

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, April 21, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“THE INDISPENSIBLE FACT”

1 Corinthians 15:20

A certain politician was once taken to task for using inaccurate facts in some public statements. We can think of several who qualify. The politician responded by saying that accurate facts do not matter as much as having the right attitude and motivation. Now it's important to have the right attitudes and motivations, but so too is being factually correct. Right motivations, decisions and actions usually follow from having the right facts. It's very important to have the facts straight in a criminal trial or even with a lesser civilian case. I know of a young man who was recently in a car accident, which initially looked like it was his fault. But with his cell phone he took photos and videos of the tire tracks which showed that the accident was in fact, caused by the other driver. Once the insurance company saw the evidence, they agreed. Facts matter. With so many issues, it's vitally important that we get the facts straight in order to take the right course of action. “Just the facts, please,” as Detective Joe Friday used to say.

The apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:20. “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” Note the words, “In fact...in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.” The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the indispensable fact of the Christian faith. Without a real resurrection of Christ, there is no Gospel, no Good News.

Some boys got together to play football. Then they discovered that nobody had brought a ball. One of the boys said, "Never mind the football, let's just get on with the game." That makes as much sense as saying, "Never mind the resurrection, let's just get on with Christianity." The resurrection of Christ is the foundation stone on which the Christian faith and the Christian Church stands. It is not a just story or a myth or a product of the disciples' imaginations. It is a fact, a historical fact, the indispensable fact. “But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead.”

In 1st Corinthians 15 Paul was writing to some early Christians who claimed that Christ couldn't have been raised since there is no resurrection of the dead. Their philosophical world view didn't allow for resurrection. But Paul argued that the very fact of Christ's resurrection proves that the dead are raised. So revise your world view, he says. “For in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.”

Now first, let's consider the consequences if the resurrection of Jesus Christ is not a fact.

This is a daring thing to do. But it's what Paul asked the Corinthians to do in verses 14-19. He starts off, “If Christ has not been raised then our proclamation has been in vain.” Without Christ's resurrection Christian preaching would be little more than offering some good advice, no better

than the advice you can get from Dr. Phil. Apart from the resurrection, there's no Gospel to proclaim. If Christ is not raised from the dead, then my preaching is essentially useless. I would do more good for people as an Uber driver delivering "Skip the Dishes."

Next Paul says that apart from the resurrection "your faith has been in vain." All that we believe about God, about Jesus, about the past, the present and the future, and about ourselves in relationship to God would be mistaken. Consider the person of Jesus. Paul tells us in Romans that Jesus "was declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord." But if Christ has not been raised he would have been nothing more than an itinerant Jewish teacher who got crucified for making outlandish claims about himself. His opponents would have been right. Heavens, if Jesus had not been raised from the dead, his name would not even be known to us. History would not remember him.

Then Paul says that if Jesus has not been raised, then we are even found to be misrepresenting God. That is very serious. It's like taking God's Name in vain. We claim that God reigns in his universe, that his love is supreme, that he has the ability and the power to fulfill all that he has promised. We say that God's power is greater than the power of evil and sin and death. But none of that is true if Jesus Christ has not in fact been raised from the dead. Without the resurrection God takes second place in his own universe.

Paul goes on to say, "If Christ has not been raised, then you are still in your sins." If Christ was not raised from the dead, then the sacrifice he made for our sin was not sufficient. His shed blood accomplishes nothing for us. You and I are not forgiven. We are not free. We are still under the law of sin and death. The assurance of pardon, "In Christ, your sins are forgiven," is meaningless.

Finally, Paul says if Christ has not been raised, then those who have died in Christ have perished. After death there is no light or hope, only cold darkness. We perish apart from God, and apart from those who have gone before us. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and nothing beyond that. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, the grave is permanent. Separation is forever.

It's hard to think about these consequences, but think about them we must. The consequences are dark and dreary indeed if Christ has not, in fact, been raised from the dead. Paul leads us through these consequences, then undercuts them all by declaring, "But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."

Now let's consider why we can call the resurrection of Jesus Christ a fact.

For one thing, the tomb was empty. The women came to anoint Jesus' body, but found the stone rolled away and the tomb empty. The two men in dazzling clothes asked them, "Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here. He has risen." Now some people dismiss the empty tomb as evidence for the resurrection. But surely it is good evidence. The empty tomb is exactly what we would expect to find if Jesus had in fact been raised from the dead.

Then there are the witnesses to the resurrection. Now there were witnesses like Mary in the Garden and the disciples in the Upper Room on Resurrection night. But Paul also tells us that the Risen Lord appeared at one time to more than 500 gathered followers. Paul says in effect, "If

you have any doubts about the resurrection, go and ask any of them. Five hundred people do not collectively have an illusion or a hallucination.” Paul adds himself as a witness too, having been seized by the Risen Christ on the Road to Damascus.

Jesus himself predicted his own resurrection. The men at the tomb said to the women, “Remember how he told you that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and on the third day, rise again.” And Jesus’ words were fulfilled, as we would expect if he is, as Peter confessed, “The Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Now Jesus’ body was transformed by God’s power in the resurrection, so that it was more than a physical body. It was a resurrection body, a body fit for heaven, a body we will also have in heaven, a body God creates from the seed of our physical remains. It will retain some characteristics of our physical body, but it will no longer be bound by earthly time and space.

Over forty days the Risen Lord gave his followers enough appearances in his resurrection body to convince them that he had been raised from the dead. Christians today experience the Risen Christ’s presence. Not all the time. But in some way and at some point he breaks into our world and our lives, not so we see him, but so that we know for sure he is risen and alive. Our hearts are strangely warmed, strengthened and comforted. I’ve had such an experience of his living presence myself.

Then we have the fact that the disciples were changed from cowardly, fearful men into courageous and powerful witnesses and preachers. Plus, there was the amazing growth and spread of the Christian church, despite great persecution. The only conclusion that fits all this evidence is that Jesus Christ had been raised from the dead by his Father. The resurrection is a solid historical fact.

A former chief Justice of England, Lord Darling wrote, “in its favour as living truth there exists such overwhelming evidence...factual and circumstantial that no intelligent jury in the world could fail to bring in a verdict that the resurrection is true.” And a lawyer named Frank Morrison set out to write a book disproving the resurrection, but the more he considered the evidence, the more he became convinced of its factual truth. And he wrote a classic book about it called, “Who Moved the Stone?” Anyone who honestly considers the weight of the evidence must agree when Paul writes, “But in fact Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead...”

Finally, let’s consider the consequences of this indispensable, foundational fact.

Well, just reverse all the negative consequences that Paul envisioned. “But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead...” Therefore, our proclamation is not only true, it has the power of God’s Holy Spirit behind it to create faith in us. The resurrection of Christ means your faith is not built on sand, but on solid rock. The resurrection means that Jesus is exactly who the Bible says he is – the Son of God, the Saviour, the Lord of all. Through your faith in the Risen One you are forgiven indeed. The fact of the resurrection means that God reigns in his universe. This world and every world belongs to him. At the end every ruler and power and authority, including death itself will be destroyed and put away. The fact of the resurrection means that the blessings we receive from Christ are for this world, but not only for this world. Through him we have the living

hope of eternal life in the Father's house where Jesus has gone to prepare a place for us. "But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead..." Therefore, we are steadfast, immovable. We can give ourselves fully to the Lord's service, knowing that our faith, our hope, our love, and our labour in the Lord are not in vain. Our Christian works and witness really matter and really make a difference in the world.

I close with this. A while back I found a copy of the minister's eulogy for my grandfather who died in June 1978 at the age of 91. My grandfather was a strong Christian, originally a Methodist from England, then United Church of Canada. I still remember his well-read Bible. The minister was the Rev. Don Parr. Here's some of his words from the end of the eulogy.

"Charles Tapscott knew his life was ebbing out. He was ready. Death was coming to him as a friend. He looked forward to a happy reunion. He took Christ at his word. "In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you." His trust was in Christ – the giver of life and life eternal. Not long before Easter, I stood beside Mr. Tapscott's bed. His condition at the time could be described as "feeble." Yet with a clear voice he said, "Don, tell the people that God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." That was the very rock of his faith. He lived it grandly. It is with sadness that we commit him to his Father in heaven. We hate to give him up but we must. And we do so with rejoicing. On my visit to him after Easter he asked about the Easter service, "Did Peggy sing 'I Know that my Redeemer Liveth?'" Charlie Tapscott is one man who knew that his Redeemer liveth; throughout his lifetime and ever more in the fulfillment of his resurrection."

Quite a tribute. And such faith is based on this fact - that "Christ has been raised from the dead..." By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit May you go from here today with such knowledge and such faith.