

Graduation Sermon 2008

Brothers Stand Firm

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1 Co 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

The preacher, the son of David, looks out over a lost world from Jerusalem. He considers all human effort and endeavor. He looks back over his own life. And he says, "Meaningless! Meaningless!" "Utterly meaningless!"

And we get it, don't we? Even in this high tech age, we get it. I remember working on a book on an early version of a word processor. I had slaved for a whole day on a single chapter. I just about got it into some kind of shape, was ready to save it when the power went out, the screen went blank, the digital ink disappeared. I stared in helpless horror as I realized, "A day's work, gone! Gone forever."

So much of what we do seems like wasted work. Labor in vain. My mother was lying on a bed, body riddled with cancer. As I held her hand I couldn't help but think that she had so much of her life yet to live. So much to give us all. As I left the house and walked out into the sunshine and the spring and the lilacs blooming, I could not erase her dying image from my heart. And I thought: What a waste! That cruel death should lay us so low, making such a mockery of all our hopes.

A friend of mine is talking about leaving the seminary. Getting into some other kind of work. I ask him why. He says, "Well I've just had it. I'm tired of spinning thin threads of thought in the air. I want a job where I can look back at the day and see some accomplishment. Something to show for all my efforts. A day's work done." Ah my dear friend! You're not listening to the preacher! Apart from Christ, there is no such work in all the world where frustration and futility aren't part of the package.

But if this message was all we had to say, then you wouldn't be here, would you? If the deepest insight we could share with the sons and daughters of Adam would be to say, "Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless!"—well then we all might as well pack it in and go home. We'd be wasting our time here. As Paul says, we would be more to be pitied than all people if only in this life we have hope in Christ!

But you do have a better word to speak. A far more powerful message. Stronger than death itself! It's that better and more powerful word above all which has occupied your heart and your mind and all your studies these past few years. It's that word above all that you are ready now to go out and preach. What is that word? Simply this: He lives! This message and this message alone makes sense of our lives and gives substance to your ministries.

He Lives! So Brothers Stand Firm...

- 1. Unswerving in His Truth**
- 2. Abounding in His Work**

1.

Sometimes the biggest words in any discourse are the seemingly insignificant ones, the ones you're likely to skip over. That is certainly true of the text you've chosen as your class verse. In fact, this text wouldn't

make any sense at all if we didn't put our focus and emphasis on this one little word, "Therefore..." You take that word away, and this verse would fall to the ground. It would be no more than the empty babble of your average commencement speaker, "Hey guys, be tough! Be strong! Dig down deep! Unlock that hidden potential!" Paul knows you better than that. And you know better than that. Left to yourself—to your own natural powers—you can do nothing.

He's not asking you to traffic in human hopes, human dreams, human stories, because every single one of them is a dead end. It ends in death. But in this little word "therefore" Paul tells us that his encouragement here is based on the resurrection gospel, the gospel he has just laid out so beautifully in 1 Corinthians 15. In it he has emphasized the reality, the centrality, the necessity, and the almighty power of Christ's resurrection. God has entered our human story in the person of Christ Jesus. He suffered. He died. But here the story changed. Jesus added another chapter. He rose again. Because of Jesus, the shape and texture of humanity's story has been transformed. He who once was dead now lives!

Take that resurrection gospel and make it your own. It's not enough to believe that God has done this great and mighty thing. It's not enough to believe that he has done it for others and not for you. You must firmly believe that God has done it for you, that it all has to do with you. Then you will sing with Paul the defiant victory song: "O Death, where is your sting. Grave, where is your victory?" My dear Jesus has come into this world and said, "O Sin of theirs, you be my Sin! Oh mighty Death, strike me! Kill me! Only do not lay a hand on them! Sin, you will hold me in your deadly grip, but I will break your fingers! Death, I'll be the death of you."

Therefore, Paul says, "Therefore..."

Stand firm. Let nothing move you—in Christ and in his resurrection we find stability in this world of shifting shadows. In Christ and in his resurrection, we have found a sure foundation. In him we will stand even when it all falls down, even when heaven and earth pass away. That's why we are determined: we ... will ... not ... move from here, from this truth. There is no progress to a deeper truth, a more profound faith, a richer understanding. Christians make the most progress by standing in the same place. Beneath the cross. Before the empty tomb. Here we will stand, unswerving in this truth.

He lives! In the power of this truth and with mouths filled with this message, we send you out. You are going to hurl this message against the darkness and bring life and immortality to light. By this message you will transform the world. You will make it new! Stand firm in it, and let nothing move you from it.

2.

Then you will also abound in his work. Paul says, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord"—a good translation, but a more literal way of saying it would be to translate, "Always abound in, always excel in, always overflow in the work of the Lord." The life that God gives us in Christ—the resurrection life that Christ lives in us is not some kind of half life. As if here on earth we were stuck in some kind of waiting room, just cooling our heels until eternal life began in heaven. And it's not a still life, as if standing firm meant we should be rooted to the spot, stuck here like saintly statues until the end of time.

The life we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us and gave himself for us is an abundant life, a rich life, a full life. As he himself said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10.)

The resurrection changes everything about our lives right here and now. Certainly, viewed apart from Christ, life is a desert landscape, surrounded by death and sorrow on every side. But he lives! And that fact changes everything. Our hearts are seized by this truth: because he lives, we will live also.

Seen in the light of the empty tomb, life now stretches before us, life unbroken. Each week, each day, each moment is now a rich green landscape bursting with promise, rich with opportunities to live and to live abundantly, to abound in the work of the Lord. Faith is a living, busy, active, mighty thing! Knowing that my status with God is utterly secure, that he is my Father and that I am his child, I am free. Free to live in this moment. Free to love others as he has loved me. Free to serve others as he has served me.

This is the highest skill that any Christian can acquire: to see all of one's life in the light of the gospel. This is the greatest service that any pastor can give to his people: to frame their lives in the truth: "He lives!" To help each Christian see and seize every moment as an opportunity to live by faith in the one who lives! Practically speaking, this means that there is no more important time for me to live than right now, in this golden moment God has given me. There is no more significant activity to engage in than that task that the Lord places right before my hand. There is no better place to be than right here where I find myself. And there is no better person to serve than the one my Savior places right in front of me. God has attached his word to my neighbor and said, "Love him! Serve her!" In our living Lord, our life becomes this extraordinary landscape full of God and rich with opportunities to serve our God.

Brothers, we are sending you out in the firm hope and expectation that you, according to Christ's own promise, are going to experience this abundant life for yourselves. Christ is going to be a living, busy, mighty, and active being in your lives. We could well envy you for the joy that you will know. You are going to see the fruit of his resurrection in your life! And, as part of your calling, you're going to have the great privilege of helping other people into that same joy. You will have the thrill of seeing the light of grace rise for the first time in the eyes of someone who hasn't known Christ. At the bedside of the dying, you will see the power of the Lord's word turn death into life. And you are going to see the power of the resurrection gospel on display in the everyday lives of the people you serve.

Does that mean life ever ceases to be a struggle for your people or for you? That there will be no more trouble? No more trials? No more cross? Hardly! We do not dwell, as one of our writers has said, among ranks of angels where Jesus rules in glory, but here on earth where he was crucified. But even in the time of sorrow—especially at that moment—we must learn the great skill of faith and apply the resurrection gospel to that very thing we are struggling with. We baptize it, and give it a new name in him who lives.

The truth is: right here in this momentary pain, the God of life is at work for our eternal good. Though death may seem to surround us, Christ's life is more abundant still. We are more than conquerors through him who loved us. Faith knows this, and teaches us to seize this moment too to live for him who loved us.

So stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Because you know—you know—that your labor is not in vain. Not in vain. Never in vain. Why?

Because he lives!

Amen.