

The mosaics that decorate the cathedral church in St. Louis occupy more ceiling and wall space than any other building can boast. Parts of the ceiling were left undone when the cathedral opened, but about twenty years ago they finished. The wall on one side includes a half-dome section. On the concave surface you can now see the risen Jesus appearing to Mary Magdalene. Below it spans an inscription taken from today's second reading: "If Christ is not risen, your faith is in vain." But the inscription runs along the bottom like this and when you're standing below you can't read the whole thing at once. The first time I saw it, I couldn't see the first word. I thought it read: "Christ is not risen. Your faith is in vain." That "if" is really important.

The resurrection is really important as St. Paul said last week. Every year through most of January and February our second readings come from the First Letter to the Corinthians. This long letter contains so many important themes that we hear from it a little bit at a time. This month we're hearing four consecutive Sundays from the same chapter, 15, which is entirely devoted to the resurrection. It was an important theme for Paul, and it should be for us too.

Many people don't believe in life after death. You probably know some; Paul knew of them in the Corinthian community. Such people think that when we die, life ends. Just as we did not exist before we were born, they reason, so we will not exist after we die. This philosophy haunts secular society. News coverage, for example, may report the fact of someone's death, but it will not report the hope of seeing them again. By removing life after death from the treatment of news, the media separate faith from fact, and in subtle ways they teach that faith is fiction.

Disbelief in life after death fits with other developments in our culture. If this life is all there is, the accumulation of wealth is more important than giving to the poor, the use and abuse of earth's natural resources is more sensible than conservation, human life is dispensable if it is inconvenient or inadequate, and dying people spend fortunes on hospital care desperately trying to bribe death. If this life is all you get, you might as well get all you can in this life. Without a belief in life after death, the meaning of life is reduced to personal pleasure.

Paul says, let's assume there is no life after death. Then, Christ is not risen, preaching is useless, faith is meaningless, forgiveness is impossible, and the dead are lost. It's a bleak picture.

Many people who disbelieve in life after death say there is no evidence to support it. Paul argues that there is. Hundreds of people saw Jesus risen. Paul saw him risen. Paul had no doubt in the resurrection because he saw the evidence. We believers have seen evidence too. We see it in the gospels, in the love of the community, in our common worship and in our own personal experience of prayer. We have come to know the risen Christ.