

A long time ago, but not SO long ago that it couldn't have happened yesterday, somebody just like us, lived a life of purpose. A life of consistent, authentic, and dynamic love revealed the divine in past, present, and future. The world has never been the same. Thanks be to God!!!

As a community of faith, one of the things we are hoping to accomplish, both individually and collectively, is to make sense of the Jesus story. Who was Jesus? Why was Jesus here? How does the story of Jesus reveal God's presence in our own lives? How can our lives be an extension of Jesus in the world?

This means we are not all that different from the earliest Jesus followers. They were seeking meaning, too!

But the earliest Jesus followers DID live in different times. There is Roman occupation. There are real differences of opinion of how the Jesus story fits into the evolution of Israel's story. For those who live in the decade after Paul, there is an adjustment to life without Herod's Temple. And oh, by the way, there is no formal canon to document the story. There is a diaspora filled with hundreds of communities, all clinging to different interpretations of messianic significance, which they each hold to be inherently and exclusively true.

What is America? What constitutes good barbeque? What's the best way to respond to pandemic? Who should be the headliner for the Super Bowl Halftime Show? Each one of these questions will generate a range of responses based on the experiences of those surveyed. But different answers don't necessarily mean right answers and wrong answers. I think the same is true for the earliest gospel accounts.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians includes a gospel before the gospels. Tradition has made it a creed. And somehow, in mainstream circles, these words became THE gospel instead of A gospel. I don't think it's a secret that many of us in this room, myself included, understand salvation in relational rather than transactional terms. And so, we struggle with the idea of substitutionary atonement.

I'm not so much interested in litigating the accuracy of Paul's gospel this morning, especially with a modern lens. I think to do so misses the point of his testimony. (I will, however, concede that there are appropriate spaces to do this kind of work, but I think they require time and dialogue beyond a ten-minute sermon). This morning, I'm more interested in considering the process that leads to Paul's proclamation. What has Paul experienced that leads him to this particular expression of gospel? And how might Paul's expression speak to our own experiences with the Risen Christ?

Let's remember the context of the letter. In Corinth, community members, having received news of God's redemptive gifts, view their conversions as part vaccination, part get-out-of-jail-free card. Their perceived belief has freed them of accountability and responsibility to one another, and they struggle to understand that it's God's love for them, not their artificial status and privilege, that gives them ultimate value.

Paul beckons the Corinthians back to Gospel 101. Let me remind you of the simple but wonderful truth that stirred the spirits of the earliest disciples, and me, and you, and all that are to follow. Hold on to this truth, because it's real and enduring. It's this truth that saves you – that allows you to live as you REALLY are:

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

I know that first line, especially the word sin, is jarring for some of you. I do think Paul is talking about corporate sin, not individual sin. I think it's also important to remember that he was very devout, and steeped in the sacrificial language of the Temple Cult. There's something that happens in Paul's conversion with Jesus that gives him a new lens – his reaction is to recode everything he's ever known, and let me tell you he knows a lot, a lot, a lot of scripture, and to reframe all of those stories and prophecies in ways that make Jesus the ultimate vehicle of redemption. In this particular case, Paul is making the argument that Jesus is credentialed by the Psalms, and the book of Isaiah, and other important verses.

Again, Paul uses scripture to credential the Holy Week events. Jesus was buried, meaning he died a human death, and was raised on the third day. It could be that Paul is trying to be succinct, but it's interesting to me that he doesn't spend much time on either the body or the empty tomb. That leads me to believe that Paul sees Jesus' resurrection as less of restoring a broken corpse, and more of becoming a renewed being. And honestly, that makes sense to me, because Paul doesn't have a physical encounter with Jesus – his witness is based on what's he's heard, very, very intimately, I'll grant you, but not seen or touched.

But it's not just that the ancient stories align with the Jesus events. The Risen One has appeared to people just like you and me. To Peter. And to the twelve. And then to more than five hundred on Pentecost. And to Jesus's brother James. And to the apostles. And even to Paul.

But it gets even better. It's not just that Jesus appears, but it's to whom Jesus appears. And I hope, that maybe, this softens that word sin. In the days of old, Isaiah, one who believed himself to be impure, was touched with coals that cleansed his lips. And even though I am mixing my accounts, in our gospel lection, Jesus calls Peter to follow him, to fish for people, even after Peter proclaims, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man." Jesus offers both table and covenant on his last earthly night to men who will betray and abandon him. And somehow, somehow, Jesus calls upon Paul, one born to him in the untimeliest ways, and a man who spent his entire adult life rejecting, persecuting, and seeking to stamp out all who would follow in Jesus' name.

Paul believes that God is an ongoing act of resurrection. God claims life out of death. And that life, manifested in Jesus, in a cosmic, miraculous kind of way, helps spark life, rebirth, and renewed purpose, even in, especially in, those who have been dead to life for too long. Think about this. A cantankerous, litigious, patriarchal, leathery and weathered old man, transformed by the spirit of the loving God can sit in a gloomy cell awaiting certain death, and proclaim, "Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I say, rejoice!"

Paul once saw himself, and I would argue not rightfully so, as irredeemable; illustrative of a broken world; an emblem of sin. In the life and resurrection of Jesus, he sees an agent who restores that brokenness. He proclaims that the good work he is now able to do, is

not a result of him, but of God. Humility was never his strong suit, but he is sincere.

He urges the Corinthians to find a spark in this same truth he's shared with them, and to express that truth to others.

You may have noticed a few things about Paul's witness. For starters, there's no mention of women at the empty tomb. And he doesn't say a whole lot about the healing acts of Jesus. And he can't really speak to any of those intimate conversations the earliest Jesus followers had with Jesus and one another as they traversed the Galilee. He can't and he doesn't, because those weren't his experiences. Instead, he speaks of what he's known and seen.

Remember, Paul's life predates our canonized gospels, even if our table of contents tell you otherwise. The generations following Paul don't have a temple to gather in. And eventually, they no longer have first-hand accounts of Jesus. And sooner than later, Rome will seek to standardize the movement. As the years pass, new believers will be more eager to understand what Jesus looked like, and who he associated with, and the words he spoke. They will create their own stories and rituals to generate meaning in their own time. What we consider to be historically accurate pieces of information will vary by account, Paul's included.

For me, Paul has shared an experience. Not THE, but AN experience. We get to decide what we do with Paul's witness.

Karen Armstrong suggests we meet the writers of our ancient texts with charity – that is we don't use our modern context to assume negative intent. We meet them with openness.

And so, I imagine an Easter morning, which I suppose could be any morning, and might as well be this morning. I see Mary, bewildered, scared, anxious, and grief-stricken seeking to find her friend. I see a forgotten woman at a forgotten well in a forgotten town. I see a wee little man high in a tree. I see Peter, speaking words of denial, and clamoring to take them back. I see a leper made whole again, racing back to say thank you. I see Paul, thoughtfully and patiently crafting a letter to neophytes who offer him untold joy AND frustration; a conversation he never imagines will be recited for two millennia. And I see Jesus. Meeting each one of these persons in different ways. Embracing each one in different ways. Empowering each one in different ways.

The words, the interactions, the experiences were all expressed in different ways. But they share a common thread: Jesus creates a connection that is resurrected in timeless witness.

I don't think Paul, and all the apostles that have followed are asking us to regurgitate their experiences. Instead, they are inviting us to experience a shared connection in the Spirit that transcends time, and encouraging us to proclaim our own unique experiences through faithful witness.

Love Paul's gospel, hate it, or be indifferent. That's not really the point. Paul's letter is an invitation for us to write our own witness. For when we resurrect and awaken our own spirit-filled gifts, we resurrect the purpose, presence, and goodness of the One we follow.

That's friends, is a living, breathing, real gospel, canonized or not. May such a gospel begin writing itself today. Amen.