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Sermon preached by Mr J K Popham
at Galeed Chapel, Brighton
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1 CORINTHIANS 15 v 20

"But now is Christ risen from the dead and
become the first fruits of them that slept"

Nothing nebulous, no uncertainty, in this text. It is of the essence of the gospel to be positive, because it is divine. The resurrection of Christ is the keystone; the arch will fall without it. The resurrection of Christ is a great historical fact, is built on historical evidence, evidence that was sealed with the blood of the men who gave testimony to it. If we are prepared to deny the resurrection of Christ, we must be prepared to deny the whole of the gospel, and all the Scriptures. What the Apostle James says of the law, "He that offends in one point is guilty of all", may be said of the Word of God. He that breaks one part breaks all. It is an organic whole. Holy Scripture, infallible Scripture, given by inspiration of God. There is no religion worth having if Christ is not risen from the dead. Let us eat and drink for tomorrow shall be as this day; and shall die hopeless and lost. Think of the importance then of this statement, this divine statement. "But now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept". There are several terrible negatives preceding this text. "If Christ be not risen then is our preaching vain, and your faith is also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ: whom He raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not". If there is no resurrection of the dead then Christ was not raised from the dead, and this is the terrible consequence, that we who believe, believe in vain; that preachers should preach the gospel, preach in vain, and that they bear false witness of God; that they say what is not true. Think of it, that if Christ is not raised, I, this morning, and all like myself who say that Christ is risen from the dead, we are just false witnesses. False witnesses are deceivers, and deceivers are wicked people, and people who believe their false witness are deceived. It is a question of the blind leading the blind. Terrible, this negative; well worth our

closest attention. "And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins". This is another negative; think of it. We, who have believed in the forgiveness of our sins, have rejoiced in that forgiveness, blessed God for it, walked about with our consciences easy, feeling that we were righteously forgiven and justified, we believe a vanity, a falsehood, and the sins that burdened us before they were removed from us by the blood of Christ, yet remain, and we are in them. Nothing more dreadful with respect to religion and hope can be imagined than that we should have been deceived in this thing, that we believe our sins were forgiven and they were not. "If Christ be not risen from the dead ye are yet in your sins". Every child of God keeps his sins if Christ lies in the grave now. Sin was a burden that we could not bear; God knew that; we felt it; and we believe that He spoke forgiveness to us. No man is more terribly deceived than myself if Christ be not raised from the dead, if God did not raise Him up, because many years ago He told me that my sins were forgiven, and if Christ is still in the grave, I believe a falsehood. And I have been preaching among you now for nearly 45 years and I have been preaching a falsehood, telling a lie, if Christ is still in the grave. And another awful thing is this, that all who are asleep in Christ are perished. The Scripture says "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord" but if the Lord is dead and in His grave, they are not blessed; they are perished. If there is no resurrection of the dead, Christ was not brought out of the grave, and all who have died in Him, conquered death by faith in Him, and believed that they were going straight to heaven when they left their poor, afflicted bodies, they were all deceived, and every minister that told them they were right, told them a lie. And another negative is "If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable"; the joys we have felt, the happiness we have realised, the comforts that have been in our souls, the support we have had under afflictions, these were deceptions. Who more miserable than ourselves. Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. "If Christ be not risen" Reflect for a moment brethren upon these terrible negatives. Having set them before us the Holy Ghost then inspired the Apostle Paul to make this divine statement. "Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept." I shall show, first, as enabled, that the resurrection of Christ is a necessity. On certain grounds, and for certain reasons,

the resurrection of Christ is a necessity. It is a necessity on this ground, an attestation of the validity, the vicarious nature of His death. If He is still in the prison of the grave, it is because He did not fully discharge the debt He undertook to discharge and did not atone for the sins which were imputed to Him. Peter tells us in the Acts of the Apostles that God loosed the pains of death because it was not possible that He should be holden of death. Why not possible? Because He owed nothing to death, nothing to the law, nothing to divine justice. He came to satisfy divine justice; to fulfil, and not destroy, the law; to please God. He laid down His life at the divine commandment of His Father. "No man taketh my life from Me. I have power to lay it down and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of My Father". Now if Christ be not risen there was no testimony, no proof, that Jesus Christ had done that which He came to do. He said to His Father - "I know that Thou hearest Me for I do always those things that please Thee." But that could not have been true if the prison holds Him still. The resurrection of Christ is necessary on the ground of divine justice. If justice is pleased with Him, if satisfied with what He did when He offered Himself without spot to God, how could He be justly detained in the prison of the grave? Justice, O justice, with all her brightness and glory, went hand in hand with love and truth to the grave of Christ and brought Him forth. The resurrection of Christ was necessary that love, divine love, might have a free flow and vent. It had been promised, prophesied, typified. Long ages had witnessed the sacrifices of innumerable creatures. The high priests in succession had annually gone into the Holy of Holies and there, before the Shechina they had offered that incense which God had ordained, typifying the infinite merit of the Saviour, and that was that God might be propitious to that covenanted people, and more than that, that the type should come and when the type did come the love of God was manifested. "In this was the love of God manifested toward us in that He sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him." You would never get any of the love of God into your hearts if Christ is still in the grave. The river of God's pleasures would never flow to you if Christ is not out of the grave. It was necessary that love should have this flow, this free flow, and come into the hearts of sinners. Therefore Christ is risen from the dead. If mercy and truth, if righteousness and peace, met and kissed and

embraced each other on the cross, in the Person and sacrifice of the Saviour, then in the next place the resurrection of Christ was necessary that truth might be known and that Zion might be called a city of truth. The Lord's Word in the Psalms makes the resurrection of Christ necessary. Said the Saviour to His Father, in the Psalms, "Thou wilt not leave My soul in hell, neither wilt Thou suffer Thine Holy One to see corruption". And the Apostle Peter quotes that Scripture in preaching that gospel sermon whereby three thousand were born again and converted to God. Nay, it is necessary in order that the Covenant of God with His Son should be fulfilled and made good. In the Covenant the Father says to the Son - "My Spirit that is upon Thee, and My words which I have put in Thy mouth, shall not depart out of Thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of Thy seed, nor out of the mouth of Thy seed's seed from henceforth and for ever". (Isaiah 59 v 21). That could not be true without the resurrection of Christ. If He saw corruption the Spirit was not there. If He saw corruption the Word of God was not there in His mouth. Christ's own Word makes the resurrection necessary - Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again. That was not true if Christ remained in the grave. See then, dear friends, what a ground there is to stand on with respect to the Lord Jesus. He entered into heaven. He showed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs. He showed Himself, after having shown Himself to His disciples, to above 500 brethren at once. What a congregation; O, what an object for that congregation; the eyes of above 500 men gazing on a risen Saviour.

In the next place let us look at some of the consequences, the sweet effects of the resurrection of Christ. And first, this, that the power of God comes on sinners, enters their hearts. This, the Apostle particularly expresses in the Ephesians, where he says, in the first chapter, praying that the eyes of their understanding might be enlightened, "that ye may know what is the hope of His calling, and what the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints. And what is the exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. Which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead, and set Him at His Own right-hand in the heavenly places." The power that brought the Lord Jesus from the grave enters the hearts of sinners, operates savingly

there, convinces them of sin, teaches them how to believe, in whom to believe, and what to believe and the end of believing. Lifts them up above the principalities and powers and sets them in heavenly places and heavenly things in Jesus Christ. That testimony is certain. He wrought in Christ most powerfully. Omnipotence was in Christ's resurrection and that same omnipotence, in different measures, operates in the hearts of believers; that is the argument. And, as Christ, by the power of God, was set above principalities, so that power, moving in a believing heart, sets the believer above the world. His affections are set on things above and not on things on the earth. Now let us pause here and ask ourselves whether that power has ever been in us; if we have been raised above self, that wicked thing, self; above the world, the allurements of it and the wrong things in it, and have been set with our hearts and affections on things above. It is in that way that believers are made kings and priests unto God; only in that way. You will never rise above yourself by your own moving and power. You will never rise above the world by your own influence. It will always be, and only be, by the resurrection power of Christ in you, and this was before the Apostle Paul when, writing of his own experience to the Philippians, he tells us what his desire was - That I may win Christ and know Him and the power of His resurrection. That power enables a sinner to believe to the saving of his soul, to cast his sinful case on the Redeemer, to look to, and believe in, and live near the cross of Christ. To come with the Apostle Paul and say - "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ by whom the world is crucified unto me and I unto the world". By this resurrection another wonderful thing comes, namely the blessed forgiveness and justification that a sinner is brought to feel his need of. "Having forgiven you all trespasses". "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus". By this forgiveness, a sinner's standing is changed; by justification his position and relationship to God is changed, and he is brought into a living, blessed, happy contact with the Saviour. You know, when you know this, you will know what it is to be near the Lord. No common experience this. A most happy, wonderful experience to find that your soul is, as it were, divorced from tangible things for the moment, and you are brought to Him and near to Him, who is the ever living God; a sin pardoning God; a just God and a Saviour. O seeker, this is before you. "They that

seek shall find". O hungry soul, this is the provision made for you. "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled". By this resurrection of Christ then, sinners are brought into this position. They are changed in their state and condition through the blood of the everlasting covenant by Him who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep.

And another consequence is this, that this forgiven people are admitted into a familiar intercourse with God. No longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints and of the household of God. Think of it. A stranger in Brighton is soon known by an observer. He looks about, without knowledge, and wanders, and moreover he has no interest in the town. He is just passing, stopping a day or two perhaps, and he goes away again and has no interest. A foreigner and a stranger to the house of God has no knowledge of it, no interest. The household of God. There is familiarity, intercourse, based on a relationship and when you are brought into this condition, this happy state, you are not a stranger to God nor a stranger to true experience; not a stranger to the Saviour, nor a stranger to the Spirit, nor a stranger to the Scriptures. And none of this could be if Christ be not risen from the dead. The whole of Christian experience hangs on the resurrection of Christ, and as Christ had shown to Him a river of pleasures at the Father's right hand for ever, so it comes to pass in true experience, that the saints do get a sight of that blessed river of pleasures; the love of God, the favour of God, the gift of the Spirit, union to Christ, fellowship with Him. Look at this for a moment. The Psalmist speaks of the Lord being his habitation. First, a refuge; there is safety. Then a habitation; there is a home, with all its familiarities, all its comforts, all its pleasures. Is God your habitation? But God dwelleth in the light that no man can approach unto. No man hath seen Him nor can see Him. How then can He be your habitation? In Jesus Christ. This is the tabernacle of God with men. This is the habitation for sinful men who are forgiven their trespasses and justified in the righteousness of Christ. They are admitted into this blessed habitation. There is a provision in the house; there is provision in the house and the children sit at meat; they sit together. "Eat, O friends; drink, yea, drink abundantly, O beloved."

(S of S 5 v 1) Jesus Christ is there; He receives sinners and eats with them. He comforts them on every side. They walk up and down in His Name. It is written - "I will strengthen them in the Lord and they shall walk up and down in His Name saith the Lord". There is comfort in this house. I will comfort you saith the Lord. And when His disciples were sorrowing because He told them He must leave them, He said - I will send you another Comforter, even the Spirit of Truth, and He shall testify of Me. He shall bring My things to you. You shall receive them in His light and His life and His power, and in this there is a rich provision. Every want of the soul is met, every desire of the heart is fulfilled. The mind and the intellect of a child of God will find everything it can crave in Jesus Christ risen from the dead, in the house of God, the living God. "Now is Christ risen from the dead".

And in the next place, this is the effect, that there is set, set before us, a prospect, a great prospect. Some prospects in this life are pleasing. When a young man has a bright prospect before him in respect of his business or his profession there is a pleasure in it to him, an anticipation. O what a prospect is set before the child of God. The Apostle, in the second Epistle to the Corinthians, speaks of this sweetly, wherein he said that if the earthly house of this our tabernacle were dissolved we have a building of God. Yea, he says of the saints, "Absent from the body present with the Lord." This is not our rest. Blessed be God, this is not our rest. Here have we no continuing city; we seek one to come. We are companions with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. They sought a city fair on high. The builder of that is God. We seek that city. What says the risen Saviour - Where I am there shall my servant also be. "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" These things flow from the resurrection of Christ. Heaven would not be a heaven without the Lord Jesus. The Man Christ Jesus is there and we sing that "A Man there is, a real Man" in heaven, and He will have men with Him whom He makes heavenly men. These shall be with Him and walk with Him, He being in their midst, leading them to living fountains of waters and they shall thirst no more.

In the next place, the Apostle says that Christ is become the

first fruits of them that slept. Under the Mosaic dispensation when the harvest was about to come the first fruits were gathered and by divine commandment taken in a basket and brought before the Lord and waived before Him. The first fruits were a promise of the harvest that was to come; it would ensue quickly. Christ answers to that, the first begotten of the dead. The first fruits of them that slept, He is before God and the harvest is, as it were, promised by the first fruits. The first fruits say the harvest is about to be reaped. This is answered by the Apostle Paul in the Romans where he tells us that the people of God have the first fruits of the Spirit. These first fruits of the Spirit are the mighty, gracious operations of the Spirit and the earnest of the Spirit, called the earnest of our inheritance. This is what the people of God have in their souls. Their knowledge of God is not an acquired knowledge. It is given. "This is life eternal that they might know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent." And, that being the case, when they have the earnest of the Spirit, they say "We know whom we have believed and we are persuaded that He is able to keep that which we have committed unto Him against that day". And here is that divine, sweet persuasion in the heart that makes a sinner say "I know". Guessing about eternity is a terrible thing. Knowledge of God is what the people of God have and it is given to them. "Likewise the Spirit beareth witness with our spirits that we are the children of God and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ". So you may perceive, my brethren, the eternal importance of the resurrection of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ and how well-founded is that hope that is built upon a risen Saviour. Nothing will move it, nothing destroy it. Christ, the ground, the Rock of Ages. Christ risen, the object of faith. Christ in heaven the object of faith and of love. So is He, as that the people blessed with that precious faith in Him, can say, "We have not followed cunningly devised fables". Mind, if you have not in your hearts some God-communicated knowledge of Christ, Christ dying and rising again from the dead by the power of the Father, you are lacking, seriously, solemnly lacking. True religion has a good ground. It has a divine Author, it has a divine end. The ground is Christ, Christ dying and rising from the dead. Its Author is God, the Holy Ghost. Its end is bliss, being with God for ever. This being so, as the saints, all of them believe, is it not a mercy for us to be enabled honestly to look

this question in the face - Do we believe that Christ is risen from the dead? Has He ever visited us? He says "I will see you again". Has He done it? When He comes in His Spirit, when He shines into the heart - O the inshining is great and sweet - then there is knowledge. It is this knowledge of Him that provokes love. Love that is real always has knowledge in it and the more knowledge of God, the more love. Hence love that is accompanied with torment is not perfected but when Christ comes and gives sweet and fuller knowledge of Himself, then perfect love casts out tormenting fear. See then if you have any gracious knowledge of this great fact - Christ is risen from the dead. "Now is Christ risen". Not perhaps, but He is, and He showed Himself alive after His passion by many infallible proofs. These proofs you can easily see by reading the account in the Word of God and if you can read these proofs, these infallible proofs, and cast a doubt upon them it is a terrible thing for you, but if, reading them, you get some gracious intimation in your heart by the Holy Spirit that there is a spiritual strength, a divine effect, to be realised as from that resurrection, then you will be on good ground, ground that will bear your weight; a Rock that will hold you. When the rain beats and the wind blows and the waves come and dash against the building, all will stand. "But now is Christ risen from the dead". Now He is before God as the first fruits, the first begotten of the dead and all who believe in Him shall one day be where He is according to His gracious promise. May the Lord cause us to believe in Him.

AMEN.