



# Central Peninsula Church

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1 Corinthians 15:12–19  
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## The Problem of Evil and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ

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*Special Occasion: EASTER*

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Sometimes I think Easter is the hardest of all holidays to believe in.

How hard it must be for the thousands of families devastated by the tsunami in SE Asia. As of February 22, the United Nations said the death toll stood at 169,752 with 127,294 people missing. Their grief has been heard around the world. One thing few of us realize is how brutally discriminating the tsunami was. It took away small babies, pregnant women, the old and the infirm—all those who were not strong enough to fight the cruel waves.

In New Dehli, 55-year-old Ligorial and her husband clung to a coconut tree to survive the waves. But her mother and youngest daughter were unable to hang on. Her eldest daughter Kavitha and son-in-law Antsal lost their little baby girl. “I was holding her close all the time,” cried Kavitha. “When the wave subsided I saw that she had swallowed a lot of water. We ran to a safe distance but she had turned blue and we could not revive her. She was only 18 months old.” How hard it must be for them to believe in Easter.

How hard it must be for a 12-year-old Peruvian girl named Anabella. She was walking home one day after school when three men in a taxi cab grabbed her off of the street. They took her to a house and one of the men forcibly brought her into a room, locked the door with a chain and raped her through the night. He allowed her to leave the next morning but warned her that if she told anyone he would kill her.

Along with philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, many have been unable to cope with the reality of evil and the seeming randomness with which it strikes. They’ve dismissed a living and loving God as pure fantasy, only to be touched by the icy fingers of

agnosticism and atheism. As Louis Dupré writes, “The sheer magnitude of evil that our age has witnessed...has not raised the question how can God tolerate so much evil, but rather how the more tangible reality of evil still allows the possibility of God’s existence.”

It’s hard to celebrate Easter in light of the sheer magnitude of evil around us. But if the Easter message is really true, if Christ really did die on the cross and then three days later rise from the tomb, then all of the tragic absurdity of evil and suffering has an answer. We might not be able to understand it. It may not take away all the pain and the grief. But if Christ was really raised, then a number of things are true; things which anchor us in the midst of the onslaught of evil.

### 1. There is hope.

First of all, if Christ was raised, there is hope. There is an everlasting hope; a certain hope of life eternal in Jesus Christ. There is more to life than what we can see.

There were people in the Corinthian church who were saying that when you die, you die. That’s it. Just six feet under. No regrets. No rewards. No consciousness. But the Apostle Paul writes to them and links together the reality of our resurrection with the reality of Christ’s resurrection. In 1 Cor. 15:12-14 he says, “**But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith.**” The Apostle is saying that the reason we know there is hope beyond the grave is that Christ went into the darkness of the grave and yet his life didn’t end there. Three days later he rose from the dead and

reappeared to many.

For many centuries the men and women in Europe looked out upon what we call the Atlantic Ocean, and they saw the sun shining on the glittering surface of the waters, and they wondered. They wondered if there was anything beyond. Scholars of that day said that you could sail off the edge of the world—there was nothing out there at all. In fact, inscribed on the coat of arms of the nation of Spain was its national motto, *Ne Plus Ultra*, meaning, “There is nothing beyond.”

One day Columbus went sailing on the shiny waters. He sailed off into the sunset. People waited expectantly, and finally after a long time the sails reappeared and the crowds were amazed. They shouted with joy, and Columbus announced that there was a land beyond the sea that was rich beyond their dreams. It was a glorious paradise. The king of Spain changed the motto of that land until it reads as it does today, *Plus Ultra*, meaning, “There is *more* beyond.”

For centuries innumerable people stood beside the dark hole that we call a grave and thought about the day that they themselves would be lowered into the earth, and they wondered: Beyond the dark waters of death, is there anything? Then one day, a young explorer went into the setting sun and descended into the blackness of the pit. He sailed off the edge of the world and crashed into hell. People wondered: Is he gone forever, swallowed up by death? Finally on resurrection morning, as the sun arose in the east, the Son of God stepped forth from the grave and declared, “There is something beyond. There is a paradise beyond your greatest expectations. And there is a heavenly Father, waiting with outstretched arms to wipe away every tear from your cheek.”

How tragic it is to live and die without hope. Muslims in Africa have a unique funeral custom. Close family and friends circle the casket and quietly

gaze at the corpse. No singing. No flowers. No tears. And then a peppermint candy is passed to everyone. At a signal, each of them puts the candy in his or her mouth. When the candy is gone, each person is reminded that life for that person is over. They believe life simply dissolves like a piece of hard candy in your mouth. No life. No hope. But if Christ was raised, there is more. I’m delighted to announce that his tomb was found empty. On the first day of the week Jesus rose from the dead. With a mighty stride he came forth bursting the bonds of death. He appeared to his 12 apostles and then to over 500 people. He is alive today! And because he is alive, there is hope.

## **2. There is grace.**

But that’s not all. If Christ was raised, not only is there hope but there is grace. Grace—a word everybody loves. But what does it mean? Grace means “favor.” But it is favor that you can’t earn or deserve any more than you can deserve the taste of strawberries and cream or earn good looks or bring about your own birth. God’s grace is God’s favor and all the blessings that flow out of that, including eternal life.

When actor Kevin Bacon’s 6-year-old son saw the movie *Footloose* for the first time, he said: “Hey Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you swing from the rafters of that building? That’s really cool, how did you do that?”

Bacon said, “Well, I didn’t do that part...it was a stunt man.”

“What’s a stunt man?” he asked.

“That’s someone who dresses like me and does things I can’t do.”

“Oh,” he replied and walked away looking a little confused.

A little while later he said, “Hey Dad, you know that thing in the movie where you spin around on that gym bar and land on your feet? How did you do that?”

Bacon said, “Well, I didn’t do that. It was a gymnastics double.”

“What’s a gymnastics double?” he asked.

“That’s a guy who dresses like me and does things I

can't do."

There was silence from his son, then he asked in a concerned voice, "Dad, what DID you do?"

Sheepishly Bacon answered, "I got all the glory."

That's the grace of God in our lives. As Frederick Buechner writes, "A crucial eccentricity of the Christian faith is that people are saved by grace. There is nothing YOU have to do. There is nothing you HAVE to do. There is nothing you have to DO." On the cross, Jesus took our sin upon himself and did what we couldn't do. As recipients of his grace, we stand forgiven and bask sheepishly triumphant in Jesus' glory.

But did you know that if Christ was not raised, there is no grace? The Apostle Paul says to the Corinthians in v.17, "**If Christ has not been raised, you are still in your sins.**" What does that mean, "in your sins"? It is the opposite of "in Christ." If you are in Christ you get what is Christ's and what he's done for you. If you're in your sins, you get what your sins can do for you—and the wages of sin is death. To be in your sins is to be under condemnation; to be guilty. This verse says that if Christ was not raised, the cross doesn't really count. You are still in your sins. Why is that true? If Christ died for our sins, why was the resurrection necessary for our sins to be forgiven? Because the resurrection was proof positive that God accepted Christ's sacrifice as payment in full for our sins. The resurrection was God the Father's exclamation point on God the Son's offering of himself for our sins. It was God the Father saying "Amen" to his death. And so, as John Bunyan wrote 500 years ago, "Doubt not his sacrifice can save/God sealed it with an empty grave."

### **3. There is purpose.**

But that's not all. If Christ was raised, not only is there hope and grace, there is purpose. There is on the surface a kind of randomness to evil and tragedy that makes us wonder, "Is there any sense in this? Is there any order? Is there any purpose?"

I was sitting atop a high rise building in downtown San Francisco recently. It was a clear day. I gazed out upon

the magnificent skyline of the city and my eyes fastened upon a billboard perched high above Union Square. It was an advertisement for Apple's iPod, preaching the postmodern maxim, "Life is random" with two arrows intersecting each other and headed in different directions. The TV version of the same ad has a silhouette of a person kind of dancing and frolicking to the music in every which way. Like the iPod Shuffle, life is random. At times it seems true. Random things happen that we don't plan for—life's serendipities. Sometimes they're good things. Three years ago I stepped down from this very pulpit and ran into a man I hadn't seen for over 26 years. We had played high school football together. He had gone into coaching and was just hired as a coach at Stanford. A few weeks later, my oldest daughter and his only son both happened to be at home from their respective colleges. They met for the first time right beneath this stage. They fell in love and in just over two months they'll be married right on this stage. I never could have guessed something so wonderful could happen. Life is random. Sometimes that's a good thing.

But let's face it. Sometimes that's a hard thing. Just two months after my father retired from dentistry, my 63-year-old mother woke up like she did every day. She had a cup of coffee. She got up to get dressed because it was Tuesday and she always played golf on Tuesdays with the same ladies. But Mom didn't show up that morning because she died of a heart attack before she could even change her clothes. Life seems pretty random. Sometimes that's a hard thing to live with.

Is there any plan and purpose behind it all, or is life just a jumble of unpredictable arrows headed off in different directions? Not if Christ was raised. If Christ was raised, there really is a purpose. If it's true, history itself is headed towards a point of consummation. That's why Paul said in v.19, "**If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.**" What did he mean by that? You see, Paul and

his friends were enduring tremendous suffering and persecution because of their belief that there was something beyond; a bigger purpose to live for. This life, its joys and sorrows, are like a tiny drop compared to the vast sea of eternity that stretches out before us. That's why Paul could say in vv. 30-32, **"Why should we ourselves be continually risking our lives, facing death every hour? For I swear...I face death daily... And what value was there in fighting wild beasts--those men of Ephesus--if there will be no resurrection? If there is no resurrection, 'Let us feast and get drunk, for tomorrow we die.'"** But there is a resurrection. And there is a purpose. That's why Paul encouraged the Corinthians to live with eternity in mind in v. 58, **"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."** Why is their toil not in vain? Because there is a day to come when God will call in his accounts. There is a judgment to come; an accounting to be made. Those who insisted on living their own life in their own way, will spend eternity separated from his presence. But those who invested for eternity, will be rewarded. As a wise person said, "Only one life will soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last."

Leo Tolstoy wrote what the Encyclopedia Britannica describes as "one of the two or three greatest novels in world literature" - *War and Peace*. But he also wrote a book in 1879 called *A Confession*, which tells the story of his search for meaning and purpose in life.

Rejecting Christianity as a child, Tolstoy left his university seeking pleasure. He drank heavily, lived promiscuously, and gambled frequently. His ambition was to become wealthy and famous, but nothing satisfied him. In 1862, he married a loving wife and had 13 children; he had what appeared to be complete happiness. Yet one question haunted him to the verge of suicide: "Is there any meaning in my life

which will not be annihilated by the inevitability of death, which awaits me?"

He searched for the answer in science and philosophy. As he looked around at his contemporaries, he saw that people were not facing up to the first-order questions of life: "Where did I come from?" "Where am I going?" "Who am I?" "What is life all about?" Eventually he found that of all people the peasant folk of Russia had been able to answer these questions only through their faith in Jesus Christ. He realized that only in Jesus Christ do we find the answer to the first-order questions.

A hundred years later, nothing has changed. Freddie Mercury, the lead singer of the rock group Queen, who died of AIDS at the end of 1991, asked in one of his last songs on *The Miracle* album: "Does anybody know what we are living for?"

Those who follow Jesus Christ can answer that question without hesitation. Because Christ was raised, not only do we have a purpose worth living for but we have a purpose worth dying for.

## CONCLUSION

We all face the dark unknown of death, but if Christ was raised there is hope. All of us are sinners who have contributed to what is wrong in this world, but if Christ was raised there is grace. We are all subject to the seeming randomness of evil, making life seem absurd, but if Christ was raised there is a purpose and a plan.

But there are those right here who know none of this. For you it's just an ancient event that happened long ago. That's because you've never yet experienced a resurrection in your own soul. Did you know that you can experience a resurrection right here, today? The Bible says, **"When we were dead in our sins, he made us alive together with Christ...and raised us up with him"** (Eph. 2:5-6).

You can experience a spiritual resurrection. Many years ago I experienced that resurrection, and my life was transformed, along with many others in this room "If any man is in Christ, he is a new creature. Old things are passed away. Behold, new things have come."

Have you experienced that transformation? If you do not know that spiritual resurrection in your life, you will never experience the hope and the grace and purpose he gives. You'll never know life till you really know him. And so, I encourage you to receive him today; to put your trust in him. To open your heart to him and let him come in.

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