

**New St. James Presbyterian Church
Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany
Sunday, February 9, 2025**

**“Which You in Turn Received”
I Corinthians 15:1-11**

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

In our Epistle Lesson from I Corinthians, St. Paul speaks of receiving and handing on. “Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters,” Paul writes, “of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn *received*. [...] For I *handed on* to you as of first importance what I in turn had *received*” (vv. 1-3). In the original language, this is very concrete: it’s about taking hold of something [παραλαμβάνω], then handing something on [παραδίδωμι] (Trenchard).

And what is it that’s being received and handed on? Here Paul offers a summary of the Gospel (cf. Irish): Christ’s death and resurrection, Good Friday and Easter Sunday. “I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures” (vv. 3-4). At the heart of the Gospel, Paul says, is the hopeful message of Easter (cf. Galloway)—that Christ is risen from the grave, that God’s love is revealed in Christ’s death and new life.

Paul then makes clear that the Gospel didn’t just end on Easter Sunday, but continued on into the lives of the early believers. The way Paul describes it, there’s no clear separation between the Gospel on Easter Sunday and the Gospel in the days after (cf. Hutson). So Paul goes from speaking about the Risen Christ on Easter Sunday to speaking about the appearance of the Risen Christ in the life of the early church. Paul writes: Christ “appeared to Cephas [that’s Peter], then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me” (vv. 5-8).

In this way, Paul can speak of the Gospel in the present tense: Christ was raised, yet Christ continued to appear; hope was revealed on Easter, yet this hope continued to be shared. And each believer, in receiving this hope and then handing it on—each believer became a link in the chain of faith, “a link in the transmission of the Gospel” (Galloway). Those early Christians never regarded

Easter as a secret to kept, as a mystery to be concealed, or as a private hope to remain hidden; on Easter morning, when those women first encountered the Risen Christ, they went and told the other disciples, who shared the message still more widely.

And as those early Christians received and handed on the message that Christ was Risen, something remarkable happened: when the early Christians handed on this message to one another, the Risen Christ appeared to those who received this message. In this way, the experience of the Risen Christ coincided with receiving of this Gospel: as that message was shared, and believers took on that message of hope, the Gospel was then confirmed in their lives by the appearance of the Risen Christ.

And so this chain continued: the message was handed on, and Christ appeared to those who received that message, from Mary and Salome at the empty tomb, to Peter and the more disciples in their growing numbers, and finally to Paul...who received the Gospel, and then handed it on to the Corinthians: "For I handed on to you as of first importance," Paul writes, "what I in turn had received" (v. 3).

Yet that chain didn't end with the Corinthians: this message continued to be shared, within families and communities, from parents to children, across the generations; and as this message was shared, the Risen Christ appeared in the lives of believers, as Christians across the centuries came to know Christ as present and risen and alive...until, "[l]ast of all [...], [Christ] appeared also to [us]."

See, we are all heirs and beneficiaries of this long chain of faith. The Gospel has been handed on and received, and believers have come to know the presence of the Risen Christ from generation to generation—until finally, this heritage of faith was handed on to you.

And it didn't just happen! Someone told you. At times, I've heard people say, 'Oh no, I didn't come to faith; I was always Presbyterian.' I mean, yes and no: sure, that means your faith formation began before you can even remember, but still—someone told you; even the most dyed-in-the-wool Presbyterians were not born reciting the Apostles' Creed. Someone who had received the Gospel of the Risen Christ handed that on to you; and then, by the grace of God, you likewise experienced the hope of the Risen Christ in your life.

You are all the heirs and beneficiaries of those who handed on the Gospel to you. It's a good thing that the women who encountered the Risen Christ on Easter

morning weren't all like, 'Well, religion's a private matter; let's not tell anybody; we don't want to be pushy.' No, the Gospel—that message of hope—was handed on, and handed on again, through all those links of that long chain—until that same Gospel was at last handed on to you. And what a difference that has made!

What would it mean, then, for you to hand on the Gospel to others as it was first handed on to you? What would it mean to receive and share that hope? The heart of the Gospel has not changed: Christ is Risen. That's the message that the early disciples shared with one another, the message that Paul shared with the Corinthians. It's not up to us "to invent the Gospel" (Galloway); that has already been handed down to us, this heritage of hope. But that doesn't mean the Gospel is just some fossilized fact that gets repeated; it's "not [just] one more piece of information" (Galloway). This word of hope is transformative: it means "discovering in [the Risen] Christ a new centre of existence, [a new source of life], a new perspective" on everything" (Galloway).

And at the same time, this ancient legacy of faith—that Christ is Risen—this takes on new meaning and new significance in the life of every believer and generation. As one Presbyterian minister puts it: "As the gospel is shared, it becomes incarnate in the [...] life of each new believer. The gospel today is the same [...] that Paul proclaimed, but it [is] expressed in fresh ways as it becomes embodied in [our] lives. The gospel has a way of letting the light of Christ shine [...] unique[ly] through each believer" (Galloway).

This means that the Gospel takes on new meaning as you receive this ancient message of hope, that Christ is Risen. As you take on this Gospel into your own life—with all your own "struggles, pains, joys, accomplishments, and dreams" (Galloway)—the Risen Christ touches your life in a way that is blessedly unique. The Gospel is always the same, but there's no one quite like you to live out that Gospel in your own way before God; the Gospel is always the same, but there's no other congregation exactly like this one to meet the Risen Christ together.

See, you're all part of this story. From generation to generation, the Gospel has been handed on and the Risen Christ has appeared—until, at last, this chain of faith extended to you; and as you receive the Gospel, it comes to mean something fresh and new through your life.

So let me ask: how has the Risen Christ appeared to you (cf. Jones)? We're not the same as the first disciples; Christ didn't appear to us at the empty tomb or on the road to Damascus. That was how the Risen Christ appeared to them, but that's not our story: we have a different story. In what ways have *you* known the

Risen Christ as present in your life? How has the Risen Christ appeared to you, touching your life with purpose and hope? How has the appearance of the Risen Christ “transformed you [and] shaped the way you live” (Jones)? That’s your story—of how you received the Gospel, which someone handed on to you, and how the Risen Christ has appeared to you.

How then does your story—of receiving the Gospel in your life—how does this teach you how to hand it on? Knowing how this message of hope has touched your life, how can your hope be shared? The Risen Christ appeared as the Gospel was handed on—from the empty tomb to the disciples, from Paul to the Corinthians; and then, at last, to you. And so you have a story: how can your story of hope—of finding hope in the Risen Christ—how can your story become the next link in this chain of faith? Amen.