

On a Friday 2,000 years ago, Jesus died. He breathed his last. He's gone! There was a brief eulogy by – of all people – a Roman centurion: **“Surely this was the Son of God!”** A nice thought ... a little late. Scripture does give us one final paragraph describing the funeral arrangements so Jesus could be buried. Then they all walked away and went home. Finished! End of story!

Not so quickly, my friends. One tiny word in today's lesson changed everything, and I mean everything. That one tiny word was the Apostle Paul's grand announcement to the sad Corinthians who were devastated that their hope in Christ had been snuffed out.

One tiny word changed everything, the way that one day – Easter, changed everything. This may not be the shortest sermon you've ever heard, but it has to be the shortest theme you've ever heard – that one tiny word: **“But ...”**

Before Paul penned our one-word sermon theme, he wants us to mull over in our heads and hearts what things would be like if that day and that event had never happened.

(1) Paul is writing to the Corinthians about 25 years after Jesus had died. He's battling the false teaching that was making the rounds in this Greek-speaking congregation in Corinth. It just so happened to be *ONE OF THE* chief teachings of Greek philosophy. That philosophy is this: there was nothing you could be more certain of than this: *dead people don't rise.*

If *the dead don't rise*, then Easter didn't happen, which contradicts *THE* chief teaching of Christianity: *dead people do rise.* When the fundamental teaching of Christ's resurrection is lost, the entire message of salvation is lost. Paul wants us to see the eternal problem, the catastrophic implications if it is true that *the dead don't rise.* To do that, he lists the 6 “if” statements in today's lesson.

The first “if” (v.13): **IF there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised.** If dead people don't rise, and Jesus died, then he didn't rise either. All that joy and comfort you experienced in last week's Easter Sunday services – that was all phony and fake.

The second “if” (v.14): **And IF Christ has not been raised, our preaching is pointless and your faith is pointless, too.** If Jesus didn't rise from the dead, I'm wasting my time as a preacher and I'm wasting your time by having you sit here and listen to the preacher.

The third “if” (v.15): **Then we are even guilty of giving false testimony about God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise, IF it were true that the dead are not raised.** You're calling God a liar. You're lying to others if Jesus isn't alive, because you swore God raised him. And, every time you confess: *“On the third day he rose again from the dead”* in the Creeds (*How many times have you confessed that?*) – you're lying to yourself.

The fourth “if” (v.16): **For IF the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised.** That makes Easter just another fairy tale, like the ones you read to your kids and grandkids. And Paul's vision of the living Christ on the road to Damascus was only a hallucination.

The fifth “if” (v.17): **And IF Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, you are still in your sins.** Nobody has paid for any of your sins. Nobody has redeemed your guilty soul. There's no proof you're justified or forgiven. Your faith is worthless.

The sixth “if” (v.18,19): **Then it also follows that those who have fallen asleep in Christ perished. IF only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.** My mom and dad, and your loved ones who died in Christ — I sure hope we enjoyed them here, because we'll never see them again, if Easter didn't happen. And we, well, we're the village idiots, because this is all

there is. There is no future. Our relationship with God ends here.

(2) The picture Paul paints isn't pretty, is it? If Jesus didn't rise, because the dead don't rise, is life even worth living?

And just when we were slipping to our lowest and saddest – that tiny, tiny word pops up in today's lesson: **"BUT ... Christ has indeed been raised from the dead!"** Just when we thought our team had lost, the apostle restates the undeniable reality of Jesus' Easter victory!

How sure can we be that Jesus' tomb is empty? Our own experience teaches us that *dead people don't rise*. **But ...** Jesus is different. The dead just don't seem to stay dead around Jesus. He's ruined every funeral he ever attended – Lazarus', the widow's son, Jairus' daughter, even his own. Matthew, John, Peter and Paul each wrote detailed eyewitness accounts of Jesus' resurrection. Job, David and Isaiah predicated it would happen 100's of years before it eventually did. There are more witnesses with more details in more books on the life, death and life again of Jesus Christ than anyone else.

The organization that was established on the basis of Christ's resurrection – the Holy Christian Church – is still in business to this day. A testimony to its still living founder.

That one tiny word has an enormous and eternal impact. Not only does it mean that Christ rose from his grave, you'll rise from your grave, too! To God it's the same thing, he says: **Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.** The firstfruits were the first bundle of grain God's OT people were to offer to the Lord, long before the rest of the harvest was even ready to be gathered in.

Christ was the firstfruits, the first bundle, long before the rest of the harvest of those who are sleeping in their graves are to be gathered. Jesus is God's guarantee that there's more to follow. Those attached to him by faith will follow.

Let's return to Paul's tragic list of 6 "if's" and see how one word – **"But"** – changes everything for you and me every day!

First ... all that celebrating we did last week, well it's going to continue today and for the next 51 weeks. Every word of every prayer and song – it's all worth it, because Jesus has risen and his ears hear it all.

Second ... all my preaching and teaching, and all your listening and believing ... it's all worth it, because this message has the power to resurrect lives and rescue souls.

Third ... we're not liars about God. All the blood, sweat and tears that has been shed for the sake of that message ... it's all worth it, it's worth dedicating our lives to the truth we've found and now share.

Fourth ... our big sins, our bad ones, our embarrassing ones are forgiven and gone. Isn't that a load off our conscience? When we've placed possessions and pleasure first— left behind in his tomb. When we've harmed others with words and failed to benefit those closest to us — buried in his grave.

Fifth ... those loved ones who died in Christ, whom we still miss? Get ready to see them again. Your reunion will last forever.

Sixth ... we're not idiots! We're incredibly blessed! Our stay in paradise is being prepared as we speak. We'll have lots of family there. We'll look fantastic in our resurrection make-over.

All of this because of one little word. **"But"** may not be quite as flashy as *"Alleluia!" "Risen!"* or, *"Victory!"* Try it on when you deal with heartaches & headaches, with disappointments & deaths. Try it on your gravestone. After your birth and death dates engrave God's tiny word. He's made it your word so that your story can go on. *"For God so loved the world ... that whoever believes in him should not perish ... But ... have eternal life!"*