

“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

I am my father's son. I have noticed that more and more with each passing year, as I see more similarities between us. Some of them are long standing traits that would identify us as being cut from the same mold: I am opinionated, as was my father. I am somewhat inept with tools, as was my father. My dad was a good tenor singer, another trait I seem to have shared with him. I'm sure my wife could come up with a whole list of other things, too. Regardless of how long the list is, it is evident to me that there are things I inherited and things I learned from my father, that make me who I am today. There are the values and ethics that were taught by instruction. There were habits or means of doing things that were taught by example. Some are good; some are not so good. But they are the things that have been passed on to me, and which I, in turn, have passed on to my children.

We all have things we want to pass on to our children. We often think of those material things that we want to leave to them. Maybe there are family heirlooms or treasures that have been in the family for generations and we want to share those with our descendants. We also may want to pass on to them our family heritage, the stories of our family that tell our history: where we came from; what our ancestors had to endure through troubled times or perilous journey; what it is that makes our family unique. There are values that we want to pass on, so that our children grow up to be responsible adults. There are family traditions we hope that they will continue.

There is one thing that my parents thought of as the most important gift they could pass on to my brother, sister and me. It is the one thing above all things that I want to pass on to my children. It is the only thing I know of that has any lasting value. It is the only thing that really matters. Everything else is just 'stuff'. But the truth that Paul speaks of in our text as being of ***first importance***, that is what I want to share with my children, with you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, and with all who do not know Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord: ***that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.***

If you have ever flown on an air plane, you know that the emergency procedures remind people that if there is an emergency, they are to get out quickly. Don't stop to take your belongings. Or think of the devastating fire a few years ago in Wood Buffalo / Fort McMurray that caused the biggest evacuation in Alberta history. That scene was repeated more recently in Jasper and then in Los Angeles. As fire ravaged these communities, people had to flee for their lives before the destruction caused by the intense heat and flames. You are just sitting down to eat, rather content in your peaceful life, and suddenly sirens are blaring and the word comes, "Evacuate immediately!" There isn't a moment to lose. You need to get out now. We know that even in these moments, people look around their home and think: what can I save? What should I take? What is important to me?

We all would likely have different responses to that question, "what is important to me?" For Paul, there was only one answer to that question. ***“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”*** Paul doesn't just say that Christ died and was raised again. That is just history. It may be important, but it wouldn't be of first importance. What is important, Paul says, is that Christ died for our sins, rescuing us from the eternal death that we deserve because of our sins. That is the Gospel! That is important! There is nothing that matters as much for everything in our life as this wonderful truth: Christ died for our sins and that He rose again from the dead.

There is nothing in this world and nothing in our lives that isn't changed because of this wonderful truth. Our families are important; in a fire, wouldn't that be the first thing you would want to save? We may see our work as important, or the plans that we have for our summer vacation as important, but they don't even come close to the importance of Christ's death and resurrection. Yes, even in the every day course of our lives, nothing matters as much as this: Christ died for your sins. He rose again to give you life!

We don't always realize the importance of this in the day to day course of our lives. So many Christians know that it *was* important. They just don't understand that it is of first and foremost importance in our lives. Part of that is that we lose sight

of our need for this good news day by day. Most Christians have little trouble seeing themselves as sinners. Yet they tend to see that as a past reality, not a problem for their lives today. Yes, Jesus died and rose, but now we live as Christian people, seeking to be better in the things we do. We are past all that sin stuff. But are we? There is a reason why our worship always includes a time for us to come before God and admit that we have failed in so many ways in our thoughts, words and deeds. We don't confess the sins that we used to commit. We confess the sins we do commit over and over again. We don't like to admit it, but we have to say as David said: ***"For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment."*** (Psalm 51:3-4, ESV)

What is first and foremost is that Christ died for you. He rose for you! Yet day after day, life simply takes over and pushes Jesus and His saving grace for us out of that position of first importance. There are so many days we barely think about Him, let alone think of Him as most important. Even in the church, we often see things that bump Jesus out of that number one spot. We have thrown around the word "relevant" a great deal in our discussions about our direction. I'm not sure what that means, because there is nothing more relevant for our lives than this: ***that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*** I did some vacancy work with a congregation that many years before had split over the issue that was first and foremost in their minds—whether they should put carpet or linoleum on the basement floor. Another went through a struggle related to the fact that the congregation chose not to allow people to smoke in the church. The building, our financial worries, even our desire for certain worship styles can keep us from seeing what really matters; what is to be first and foremost in all we do—that Christ died for our sins and rose again for justification.

I have said before that every Sunday is a little Easter. We refer to Sunday as the Lord's Day, as the church has done since Christ rose from the dead. This glorious truth was instrumental in the church changing our Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday. But every day is also a little Easter. In a radio interview, originally broadcast in 2003, the late Yale professor Jaroslav Pelikan made the remark: "If Christ has not been raised, nothing else matters. If Christ has been raised, nothing else matters." If Christ did not die to take away your sins and rise again from the dead again, then nothing else matters. Life would always come to the same, sad ending. I'm not sure we would even still exist. That undefeated power of sin, death and the devil may have brought our destruction long ago. Without the dying and rising Christ, life would be empty, meaningless and hopeless.

In our Epistle lesson, Paul laid it all out for us: ***"And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins."*** (1 Corinthians 15:14-17, ESV) To repeat those words of Jaroslav Pelikan: "If Christ has not been raised, nothing else matters."

But Pelikan also said: "If Christ has been raised, nothing else matters." That is the hope that Paul gives us: ***"But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep."*** (1 Corinthians 15:20, ESV) This is of first importance. It should be a truth that is first and foremost in our lives day by day; yes, even minute by minute. This is what matters. Christ died for me, a sinner. He has set me free. He is here with me in all I do. He is with you in all you do! In our Gospel lesson, Jesus said: ***"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets."*** (Luke 6:20-26, ESV) Why are all these things true? Because first and foremost we know that Jesus died for our sins. Jesus rose again from the dead. This has always made all the difference for God's people. Why did the apostles risk everything for the sake of the Gospel? Because of what was first and foremost: Jesus died for our sins and rose again. Why did the early Christians face martyrdom rather than deny Christ? Because of the resurrection. Why did the reformers dare to cling to the confession that we have in the Book of Concord, even though it could mean their deaths? It was because they knew what was first and foremost. Why do people like Mother Teresa give up the blessings of a comfortable life to go serve with the poor in less than ideal conditions? It is because of what was first and foremost—that Christ died for us and Christ rose that we may live in Him.

When we are struggling with life; when we find ourselves standing before the casket of a loved one; when we don't know how we are going to get through another day or, for that matter when we don't know what we are going to do in the ordinary,

everyday course of life, we need to remember and focus on what is first and foremost. We don't focus on what we think will make life better. It is that Jesus died and rose. His resurrection from the dead is the most important event in all history. Nothing else comes close. He makes family, work, our leisure, our service to one another and the rest of our lives important, significant, alive, purposeful. Yet none is as important as Jesus himself. Jesus Christ, dead on the cross and risen from the dead now and forever, is of first importance. We can't live without Him, but in Him and through Him we find life is full of meaning, hope, blessing and victory. With Paul, I say to you: ***“For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.”*** What glorious news this is! Amen.