

*1 Corinthians 15:20 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.*

## **The Firstfruits of the Resurrection**

### 1. It Starts with Solid Roots

The difference between life and death is the starkest contrast we have. Even if death is expected, it's finality still completely shocks our emotions. Going from having a person in your life one moment, to having them gone for good; there's simply no other feeling like that. It's startling and earth-shattering. The Holy Spirit confronts that contrast head-on in the most complete treatise on the resurrection to life in the entire Bible. You know the chapter well; it's quoted often on Easter Sunday – 1 Corinthians 15. At the beginning of the chapter, the Holy Spirit led Paul to present a dire warning of what life without the resurrection of Christ would mean. It is quite a depressing scene. Without the resurrection, sins are not paid for, faith is worthless, Christians are fools and liars, and there is absolutely no hope. Those words bring our hearts to the lowest point imaginable. And then the change that Christ makes. Paul immediately lifts us up by declaring that Christ *is* risen, and to mark the contrast he says, "But now..."

There has never been such a dramatic shift in the human language. "But now..." at the very point of desperation, of hopelessness, "**Christ is risen from the dead.**" And to kick off the joyous declaration, Paul added, "**and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.**" Christ – the firstfruits of the resurrection. We know the properties of life from simple plants all around us, and so Paul makes the comparison for understanding the implications of Christ's resurrection. He is the firstfruits in that He was the first human to come back to life after death, but also in that He is the greatest of all. We follow His example and His power today as we think of our own resurrections in light of His. And as it is with all plant-life, it starts with the solid roots.

The Word of God we consider this morning comes from a personal confession of Paul's, from Acts 13:33-35 "**God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: 'You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.'** 34 "**And that He raised Him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, He has spoken thus: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David.'** 35 "**Therefore He also says in another Psalm: 'You will not allow Your Holy One to see corruption.'**

Jesus was revolutionary in His ministry, but not because He forged His own path. The clear Word of God had become so foreign at that time, that to preach it in its simplicity was considered extraordinary. But, as Paul states here, the roots of the resurrection were established long before Christ was born. He quotes three portions of the Old Testament to confirm this. In Psalm 2, Christ was chosen by the Father as the acceptable servant, the Messiah. Through Isaiah, God's people were taught that Jesus would establish the promised mercy of God as given to David, and many others. And in Psalm 16, the crowning note of Jesus' work would be endless life. The grave would not corrupt Him because it could not hold Him.

These roots founded the resurrection in the Word of God and provide a stable foundation for your faith. You can trust God's promise for your life after death because it was confirmed by Jesus. He is the firstfruit because the root of His resurrection is not separate from God's promise to you. In truth, both stem from the same source. Jesus, of course, said the very same thing to His disciples after He came back to life, telling them, "**These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses, and the Prophets, and the Psalms, concerning Me.**"

Hymn 203

2. It Grows through the Vine

Paul moved from speaking of what was written long ago to what had just happened while Jesus was on earth:

**Acts 13:38-39 "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; 39 "and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.**

As we think of Christ as the firstfruits of the resurrection, it would be a tragedy not to also think of Him as the Vine. He spoke to the disciples, just days before His death and resurrection, **"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing (John 15:5)."** Here, Jesus was giving them comfort and advice for when He would leave. Whether that be the few days He was in the grave or after His ascension to heaven, the point remained the same – all spiritual growth comes through the Vine.

Jesus wanted the disciples to remember this in the present time, as they were completing their lives here on earth. We are far removed from these words, but the meaning applies just the same to us. The Vine strengthens us in our lives today, as we live them now. Without Jesus, there can be no growth of faith. Without Him, we can do nothing. Paul speaks with the same tone when He says, **"Christ justified you from the things which you could not be justified by the law of Moses."** Without Jesus, the Vine, there is an interruption in the nutrients needed to grow.

The point for our lives is clear – live in Jesus and you have hope. Live not in Jesus and you have nothing. Peter said it plainly elsewhere, **Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3-5).**

Just as the Vine keeps the branches alive, so Jesus, the firstfruits of the resurrection, keeps us alive. He does this by blessing us with faith and forgiveness *now*, even though we still struggle with sin. Think of this as a living hope. We are alive in His name but it is hope that we hang onto, because we have not yet been perfected in heaven. The greater fulfillment of this promise is given after death. At that point, our gift is no longer hope, but reality. Eternity in heaven. We receive the incorruptible inheritance. We are changed from mortal to immortal.

The Christian's death is simply the **"But now..."** moment. It is the transition from a life of shattered expectations and feelings of despair about what is to come. A change from the futility, the worthlessness that Paul so vividly paints, if indeed, we are left on our own. **But now... Christ is Risen.** He is the firstfruits. And We have living hope. Christ is your Vine now, to strengthen, lead, protect, and nourish you. The nutrients of life eternal come through those ageless roots of His Holy Word and are given in the precious gifts of Baptism, the Lord's Supper, and the Ministry of the Gospel. So drink up, and live in your Savior's name!

Rise: Confession of Faith  
Hymn 730 (children)

### 3. It produces life

The final product of the firstfruits of the resurrection is the bearing of fruit in our lives, and our last portion of Acts 13 gives us an example of that in Paul's life:

**Acts 13:42-44** So when the Jews went out of the synagogue, the Gentiles begged that these words might be preached to them the next Sabbath. **43** Now when the congregation had broken up, many of the Jews and devout proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who, speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God. **44** On the next Sabbath almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.

We started by showing that the truth of the resurrection is rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. When it comes to the fruit of the plant, namely the result of the roots and the Vine working together, we see another example of that in the Old Testament. The term "firstfruit" is actually a term that dates back to the worship life of God's people in the Old Testament. In worship, the firstfruits were the best of the individual's harvest and they were given as an offering to the Lord. It showed gratitude for His grace and also that He was the main priority in their lives. To ignore the firstfruit sacrifice was equivalent to ignoring the grace of God.

But there was also something very significant about the firstfruit sacrifice that pointed directly to Christ's resurrection. It was to be given the day after the Sabbath, just as Christ rose from the grave the day after the Sabbath. God told His people that the firstfruit sacrifice was a **"testament forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings (Lev. 23:14)."** The resurrection of Jesus confirmed this hidden promise within the festival itself. The offering foreshadowed Christ's perfect sacrifice before the Father which atoned for the sins of the world. The firstfruit offering endures to this day in the Resurrection message. We celebrate it anew everything we think of Christ and His empty tomb.

A plant's fruit demonstrates its life, just as the Old Testament ceremonies demonstrated life by faith, as our worship does today. But the hidden life within the fruit is the seed. The blessing of fruit is that it continues to bear life long after it is gone. But, in order for that life to be spread, the seed must die, and be planted in the ground.

Christ is the firstfruits in this manner too, the one who died and thereby secured enduring life for all. Through the lifeless seed of His body the Church was born, and so the fruits we produce by faith in His name continue to share the life He gave. But the Easter message is that all this would mean nothing, if Christ did not rise. Everything hinges on His resurrection.

This was Paul's entire point in 1 Corinthians 15 and Acts 13. If you do not start from the objective fact of Christ's resurrection, rooted in Scripture, you have no hope of further spiritual life. Those who ignore the clear Words of God pass along a seed that bears death and not life. And so, the simple Christians to whom Paul preached in Acts 13, continued to hunger for the Word of God. They begged Paul to tell them more because they were being filled with Jesus.

This is the process that takes place wherever Christ, the firstfruits, is truly present in His Word. In like manner, James wrote:

**Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth, that we might be a kind of firstfruits of His creatures (James 1:18).**

John, when witnessing the redeemed of heaven, said, **These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb (Revelation 14:4).**

God's Church is not a complicated thing any more than the message of salvation is complicated. Follow Christ and you have life. Believe in the firstfruits of the resurrection, and you will have life to share as well. Each work of faith that is born from the Gospel, affects a great number of people, just as one fruit can contain many seeds. When a work is complete, you don't always see the effects. Fruits done out of love in the Gospel rarely allow the opportunity to see the result. But, seeing the result of our works in Christ is not the important thing. The seed is planted and life moves forward.

The greatest seed we can plant is the gift of our lives. This can happen in today, as we obey God's commandments, give Him the honor due His name, and help our neighbor out. But, it can also happen in death. The life of a Christian is evidence itself of the effectiveness of the resurrection. It is a seed born from a lifetime of growth. From the roots, to the Vine, to the fruit. A seed sown in corruption, and raised in glory. A resurrection like the very first – Jesus, our Lord and Savior. He lives, So will we! Amen.

Hymn: 192 vv.1-2, 6,8 "Awake My Heart With Gladness"

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