

Sermon: Easter Day
Text: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
Theme: God's Answer to Right our Wrongs

A long time ago, in a place not that far away, I went to school. My memories are mostly positive. Back in those days, we had weekly spelling tests. I loved spelling, still do. And I desperately wanted to get the words right, and twenty ticks. But there were words that tripped me up, and I hated the dreaded red cross against the answer.

Crosses have always had a negative connotation. Nobody wants to be told that they have failed at a certain task. Getting a few red crosses against a misspelt word is no big deal. But when we get a tough employment review, or fail to hold a relationship together, or don't follow through with a commitment we've made, we feel like a big red cross is emblazoned across our forehead. It doesn't matter if anyone else knows; we feel guilty. And if other people know about what we've done, then we feel shame, piled on top of guilt.

Today we used the words of our text, from 1 Corinthians 15 as our confession of faith. And that's appropriate because what Paul has shared with us is an early Christian creed. In his words we are taken right back to the days right after the momentous events of Good Friday and Easter Day. Jesus' followers were grappling with the meaning of the most unexpected, unprecedented event in all of history: their disgraced teacher and leader Jesus, crucified on Good Friday, buried in a rock-hewn tomb, has been raised from death on Easter Day. Suddenly all the old certainties didn't make sense anymore. God wouldn't allow his Messiah to suffer and die. Red cross. Wrong. God had in fact confirmed that what Jesus said multiple times about his suffering and death was true. The resurrection was God's great big tick to Jesus' betrayal, suffering and death.

Early on Easter morning, the two Mary's, and Salome, trudge to the tomb to anoint the dead body of Jesus. But they get the shock of their lives. The stone is rolled away, and an angel greets them with these astounding words: **"Don't be alarmed," he said. 'You are looking for Jesus the Nazarene, who was crucified. He has risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid him.'** Who was the angel kidding? Of course they were afraid. But next come hopeful words about the future: **"But go, tell his disciples and Peter, 'He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.'"** And yet, even then, these three women fled, trembling and bewildered, trying to make sense of the empty tomb after the shock and horror of Jesus' crucifixion.

The Apostle Paul wasn't there that day. He wasn't a disciple of Jesus at all. Like his fellow Pharisees, he would have seen the death of Jesus on the cross as vindication that Jesus wasn't the Messiah but a misguided religious crank. But no doubt Paul would have heard the rumours of resurrection. He was determined to stamp out this fraudulent claim. And that's Paul doing when we first come across him in the Book of Acts. Saul, as he was then known, approved of the death of Stephen, the first Christian martyr. But not long after, the Risen Jesus intervened in his life on the road to Damascus.

"A light from heaven flashed around him. ⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' 'Who are you, Lord?' Saul asked. 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' he replied." Confronted with the one he both denied and persecuted, Saul's life turned 180 degrees. He spent time with Jesus' disciples, learning about Jesus' life from them, and dedicated his life to proclaiming the cross as God's right answer to our sin, disobedience and plain disinterest in God.

Take the opening chapter of First Corinthians. Paul states: **"We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling-block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles... Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption."** Through the cross, God solves the equation of divine justice. God is full of pure love. He can't stand evil, and it can't stand in his presence. Which presents a huge problem for us. We can't stand in God's presence either. Yet the fact is that God loves each of us. He created us in his image, and he laments the way that our sin separates us from him. It's a great big red

cross on our copybook. But Good Friday shows us how God solves the problem of our making. As Paul himself writes in Romans 4: **“Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”** This cost Jesus his perfect and sinless life. He died because he bore our sin at the cost of our lives. That’s the good news, pure and simple.

And so, in this famous chapter where Paul focuses on what the resurrection of Jesus means, he begins with the gospel. **“I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.”** From what we know about the church in Corinth, they had plenty of problems: arguments, conflicts and behaviours that didn’t honour God. We know these things in our community too. Guilt and shame are still powerful emotions. Forgiveness is still a necessity.

Paul’s answer is to hold tight to the message of the gospel, which is summed up in these actions of Jesus: **“For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”** And the Old Testament points forward to this. Take Isaiah 53, for example: **“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”**

Secondly, Paul says that the resurrection is real because Jesus made himself known to many people after the resurrection. Paul runs through the list of some of those who saw the Risen Lord Jesus. There was Peter, of course, and the disciples, and then five hundred of the brothers and sisters. Now we don’t know when this happened, but what Paul is saying to the people in Corinth is: “Check these people out. They’re still around. You can talk to them.” And you can talk to me too, because I’ve also seen Jesus.” **“Last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.”** What Paul is getting at here is that he was a Johnny-come-lately to this faith-in-Jesus thing. And he adds, **“For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God.”**

But he shouldn’t have been surprised. This is the way God works. It’s grace. Paul says, **“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them – yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.”**

The same was true for the disciples. Only three days after they had abandoned Jesus, on the evening of the day he had risen from the dead, he burst in on their gloomy gathering and commissioned them to serve him all over again. **“Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.’ And with that he breathed on them and said, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.”** The disciples have been given a part in the Father and the Son’s family business: making God’s forgiveness of sins real in people’s lives. And this is also what Jesus has called Paul to do.

And that’s where we fit in too. The cross is God’s way of righting our wrongs. The resurrection is God’s big tick. The grace of God that flows put from Jesus’ finished work has transformed us from lost causes to people whose purpose is to love and serve God, and the world loved by God. We’ve been forgiven, we’ve been set free, and the Holy Spirit continues to prime us so that our lives reflect the forgiveness that we have received. Jesus has taken our guilt and our shame, not because we deserved but because his love decreed it. Not only that, but we trust a Saviour who has gone through death before us, risen and ascended to eternal life and who promises to take us to be with him forever. Jesus’ resurrection shines even more brightly when we are grieving or facing our own death.

God’s gift of new life is for all people. If you don’t know where you stand before God, or don’t think your worthy, or think you can tough it out without God’s grace and mercy, think again. The cross of Jesus isn’t a mistake but it’s God’s answer to all that’s wrong with the world, and with us. And the resurrection is the tick that confirms God’s saving work, which he graciously wants to share with all people. Amen.