

Humans are storytelling creatures. From the beginning of human history, our ancient ancestors would gather around the fire and tell stories that dealt with moral fortitude and valor. We, as humans, have been telling stories to make sense of the world around us since the beginning of time. It's in narrating these stories that we make sense of the world around us. We make sense of who we are. But all that's changed.

In modern Western society, we don't gather around to tell stories to make sense of the world. Rather, maybe like me yesterday, we gather in a dark room with a giant glowing rectangle and listened to stories, such as Super Mario Brothers, with your family. Now, I'm not quite sure Super Mario Brothers is helping me make sense of the world, but it is helping me make sense as to why plumbers are the core character of that saga.

But as good post-modern Westerners, we now understand life through empiricism and scientism, and enlightenment rationality. We've certainly moved on beyond these sorts of myths. The march of progressivism and cultural evolution is really challenging the idea that we need stories at all. What felt foreign to us, storytelling, hasn't really changed all that much. We just tell different stories around different types of fires. We, humans, are narrative creatures. We long for stories. We long for something to make sense out of the world. Listen to what the sociologist out of Notre Dame, Christian Smith, said in his book *Moral Believing Animals*.

We, every bit as much as the most primitive or traditional of our ancestors, are animals who most fundamentally understand what reality is, who we are, and how we ought to live by locating ourselves within the larger narratives and meta-narratives that we hear and tell. Christian Smith

This idea of living by narratives is at the core of who we are and has been with us since our very creation, but we live in an interesting time. We live in what philosophers would call the post-modern world. In which our hope is to reject any narrative that would impose itself on us. We are repelled by this idea of some overarching meta-narrative story. A recent Gallup poll found that for the first time in American history, affiliation with a church, synagogue, or mosque no longer defines the majority of Americans. The

decline has been most notably from the shift of over 70 percent of Americans in the 1930s considering themselves religious to merely 47 percent currently, and only 36 percent of millennials say they belong to a religion.

There are many reasons for this shift. My read of reasons ranges from the increasing polarization of the culture wars to the very hypocrisy of the church, whether it's spiritual or sexual abuse. Or maybe it's simply that history has demonstrated the failure of the onlooking world to recognize the way of Jesus in the church. But regardless of the reasoning, what we're watching is an unprecedented shift in the course of human history, in which we're walking away from any sense of a meta-narrative.

In his massive tome, *The Secular Age*, Charles Taylor called this the "imminent frame." When you get rid of the transcendent, all that is left is the imminent, what you see, what you touch, what you smell, what you feel, and so what remains then when we try to derive meaning and identity and purpose from a story with nothing beyond the imminence, what remains is a humanism.

A sense that if there is nothing beyond this life, then what we find meaning in the story we believe about our world is that which is found in materialism. It's a world that's flattened itself. Where do you find meaning? Where do you find purpose? How do we make sense of the world?

In a flattened world, all that remains is the sacred self. You look internal. You look to yourself for the source of meaning and identity because there is nothing beyond. If there is nothing transcendent, no other story to believe, then I have to turn inward to derive my own identity, my own meaning. This becomes the fundamental basis of reality. You be you. Let and let live. Embrace your individuality. March to the beat of your own drum. See in this narrative, which in a sense of irony is rejecting all meta-narratives, but yet is making a meta-narrative claim, is actually fundamentally eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die. If there is nothing beyond this, why live for anything different?

I want to ask this question, in light of that particular narrative, not in a way that's pejorative, but in genuine curiosity. Is this narrative, is this a good story to live by? As we've watched the past few years unravel before us headline after

headline. This question is worthy of asking. It's worthy of reflection. Is the modern narrative that we organize our life by true and good? I don't have any qualms or hesitations about living within that. I believe that most of us live very sincerely into that narrative, but it begs the question: How did the 21st century become the bloodiest in the history of human history? According to the most recent 2021 CDC report, deaths of despair are rising—drug overdose, alcoholism, and suicide—all on the rise.

Now, I don't want to conflate correlation with causation, but let's look at the pop culture of the icon Bono who cried out, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." I think of Ben Gibbard's Side Project, The Postal Service in 2003 released this album that said, "I want so badly to believe/ That there is truth, that love is real/And I want life in every word/To the extent that it's absurd." We are narrative creatures. We long for a story to make sense of the world. And what we are gathered today to discuss is a story that makes sense of the world. It's a story of coherence. It's a story that Bono could reflect on and maybe find, in fact, what he is ultimately looking for.

What we are gathered here today to talk about is resurrection. Resurrection gives meaning; it gives coherence; it gives purpose; it makes sense of the data points in our world. It gives a reason and understanding for death and brokenness, for sin and our isolation, and the ways we feel disconnected from God and from one another. Resurrection makes sense of the world. What we want to offer in this message is a different story that maybe you can resonate with.

Corinthians was written by a guy named Paul, who lived two different narratives. He had a story that, before encountering Jesus, was one of pain, one of murder. It was pursuing and trying to squelch out the way of Jesus because he didn't believe that Jesus was who he said he was. But then, when he encountered the living Christ, everything changed for him. And he went on from murdering Christians to writing the majority of the New Testament. What we arrive at here at the end of his first letter to the Corinthians is he's tying up all these loose ends. He's been teaching them about all sorts of different issues they face, and here in 1 Corinthians 15, as he closes, he's bringing what is of utmost importance back to the surface for them. Let's pick up in chapter 15:1.

Now, brothers and sisters, 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. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 1 Corinthians 15:1-2

So as he's wrapping this up, he says, "I want to remind you of the gospel." Now, there may not be a church word that's more familiar than this word, gospel. Gospel in the New Testament Greek is the word *euangelion*. What this word fundamentally means is good news. It actually wasn't a religious word in the first century. It was a word that was common parlance for the day. Historically, it was far more used by the Roman Empire when they would have a victory over some battle and they would declare the good news, *euangelion*, "we've won."

It'd be used to talk about a king coming into power, a new king that had risen. Or it was used to celebrate a birthday. They'd say, "gospel" (*euangelion*). Good news. This news is about an event that happened in which everything is now different. This is the gospel. And Paul says, "I want to remind you, brothers and sisters of this gospel." Notice the next line. He says, "The gospel, which you received" speaking in the past tense, which he did before, meaning it had changed their history. He says, "On which you have taken your stand," present tense. It's the gospel in which they understand their life in light of the gospel, the good news, "and by this gospel you are saved," future tense.

There's something about this news, this event of what has happened in the past that reorients the very whole of their life. Paul is saying, "Let me remind you of this gospel." Let's keep reading in verse 3.

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 that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born. 1 Corinthians 15:3-8

"Fallen asleep" is a Christian euphemism for death. It's a Christian euphemism because death does not get the last word as we say. So Paul likens them to this idea of them falling asleep. Paul's description here of the gospel is simple. It's minimalist. It's stripped down to its very core essence, and he uses four particular verbs to describe the gospel. The first is "Christ died," the second is "was buried," the third is "was raised," and the fourth is "was seen or appeared."

I've highlighted the first and the third because the way Paul constructs this description of the gospel is that verbs two and four reinforce the verb that preceded it. So when

Paul says Christ died for our sins according to the gospel, he validates that by saying he “was buried” in the ground, meaning his blood stopped pumping. His body grew cold. The corpse started to smell. The body started to decay—death to Jesus.

And the third “was raised” was validated by the idea that he had appeared to hundreds of people after his death. The reason we can understand the bodily resurrection of Jesus is that it wasn’t the one story of one individual, but rather hundreds had seen Jesus post-resurrection. Christ died, was buried, was raised, and was seen. Let’s take each in turn.

Christ Died For Our Sins and Was Buried

First, Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. Now, this phrase, according to the scriptures, is Paul’s way of linking this minimalist, simplistic story as a part of a much larger narrative that the entire scriptures deal with. This long narrative is a much larger story about the relationship between God and the universe and humanity and one another. This story, this narrative that we hold as true at the pinnacle of the gospel begins not with an angry God, not with the God who’s frustrated with creation and a violent beginning, but rather it starts with an expression of love.

It begins with God out of love speaking the world into existence. A world in which he called good, good, good, over and over again. And then at the culmination of creation, he places the humans in this world and says, “These are very good.” God, in the beginning of this story, is ultimately an expression of love. It was God in love, creating a world so we can be loved. And then expressing that love. It’s a story that recognizes the sheer dignity of all humans because when the humans were created, they were endowed differently from all of creation. They were given the very image of God. They were created in a way to reflect the very glory of God.

When he places them in the garden, the story was that they were to live in alignment with God, not in some controlling way, but rather as a father who says, “This is the way the world operates. This is how you flourish.” And he places them in there and says, “Now will you create this world with me? Will you fill it? Will you subdue it?” God, out of love, gives humans free will, the consciousness, the ability to love because love is dependent on the ability to actually not love. You have to have that choice and God creates that within the humans. It’s a story that says we are called to live with God, co-ruling in alignment with that, but unfortunately, Christ had to die for our sins.

This idea of sin is representative of the way that the humans in free will have gone out, and rather than abiding by our good Father’s created order, we’ve seized control. We’ve thought we know better than God. We want to decide what is right and wrong rather than listening to the voice of God.

We trust our own intuition. We seek to run the world for our own good. The result is enslavement, imprisonment, and idolatry of the self. A world that runs amuck with sin. We feel this in the sins that happen against us as we experience atrocities that we were never meant to experience from those in a community and a society that is just infected with this disease of sin. We also feel this in our own culpability in the way we perpetuate the brokenness in the world.

What happens is our souls slowly disintegrate. We live against the grain of the universe; we get splinters along the way. As we fight this God the result is death in our souls and in our world. And rather than turning to God, what we often do is turn to ourselves to self-heal, to self-medicate, and self-liberate. We want to usher in human utopia. The problem is that we have tried to solve this issue, but no matter the intention and no matter the means, we have always fallen short. Every attempt to usher in God’s kingdom without the king, usurping God’s role, and inserting ourselves as the hero of the story, runs amuck too quickly.

This is only part of the story though. Christ died for our sins. The gospel begins with God creating the world and then entering into the world out of love. God did not want to leave us to our own accord because he recognizes the ways we continually, over and over, seek control. Jesus’ death functions as the atonement, the way back to communion with God. Rather than allowing that pain and hurt to fall on us, although we still feel that sting, Jesus absorbs that pain on the cross. The act of Good Friday, or Great Friday, is that God is creating a way back to him. He has come, God has come near, in Jesus, to bring healing and salvation to your soul.

If the story ends here, it is not good news. If it ends with him buried, which is the second part of the gospel that Paul notes, “he was buried.” If it ends there, we have no greater story than the very story I talked about at the beginning of my talk. If it ends with Jesus buried with nothing beyond, eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow you die just like Jesus, it is no good news. If Jesus is buried, if the corpse began to rot and decompose and stayed there, this is no great story. This is no *euangelion*. But Paul says this isn’t the end of the story. The third part of Paul’s description of the

gospel is that he was raised on the third day according to the scriptures.

Christ Was Raised From The Dead and Seen

For Jesus, death did not have the last word. Rather, after being buried for three days, God himself raises Jesus back to life. That heart that had stopped beating was pulsating blood and pumping through his veins. The body that once was cold began to get warm again, and out of the tomb, Jesus walks. He was raised on the third day and now, church, we have a different story. If Jesus walks out of that tomb, if Jesus was, in fact, resurrected, there must be something beyond because Jesus himself is the picture of that which is beyond. The story is much more than just hope after death. It's much, much more.

If the resurrection is true, something brand new is being birthed right in the middle of this world. It's out of that that we see he appeared to see Cephas, and then the 12, there's the fourth part of Paul's description. It isn't just that he was dead and buried and raised, but rather he appeared to hundreds following his resurrection. Jesus understood this and came to bring about this new life right here in the middle, and Paul says that this is the absolute crux of our story. If we're to live a narrative that will offer something new and different to the world, Jesus must exit out of that tomb.

Just look at the way Paul talks about it. We'll go quickly through verses 12-19. *"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?"* (v. 12). The Corinthians were having a hard time believing this. They didn't believe that Jesus' bodily resurrection took place. And Paul says,

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. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. vv. 13-19

I love the ruthless honesty of Paul. He says, essentially, if they were to discover the body somewhere decomposing in the Middle East and somehow identify that it's Jesus, he says, why are we here? You could be having brunch right now. You could be doing something much more with

your time if Jesus has not, in fact, been raised. He says our preaching is useless. Your faith is futile. If the resurrection didn't take place, there's no reason to gather. There's no reason for a different story. Then actually, the modern narrative is true, live and let live. If Jesus was not raised, there's no purpose to live beyond.

But the problem, the bad news of that, the *non-euangelion*, is that means you're left to your own devices to solve your own pain—self-medicate and self-liberate—eat, drink, be merry for tomorrow you die. Paul says we're wasting our time. If Jesus did not walk out of that tomb, he says, we are left on our own. That's the problem. That's the bad news. Most of us, again, have a hard time believing this story, and I get it. I understand. It's easier to self-medicate. It's easier to try to find our way. The materialistic, humanistic understanding of our existence actually offers a way where we can numb the pain for a time. But as we've seen play out over and over, ultimately, it leaves us hollow; it leaves us wanting.

My hunch is that you've been trying to live that story in which you are your own savior, and it's just left you wanting. I wonder if there's a different way from the angst, despair, and brokenness. If Jesus is buried dead, decomposing in that tomb, and you have no hope, you have nothing beyond the self; you can then live from that story. But church, there's a different way because that isn't the gospel.

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. vv. 20-26

So Paul uses this imagery, this metaphor of the first fruits, an agrarian metaphor that we are not too familiar with in the modern world. But the first fruits is this idea of the changing seasons. And what he means by this is what happens in the first fruits is what you might see when the trees start to bloom. When you see that first bud blossom, you know that more is to come. That more new life is bursting out of the cold winter. See first fruits is when a vintner sees that first great bud pop on the vine, and he knows harvest is coming, goodness is coming.

Paul says Christ, more than just hope for life after death, is the firstfruits of something else that is happening. What he means in its most simple place is what is true about Jesus will be true about all. Jesus is the first sign, the first fruits, the first example of not just life after death but rather life after life after death. It's new creation. It's resurrection. It's this world being made new, being made whole, being renewed.

The biblical understanding of where this whole thing is going is not that we whisk away to heaven some glad morning. But that, rather, God is recreating this earth, restoring this place. He's renewing it, and the resurrection is the first fruits of that. When Jesus arises, it is the declaration, the shot across the bow of death and despair, that says there's a new world being born right here. And the way you get to it is through the gospel that Jesus has been killed and buried for our sins. He was raised, and he appeared, and he is the first fruits of a new world that's being born right here, right now.

And at this moment, we live from the inauguration of that new world and we wait. We long, we hope, and we look out over the horizon for the day when it's fully consummated in the here and now. Christ is the first fruits. Christ is the first of a new world being born here.

And then he says this little phrase in verse 24, "*Then the end will come.*" Now let's do a little work on this. The word end there is the Greek word telos. It comes from, if you remember, philosophy 101, the word popularized by Aristotle, teleology. And what he means by that is not the end of history, not the end of all things, but rather the end of a history of a world. The word telos means culmination, maturity, and fullness. It means not that the end of the world is coming, but rather the end of the old order of things is coming. It's what Paul in other places would call "old creation."

There is a world that's run by sin. It's the one that God had given us responsibility over and in our free will, we've tried to create the kingdom of God, but we've failed over and over again. It's a world that's run amuck with death and all of its friends. This world is coming to an end. Paul says there is an end coming, but it's not the end of the earth. It's not the end of some sci-fi dystopian thing. But rather it's the end of sin's reign, of death's reign. There's a new king that we hail and his name is Jesus, who's coming onto the scene.

The end of the telos is that there is no more death. There is no more shootings like in Nashville. There is no more polarization. There is no more racism. There is no more pain, death, and hurt. And here's the kicker, when Jesus rose out

of that grave, he created a way for us to live in that reality here and now. We don't have to wait until our death. But rather, the resurrection says this life matters. This world matters. And we are called to disciple under Jesus as a way of understanding this brand new reality birthed here and now. We are to ask, "How do we organize our life in terms of that *euangelion*, that good news?" Because if that news is true, everything is different. If death doesn't get the last word, everything is different.

N.T. Wright, one of the best living New Testament scholars says,

Jesus' resurrection is to be seen as the beginning of the new world, the first day of the new week, the unveiling of the prototype of what God is now going to accomplish in the rest of the world.

We gather to celebrate the resurrection because we are declaring that the first fruits that will conquer and has conquered death is here. We gather to celebrate the end of cancer and Covid. The end of senseless violence, the end of evil, and injustice of despair. It's the end of the old order and the old order of things. And yes, we live in the time before Jesus has come back to reconsummate and recreate it in its full and totality.

Yet you feel these moments in which they break through. You have dinner with friends that transcends time. That's a taste of the kingdom of God. You see acts of love in the midst of injustice, and you see the new creation bursting out. You see that in the church in Nashville gathering that following Sunday and declaring, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Not out of arrogance or blind optimism but out of a declaration that the shooting doesn't get the last word. That there is coming a new creation that's being birthed here and now. We gather as the church that declares that this is the narrative that offers hope. It offers something beyond. There's something in this story that moves us forward, that brings that new creation here and now.

There's a scene at the end of J.R.R. Tolkien's, *Lord of the Rings*, in which Samwise is reflecting across all of this brokenness and battle and pain and hurt that he's experienced. And the guys there, they had just destroyed the ring that tried to enslave all of creation, and they thought they had lost Gandolph. But there's a scene toward the end of it.

But Sam lay back, and stared with open mouth, and for a moment, between bewilderment and great joy, he could not answer. At last he gasped: 'Gandolf! I thought you were dead! But then I thought I was dead myself. Is

everything sad going to come untrue? What has happened to the world?

Is everything sad going to come untrue? The answer with an emphatic tone is yes. Yes. Every sad thing will become untrue because what the resurrection does is says that sin and death are actually the parody. It exists, it stings, it hurts, and I don't know what it is that you brought in here, but in a room this size, you carried all sorts of pain and hurt that are caused by others, that are caused by your own choices that are caused by all of this. But Christ has died for your sins according to the scripture. He was buried. He was raised according to the scriptures. And he appeared and was seen. Church, Easter is about good news.

My question for us is, what is the narrative that we will live by? In the first narrative, Jesus is dead. He's buried. He's decomposing somewhere. In this narrative, sin reigns. The possibility of change is ultimately closed. You're left on your own to solve that deepest ache in your soul. There is no help coming. No one is coming to save you. The responsibility for the weight of your fullness is on your own shoulders. My hunch is we need a better story.

The second narrative is Jesus died, was buried, and was raised on the third day. It's a story in which the possibility of change is open, where the world is being made new. It's a story of the resurrection, of hope, of new life. It's a story of the death of death itself. In this narrative, you are being made whole as you surrender your life to Jesus.

It's the narrative in which your sins are being forgiven, and new life is breaking into the midst of this. See, in this narrative, whatever sin, whatever pain, whatever brokenness, whatever hurt, whatever bit of death you are carrying with you doesn't get the last word. This is not how the story finishes, for he is risen.

This is our story. This is our narrative.

Lord, I imagine that scene of Mary going into the tomb and seeing your body gone and the confusion in her mind mixed with hope and with joy. Lord, would you fill us with that this morning? Lord, when you walked out of that tomb, the world fundamentally changed. It was fundamentally altered. Lord Jesus, thank you for the resurrection.

Thank you that we can declare he has risen. And Lord, I pray that we can enter into this new narrative, this new story, and live differently in light of that. God, this is the hope, that you have moved closer to this world. So God, may we learn to embrace this narrative. May we learn to

let go of the old story that places me at the center and rather places you in the forefront of our minds. God, may we embrace that.

So, Lord, we thank you for Easter. We thank you for your death and resurrection Lord, we thank you for all that Easter means in Jesus' name, amen.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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