. Before Paul’s powerful spiritual encounter with the risen Lord, one that’s described in the book of Acts, he denied the truth of what he now proclaims, that Christ defeated death and gives us victory in life. Saul, as he was known prior to this mystical event, is a living example of what God can do – how experiencing Christ’s loving presence can help us to turn from those things we do that separate us from God and one another – tearing people down instead of building one another up.

Maybe that's why Paul is so passionate about this theme – his life, as he sees it, is testimony to the truth of resurrection.

Not to be reductive of the multitudes Paul is conveying, but I think in his letters, particularly these from the 1st, 13th, and 15th chapters that we've read recently, we're given some litmus tests to guide us in learning how to be the church. First, If you say you belong to a leader that isn't Christ, you're following the wrong person. Get aligned so that you can do the work you're created to do – to be the church you're called to be. Second, if you can't love other people– remember, you don't have to like them, but if you can't love them, you've missed a step. Love is the way in which Jesus calls us to follow him. If today's letter from the 15th chapter could be distilled down to a litmus-test version, I think it would be this: what we do out in the world, how we treat others, how we use our resources and power, how we bear witness to the gospel with our actions and choices– it better be pointing to new life. If we are the resurrection people we claim to be, we cannot be dealing in currencies of death and fear and despair – that stuff has no power. We cannot be sowing seeds of division or hatred or destruction because the story that we believe and the God who made and claims and loves us has shown us, time and time again, that those seeds are no good here. When we bear witness to what God has done, what God is doing in our lives and in all of creation, there is no room for fear or doom or death because we are children

of God who defeated death, who destroyed its power. We are children of God who leads us into life and calls us to flourish, to rejoice, to generously and enthusiastically make room for others at the table. We are children of God who, in response to God's unfathomable grace, have been blessed with unique gifts with which to offer compassion and healing and new life to a world that desperately needs it. Our story is about life. It's about hope and healing and love. May our lives tell that story well.