

Quite a while ago, I was talking with someone who was grieving. Grieving the death of someone who was definitely not a Christian. They had never been baptized. They had never gone to church. As far as anyone knew, they had never even opened a Bible. And the only thing they had ever said about the Christian faith was, in fact, fairly derogatory.

And this person I was talking to was troubled by all this, understandably. But it troubled them not only because their family member was now dead and beyond redemption. But also because it made it so hard to comfort the other friends and family of the deceased.

Because every Christian wants to go up to a grieving person and say, “They're in heaven now.” Or, “They're not in pain anymore.” Or, most of all, “Don't worry, you'll see them again.” But what if you know that's not true. How do you offer comfort when the person who has died is really, really dead? Dead in both body and soul.

It's a hard question. And unfortunately, I don't have a very satisfying answer for you. It's something that I struggle with as well. I bring it up instead because I think it highlights just how important the resurrection is for us as Christians.

We say it every week. In the Apostles' Creed, we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” In the Nicene Creed, we say, “I believe in the resurrection of the dead.” Even in the little used Athanasian Creed that we say once a year on Trinity Sunday, we proclaim, “all men shall rise again with their bodies.”

It is an inescapable, fundamental, utterly irrevocable doctrine of the Church. And yet, it is a concept that Paul actually has to teach to the Corinthians. In fact, he has to convince them of it.

Because these were once Jews after all. Converted Jews. Messianic Jews, to use a modern term. But, despite their newfound faith in Christ, they still have a very Jewish way of looking at things. And frankly, the resurrection of the dead wasn't a completely universal Jewish doctrine.

In fact, in Jesus' day, there was a pretty big argument about the resurrection. We hear often about the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the gospels. One of the key disagreements between them was the resurrection.

And on this one issue, the Pharisees were actually the good guys. For all their faults, the Pharisees actually believed in the resurrection of the dead. The Sadducees did not. And it sounds like the converted Jews of Corinth were, possibly, converted Sadducees. Because they have trouble believing in the resurrection.

So Paul lays out for them a case for it. He explains to them why this is such an important doctrine of the Church. And in the process he helps us understand the resurrection a little bit better. So that maybe we can be better able to talk to those who do not have faith about the comfort and hope found in Jesus Christ.

And Paul begins this explanation by talking about Easter. About Jesus' resurrection from the dead. And about how that lays the foundation for our faith in the God's salvation. Because Christ is the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

Now, that term “firstfruits” is interesting. In Greek, the word is “*apárke*.” I want you to remember that word: *apárke*. It's actually a Jewish theological term. Remember, Paul is talking to a bunch of converted Jews here. So this makes sense. And *apárke* does mean “firstfruits.” But it's a particular kind of firstfruits.

You see, when we give an offering, we generally give money. The plate comes. We have an envelope with cash or a check ready. We toss it in. And after the service, a group of people collect it all, count it, and deposit it in the bank. Easy. Simple.

But things were a little more complicated for the ancient Israelites of the Old Testament. Because most of them are farmers. And they do an awful lot of business by bartering. And giving money to the temple just isn't very practical. They don't keep a lot of cash on hand, like we do. So God lays out a system for them.

It's already their practice to stagger their crop plantings. They didn't put all of their seed in the ground at once. They staggered it over several weeks. That way, at harvest time, they didn't have to harvest all of it at once. They could do it gradually.

The *aparde* was the first harvest. The first wave of wheat or barley or grapes or olives that ripened in the fall. And it was special. Because they didn't eat the *aparde*. Or sell the *aparde*. Or trade with the *aparde*.

They gave it as an offering at the temple. It was their tithe for the entire year. One tenth of all the seed they had planted. One tenth of all the fruit they would pick from their orchards.

And they gave it as an offering for a very specific reason: because they were not allowed to harvest the rest of their crop until they had done so. You see, the Israelites then believed the same as Christians today. That everything we have is a gift from God. This world belongs to him. These bodies belong to him. And their harvest belonged to him.

And so they would take the *aparde* to the temple as an offering. And receive the priest's permission to keep the rest of the harvest. As a gift from God.

Christ is the *aparde*. He is the firstfruits. The first harvest. He is sacrificed on the cross. Given to God the Father as an offering. So that we can keep the rest of the harvest. So that we can receive God's gift of eternal life. So that we can rise from the dead as well.

Because, you see, the original first harvest was a failure. Adam didn't give himself to the Lord. He gave himself over to temptation. To sin, death, and the devil. And we have been reaping a harvest of sin and death ever since.

We needed a redo. A fresh start. Someone to reset the clock. And do what Adam didn't. And what none of Adam's descendants ever did. Someone to truly give his life to the Lord.

We use that expression so often to describe our faith. "I gave my life to the Lord." But we don't. We can't. Only Jesus Christ could be the perfect offering that we aren't. Only he could be the *aparde*. The firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.

So that he could take possession of us. Make us his own. And make us part of the harvest. Not a harvest of sin and death, like Adam. But a harvest of righteousness and of new life.

And that harvest has already started. Easter proves it has started. Christ is risen from the dead. The first crop is already in the barn, so to speak.

But there's more to come. Because just as there were many years when humanity only reaped sin and death for the devil. There will also be many years before Christ conquers all his enemies. Not just death and the devil. That's already been done.

But, as Paul puts it, "*every rule and every authority and power.*" All his enemies. And Christ has a lot of enemies to put under his feet. War and greed. Lust and pride. Rulers who oppress the weakest among us. Authorities who persecute the Church. Powers who say there is no God.

The end will not come until Christ has subjected all of them under his feet. Until he has destroyed them all. Until he has destroyed last, but not least, death itself.

Then the harvest will be complete. Then God will be glorified in all the world. For He will rule over all things. Living and dead. God will be all in all. As he was in the beginning. Is now. And ever shall be.

And so we wait and we grieve with hope for those who have died in the faith. The harvest is coming. The King is on his throne. The shepherd is gathering his flock.

And for those without faith, well... we have motivation. If you don't bring the Gospel to an unbeliever for any other reason, do it for this one: That when they die, you can look their friends and family members in the eye and say with complete honesty, with complete conviction, and with complete hope, "Do not worry, you will see them again." Amen.