

WHY DO WE DO THIS?
The Rev. Dr. Charles D. Mayer
The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
February 6, 2022

It's our second-to-last Sunday together. Thank God some of us are able to be in person for it! And greetings to all who are watching the stream, as well!

I want to start off with a little story. Some of you may remember me telling it before, but it's a good one, worth repeating.

It is said that Karl Barth, the great 20th-century Protestant theologian, was once asked to summarize his multi-volume magnum opus, *Church Dogmatics*. I can tell you from my own seminary days that it is a head-spinningly difficult work of philosophical theology! Barth's summary was this: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

This is quite a reasonable summary of the Christian faith, I think. It is a summary that relies on an even deeper reality, though, which is the topic of today's epistle lesson. I think we can think of this text as Paul's "elevator speech," summarizing the gospel he has been preaching and teaching in Corinth. Karl Barth's summary of the Christian faith is dependent on the core truth of Paul's elevator speech: that the Resurrection of Jesus is true. As a seminary friend of mine once said, "If He didn't get up, we are wasting our time." The truth of the Resurrection is the foundation upon which everything else is built.

Listen to Paul: "Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, 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." (1 Corinthians 15:1-2) Then, in the verses that follow, Paul describes what that good news is: that Christ died for their sins, was buried, and was raised on the third day; that he appeared to Cephas (Peter), then to the twelve; then that he "appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died;" then that he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; then "last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me." (1 Cor. 15:3-8)

Let's step back and take this in. This is a letter written in the mid-50s A.D. It was written at least ten years before the first Synoptic Gospel, the Gospel of Mark. It was written at a time when many eyewitnesses to the Resurrection were still alive, including more than five hundred to whom Jesus appeared at one time. Paul is saying, quite literally, "go and ask them." There is not the slightest reason for us to doubt the authenticity of these words.

Imagine the thrill of having this proximity to the Resurrection appearances. For Paul, good Jew that he was, and for many in the congregation in Corinth, Jesus' resurrection was a sign that the end times had come. Jesus' resurrection, they believed, would be just the first of many. It would be followed soon by the resurrection of all the dead--the General Resurrection--when Jesus returns in glory.

The only thing Paul had wrong was how soon the General Resurrection would occur. We are still waiting for it, two thousand years later. But if we seriously engage today's text, we must ask not "did Jesus rise from the dead"--because the textual evidence is conclusive that He did--but "why didn't the timeline unfold the way Paul and the Corinthians expected it to?"

This is where so much modern Biblical scholarship really misses the mark. There is the idea that because Paul was wrong that Christ would come again soon, in his lifetime, he must have been wrong about Jesus' resurrection, too. But all Paul got wrong was what God meant by "soon:" "A thousand ages in your sight are like an evening gone," says the great old hymn, "O God, Our Help in Ages Past." (*The Hymnal 1982*, #680) Before Jesus comes again, it is the work of the Church--and the work of this parish--to share His love.

How many of you sang "I Will Make You Fishers of Men" in Sunday School as children? It was based, of course, on today's Gospel story, with "fishers of men" replaced by "catching people" in the translation we use today. It's good that we have said goodbye to the sexist language, but as a boy I used to find the idea of reeling in people to share the joy we felt in church quite an exciting one. And if we put ourselves in the story, it is indeed a thrilling one: this overwhelming, miraculous catch of fish, Jesus tells Simon Peter, is just a taste of the power of the message that we are going to share with the people we will be meeting along the Way.

It is this amazing thing--this sharing of the powerful message that we can know the love of God in the person of this man, Jesus--that we are charged to be a part of. Paul didn't understand it, but God's "soon" would come only after the Church practiced the love of Jesus for all the world to see. There is too much brokenness, too much injustice, too much sadness, too much hatred, all needing the healing love of Jesus before He comes again. Our new parish, our joined families, here in Ossining, have a lot of loving to do. And we will do it looking forward to the day when the One we serve does indeed come again to a world healed by that love.

Only God knows the timing. In the meantime, here's our elevator speech, addressed to one another and to the community we serve. It is part Karl Barth, part Paul, and part Luke's Gospel: "Jesus loves us, this we know, and we have work to do until He comes again in glory. Let us love you--and won't you join us in our work of love and service?"