

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 6th Sunday of Epiphany, February 17, 2019.

As people of faith, one of our fears is that our faith is misplaced. That what we believe might not be so. That what we have practiced for much of our life might be a waste. That what we have obediently and joyfully shared with others might be untrue.

St. Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians (**I Corinthians 15:12-20**), raises this concern. “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain.”

And if our faith has been in vain, what about those blessings – the Beatitudes – that Luke describes in this morning’s gospel? When hungry, will we be filled? Will our sorrow be turned to laughter? Will there be any reward in heaven?

We have committed great energy to building our faith. What if that is wasted energy?

Pretty heavy stuff, but I don’t think I’m alone in acknowledging this possibility. I’ll bet that you’ve had these misgivings too. But you’re here, and so am I. And so are many others, past and present, all over the world from all sorts of backgrounds. And I don’t see our faith turning south any time soon, if ever.

Here is where I draw my optimism and indeed my conviction. And I bet it mirrors your conclusions about faith in general and the Christian Faith in particular.

We are born with an insatiable curiosity about who we are and where we came from and what we’re supposed to do with our lives and what if anything is beyond this life. What accounts for this curiosity? Who planted this seed anyway? Why is it that the search for meaning is universal?

Well, it seems reasonable to me that whoever is responsible for creating existence from nothing – a pretty amazing feat - might well have an ongoing interest in this creation. I can’t believe that things just happen. Poof! If there was a Big Bang, it wasn’t the beginning. Someone, something lit the fuse.

People of faith have a name for this Someone, this Something, this Mystery, and that name is God. People of physics speak of Infinity – also a Mystery - as Singularity. No wonder that people of faith who are also people of physics are very interesting people indeed.

From God, from Singularity, the Creation unfolds. You and I are part of one of these folds. Who knows how many folds preceded our fold and how many remain. Well beyond our pay-grade, whatever our field of study.

But, within our grasp or not, we wonder and we wonder some more. We are always wondering, always thinking about our place in the Creation. And, as we continue to wonder, we test some theories. Some seem to make sense, and some don't. One of the conclusions that makes sense to you and me – and it's why we're here – is that this Beginning Force – the One you and I call God – continues to be engaged in the Creation.

Our belief is that the Creator didn't light the fuse and then step back and just watch. No, our belief is that God stayed engaged, especially when God's prize Creation, the human being, appeared on the scene and proceeded to get into trouble. At that point, God had a choice: do I let things just happen, or do I guide the outcome, a push here, and pull there.

We believe in the Guidance theory, and we give the One guiding a more refined name than just God. Does the term "Father, Son and Holy Spirit," or in contemporary parlance, "Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer," ring a bell? Of course, it does. It's what you and I profess every time we gather and every time we pray one by one or together.

Among our grandchildren are twin boys. These guys are currently mid-way through doctoral programs in physics at different universities. When we are together, we do more listening than understanding, trust me. At the same time, we are mindful of having baptized these two as infants. One of the intercessions offered in the service of Holy Baptism goes like this: Leader: *Open their hearts to your grace and truth.* People: *Lord, hear our prayer.*

Well, in my mind, and perhaps in theirs – we haven't had this conversation - their passion for physics reflects a search for the truth of the Universe. And I am

certain that as they proceed in this search they will acknowledge help along the way, including I would hope the concept of grace. Now, God can shed His grace on us in all sorts of ways, including the influence of parents and professors and fellow scientists and maybe even relatives and maybe even the Church.

Which brings us back to our good friend, St. Paul and his letter to the Corinthians. Isn't the possibility that he raises in this passage – namely, that maybe Christ didn't rise from the dead – the kind of intellectual challenge that the advisor of a doctoral student would raise? And isn't the assurance that Paul gives at the end of this passage – namely that Christ really did rise from the dead – what an advisor might pass on to his or her former student at commencement?

Here's the before and after. Before: "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins." And After: "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died."

Our Gospel today (**Luke 6:17-26**) has a university lecture hall flavor to it. Imagine Jesus speaking to room full of doctoral students. The students and their professors have heard stories about this man with healing power. They are curious and they are skeptical. They want to see for themselves if this fellow is as special as some people claim. And, if he is that special, they want to be on the receiving end of his power. "And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them."

Well, the visiting lecturer wasn't through. But this time he didn't speak to the students and professors. He spoke rather to his disciples who had accompanied him to the event. And he tells them, warns them, that, if they behave in a certain way, they will be blessed, and if they behave in an opposite manner, "Woe to them."

This had to make an impression on the students and professors who had just been healed. Maybe some even changed their major. In any event, Jesus ended his presentation with two quotes. First from **Psalms 1**: "Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and they meditate on his law day and night." And second from the Prophet Jeremiah (**Jeremiah 17:5-10**): "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord ... They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the stream. It

shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”

Well, let's come full circle. We began by acknowledging that sometimes we wonder if we are on the right path. Well, I think we are. And I think you think so too. That's why we're here, and that's why we offer our Collect this morning: “O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you: Mercifully accept our prayers; and because in our weakness we can do nothing good without you, give us the help of your grace, that in keeping your commandments, we may please you both in will and deed, through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Amen.