

## ARE YOU PITIFUL?

*“If only for this life we have hope in Christ,  
we are to be pitied more than all men.”*

(I Corinthians 15:19 NIV)

*“If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,  
we are of all people most to be pitied.”*

(I Corinthians 15:19 NRSV)

*“If it is for this life only that Christ has given us hope,  
we of all people are most to be pitied.”*

(I Corinthians 15:19 REB)

Are you pitiful? I'm not talking to the tourists. If you are a guest or visitor, you are very welcome here, but you haven't necessarily bought it yet, have you? It isn't a commitment or anything. Some of you even like to prove, at least fifty weeks a year, that you can take it or leave it alone. That's fine. It's a free country. We have a deal: you won't make any promises, and I won't expect anything from you. So my question is not relevant to you, and no insult is intended toward you.

But those of you who are part of this place, who come here out of conviction and claim the Christian Life as your Path and WAY - for you this is a serious question. Are you pitiful? Do you believe in the Resurrection with all your heart and soul, or are you trying to limp along in the life of faith, and in the life of the church, by taking what you think is valuable from around the edges and fringes of Christianity, but leaving out its core and power?

This has been happening, especially in the so-called mainline churches. Oh, not with everybody by a very long shot. But some people think they are too intelligent now, or too well-educated or too realistic, to take the faith part of the Christian Faith. So they shield themselves from the gooey parts, or they doze off or ignore it when the Scriptures get onto any of the touchy subjects: Sin, Salvation, Satan, Miracles, Heaven, Hell, Conversion, Crucifixion, Resurrection. “Can't we focus on some other verses? Or maybe change the meanings around? The Resurrection is okay maybe symbolically - ancient Christianity's version of Positive Thinking, perhaps. But mostly we'll just duck until the big

fanfare stuff goes by, and then get back to a more sane and realistic business: help the poor and love our neighbor.” That’s *really* pitiful. Oh, I don’t mean you shouldn’t help the poor or love your neighbor. But every religion in the world knows that - they always have, since long before Jesus.

If you really are intelligent, can you imagine yourself being part of anything Christian apart from the Resurrection? Without the Resurrection, the disciples would all have gone home and never left Galilee again. That is as close to fact as you will get with anything in the New Testament: no Resurrection, no Christendom.

Lots of church people are playing the reduction game in our time. Never mind the Good News, or prayer, or trying to figure out what a Living God may want from us or may be trying to tell us; we can help the poor, save the whales, and make it a better world if we all just *try* hard enough. And since God isn’t really real, or at least not personal, and since Jesus isn’t really the Christ, and the Resurrection didn’t really happen, and there is no actual spiritual power except for maybe developing a good attitude - well, we better focus on our own good deeds and concentrate on our programs (maybe use modern advertising techniques, and bring more rock music into the worship services), then we can still attract enough people so we can go on with our wonderful programs. That’s *really* pitiful. It’s also pathetic.

But maybe I’m being too general. What about you? What happens if your child dies, or if your business folds and you lose everything at age fifty-seven? What happens if your grandfather or father turns out to be a child-molester? Or the doctor calls and the tests have come back positive? Oh, I know the lilies are pretty, and we all look absolutely beautiful on this glorious Spring morning - as much as any group of humans ever could. I’m really glad to be here. I’m really glad that you are here also. But that doesn’t repeal real life. Could we be *real* as well as pretty? If this is all a charade, if we don’t really believe in the Resurrection, then all of this - the building, the church, our hymns and anthems, our being here - is really pitiful. All of it! Pitiful and pathetic.

Paul was dead-on, you know. If we are pretending about the Resurrection, the rest will all melt away on us. If we don’t know that Jesus’ Resurrection is promise and surety for our own resurrections, then it still all melts away from us. We are the Resurrection People. Every opinion we hold on any subject in life is affected by that belief.

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Every decision we ever make is influenced by that reality. Every person we ever care about is changed in our eyes because we know their life is neither defined nor limited to what happens here.

Let us be very clear: Easter is not unmixed good news. The Good News is not that we live forever; that might be the very worst news possible. The Good News is that God loves us - that's the Gospel. Thoughtless people like to pretend that humans have made up the notion of eternal life so they can console themselves with it in the face of death. Death has never been our problem; dying sometimes is, but not death. Eternal life is our problem. Eternal life has never been our idea - it is God who keeps insisting on bringing it to our attention. Humans who think about it for more than five minutes are not sure they like this truth at all. Have you never read Hamlet? What if you commit suicide and find out it still isn't over? "*Ay, there's the rub!*"

Humans much prefer to imagine that there will never be any true accounting. We are not troubled very much by the thought that we will die and that will be the end of it. This matches our assessment of our true worth anyway. Karl Marx had it wrong: Religion is not the opiate of the people; thinking there is no God is the opiate of the people. Thinking we can die and that will be the end of it - and we will never be troubled again by purpose or love or destiny, or what we were supposed to be and become - that is our wishful thinking! We like to imagine that we live in an immoral, accidental universe because then we can do anything we damn well please and never be called to account for it. Look around. Do you really think the vast majority of people in the Los Angeles Basin live each day in conscious awareness that God cares what they do, and that they are shaping and forming the lives they will carry with them forever?

Humans did not invent eternal life. God keeps interrupting our senseless fairytales with the truth about eternal life: insisting that we matter, that we are his children, that we have to keep learning and growing and changing and working. And like all children, we get sick of it. We want to retire. We want to go play. We want to pretend that all those other children we've never liked will never bother us again. We'll never have to make amends, never need to repent, never have to heal all the broken relationships we've left in our wake. We want to pretend that we are independent - that we can live any way we decide to - and then it will all just end, be over and done with. That is our wishful thinking. And God keeps saying, "Guess again. Happy Easter."

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Not very good news to be told that it doesn't just end. All those people we have not yet learned to love - well, they are not out of our lives; they are going to be around for the next several billion years. That's Easter too! And some of us have problems: we eat too much, or drink too much, or have temper tantrums, or don't control our passions as if other people were truly important. What do you think happens to all the stuff we don't figure out and take care of here? It just blows away? That's the fairytale part we like to add in. But sorry, you don't suddenly get perfect just because you die. Eternal life means it goes on. You pick up in the next realm where you leave off in this one. What do you think this life is for?! You think this is all by accident? You think there is no rhyme or reason to it? You think the lessons and issues and principles we keep running into every day of our lives here have no significance? Jesus, have mercy!

How would you like to be overweight for the next thirty thousand years? How would you like to come home drunk every night for the next millennium? How long do you plan to stay grouchy, or depressed, or greedy, or cynical? Do you know how long you can blame everybody else and everything else for your problems if you want to? Zillions of years. Eternal life means that if we don't like our lives, we better get busy, get to it. Death is not going to help. We cannot just wait it out. Happy Easter!

He is risen! He is risen indeed! And we rightly rejoice and sing praises to the God who is so much greater than we at first imagined - and to the Christ who keeps insisting and declaring that *we* are also much greater than we have ever imagined. But if we have ever contemplated the Easter Message for more than three mindless moments at one time, then we also tremble and are awestruck - both fascinated and frightened by the sheer magnitude of LIFE. And there is no waiting. That is the terrible aberration we have invented to get out from under the pressure. Jesus always spoke of NOW: The fulfillment is now. The Kingdom is now. Eternal life is now. You are already living your eternal life. It is not the longevity that makes Easter worth celebrating - it is the quality of LIFE. When we walk with Jesus and begin believing Him, life changes. It is different to be alive in His presence. That's what makes Easter worth celebrating - not the length of life, but the new quality of LIFE in Christ Jesus: the new relationship, the LOVE, God with us. You think Christians have been laughing and singing all these years because we found out that the work and the challenge go on forever? Not likely. We laugh and sing because He is with us! That's what makes the difference.

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So, did Jesus really rise from the dead? Yes, but there is a twin question that needs to go with that one: Is Jesus then alive and with us still today? Yes to that also, or the first yes doesn't count for very much. There is a common belief, however, that's killing Christendom: that Jesus rose from the dead and went off to Heaven somewhere, and we are waiting for Him to come back - that everything is on hold until He comes back. ("*Shane, come back!*") That's not Christianity. Christianity is God with us - New LIFE in Christ Jesus - not us sitting around waiting while life trickles through our fingers and souls. That's back to where we started - waiting for the Messiah to come.

Did Jesus really rise from the dead? Of course, but we are not the Christian Fact, we are the Christian Faith. If you want to reduce life down to facts, you can, but then be honest enough to admit that you do not wish to consider anything religious. Admit also that you do not want any meaning or love or loyalty or purpose in your life - and that's a fact, if you want to stick with the facts. But a billion facts never add up to a single truth. Everything that matters in life is a risk, a gamble, a leap of faith. The evidence mounts that she loves me, but if I wait for proof, I will wait forever. Just so with God.

Though the evidence is overwhelming, we can never prove the existence of God. If we ever could prove the existence of God, we would at the same time prove God to be a human contrivance and a fraud. You can never prove the greater by means of the lesser. When humans seek truth, they always end up in mystery that goes beyond the facts - not often counter to the facts, just beyond them. That's why we are the Christian Faith, not the Christian Fact.

We cannot prove the Resurrection of Jesus. And yet the evidence is overwhelming. No other belief has so startlingly changed so many lives, and the course of human history, and over and over again. The problem, for those who want proof, is that there are no objective observers. If you believe Jesus rose from the dead and is alive, then you are a believer. And if you are a believer, then all the skeptics cease to value your opinion. So, automatically all the nonbelievers assume they are the only ones seeing straight, and to any believer they seem unwilling and unable to see anything at all. That's not going to change, except that nonbelievers will continue to encounter the Risen Christ and turn into believers - and then their word won't count anymore except inside the fellowship. No surprises there; this has been going on for two thousand years also.

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The empty tomb, by the way, is a symbol for those who already believe. It's shorthand, an image, sort of an insider's code. Nobody ever believed in the Resurrection *because* of the empty tomb. Mary didn't; for her, it was a gardener who turned out to be more than a gardener. Peter didn't believe Mary, and wasn't impressed by the empty tomb; it wasn't until Peter ran into Jesus on Easter evening that he became a believer. Thomas gets the title "Doubting Thomas" because he was exactly like all the rest of them; he wouldn't believe until he encountered Jesus for himself. And neither did any of the others. Nobody in the New Testament is a secondhand believer. Paul encountered Jesus some time later. So have a lot of other people ever since. Nobody in all church history is a secondhand believer. If you are a secondhand believer, you are pitiful. Yes, we have nominal Christians - people who claim it but don't really mean it; people who say the words but it's only pretense, or tradition, or custom. That will never fly. The church cannot survive for long on such weak broth. It's pitiful!

People believe that Jesus is risen - that He is alive today - because *they* encounter Him. When that happens, they usually realize that it has been going on for quite some time but they have been refusing to acknowledge it, to add it up. They say strange things, in total seriousness, like, "At first I didn't believe it, but now I realize He's been after me, trying to help me, for a long time."

Easter is incredible and beyond full comprehension, but we need to stop making it all so complicated. Jesus is risen - He is alive here and now! And almost every one of you here has felt His presence, and you know He has been after you for nearly as far back as you can remember. But a lot of us don't want Him interfering with our lives and our choices very much yet ... not quite yet. That's why we have all the hoopla every year about "Is it really believable?" And "What do the scholars say?" And "Is it just wishful thinking?" And "I don't know, it's so confusing." And all the rest. For many of us, it's a smoke screen. We know very well that He is risen, and that He has been trying to guide, help, change, and direct us for years. But we know that if we ever admit it out in the open, there go all our excuses. "Ah, well, yes then, hello Lord ... is that You again?"

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### PRAYER

In the stillness, and in the noise ...  
In the anger, and in the love ...  
When all seems to be going well ...  
And when there is mayhem within and without ...

We remember You, O Lord:  
That You created us, and all things ...  
That You have provided all that we have known ...  
That You have searched for us, tracked us, found us, and taught us.

We remember that You sent the Incarnate One:  
To live among us, healing and teaching ...  
To die among us - for us - and forgiving us.

And now, as if all of that were not enough ...  
As if all of that would not bind us to You in love and devotion forever ...

Now we remember and celebrate:  
The Return ...  
The Resurrection ...  
The coming of the Holy Spirit.