

A person could preach an OK sermon on just what we have in today's reading. We could talk about not getting tangled up in words. We could say we need to keep the main thing – Christ's death and resurrection – the main thing.

I like words and my main spiritual type is a more intellectual, head type of spirituality. I do sometimes find myself getting tangled in words though, and have to just come back to the main thing...Christ died and rose for my healing and the healing of the world.

It's where our hope comes from. But it helps to read on a bit further in the letter to get some context.

It seems that there were false teachers who said that the resurrection – not just the resurrection of Jesus but the general resurrection had already happened.

It doesn't sound like anyone now really knows exactly what they meant for sure, but a good possibility is that they were teaching that resurrection was more of a spiritual event than a physical one. A spiritual resurrection manifested in a growing faith and changed life. They may have denied the future hope of real, bodily resurrection.

It may have been somewhat similar to beliefs in our own time. Perhaps the most common belief about what Christ's resurrection did for us is that it means our souls go to heaven when we die.

For some, that's really it...Christian hope lies in having the strength and guidance to muddle through this life to get to our reward in the next. Hope lies in escape from this world.

At its worst, that belief is accompanied by the belief that one day this world will cease to exist – it will be destroyed in a violent end. If we believe it's all going to be destroyed, it can be hard to see the point of things like caring for the environment or creating new things and new ways of doing things.

Probably we don't all believe exactly that...we have some sense that since Jesus spent a lot of time teaching about how to be in this life it's probably important. And we have all hopefully come to see that the kingdom of God is here, now and not just some far away place we need to get to.

But where does resurrection fit in?

What did Paul and his early colleagues believe about resurrection?

Well, in a nutshell, they believed this...that the resurrection of Jesus was the beginning of the new creation. It was the beginning of the healing and restoration of the world...this world. What God did for Jesus, God would do for us and for the rest of creation.

Furthermore, they believed that Jesus would return to finish the job. When Jesus returns, the dead will be bodily raised, heaven and earth will become one, and the new creation will be complete.

When Jesus said the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven was at hand, he meant it wasn't some other physical destination...it was another dimension of the world around us and nearby. It was God's dimension.

The goal of salvation was not escape from this world – it was the joining of the dimension called heaven and our own earthly dimension.

The resurrection of Jesus is a hard sell to non-believers. Most Christians have reached some level of belief in the bodily resurrection of Jesus. There still are, however, those who believe that it was more of a spiritual resurrection.

But the belief that Jesus will return and the dead will all be raised is a hard sell even for many Christians.

How do we know that's what Paul and many early Christians believed? Because that's what the New Testament letters say.

Does it matter? Am I just wrangling over words, like the letter's author warned against?

What's the difference between believing our souls go to heaven versus believing that we will one day be physically raised from the dead?

Part of what makes it hard is that we want to believe the souls of our deceased loved ones are in heaven now. And actually there is support for that in the New Testament as well. Jesus called it paradise. Paul often called it a place of rest. It's a good place for the soul to be.

But that wasn't meant to be the end of the road. Resurrection is.

Perhaps that's a hard sell for you. And it just might be that you will one day be surprised.

But what does it matter now?

I really think it all comes down to hope. If hope lies primarily in escape from this world, it seems to me a rather thin hope when we're confronted with all the suffering and angst of life now.

But if instead what resurrection means is that the new creation is here and already unfolding, this life matters profoundly.

When Christ comes to judge good and evil, that's supposed to be a good thing. It means that one day evil...the evil in us and in the world... will be judged and defeated. And we will reign with Christ in a remade world.

That remade world...that kingdom of heaven or new creation...will be built from the building blocks of how we live our lives now.

The bad in us will be transformed and the good will be taken up in the new creation. Paul says if we die with Jesus, we will also live with him. That's not just a onetime thing at the end of life. We understand that to mean a daily dying and rising... the death of our self-centered sinful self, the weak, sick, struggling self, and then rising to walk in a new path.

But at the end of all things, it means rising from the dead and walking in a new body in the new creation.

New Testament scholar NT Wright has studied and written volumes about what early Christian belief was and what it means for us now. In a video, he was at an ancient cathedral in Durham England where he was once bishop.

He used the image of a stone mason during the building of that cathedral. A stone mason will painstakingly craft each stone. And given how long it took to build those cathedrals, it could have been several generations of stone masons.

No one stone mason can see much beyond their own stones. But in the end, each stone, carefully crafted, becomes a tiny part of a massive work of beauty.

To believe in resurrection is to believe that we will be a part – a physical part of this beautiful new creation. That our work will contribute to it.

It can seem hard to believe. Even as I write it, I have to wrestle with whether I believe that. And if all the further we get is that this life and this world are where Christ's work is now and always will be taking place, we can still rest knowing that we have contributed to the building of this new world.

Does knowing we will actually live in it give us more hope? Does knowing that the defeat of death is literal and not just spiritual change how we live on our planet? Does it help us better navigate the awfulness we see around us, knowing it will not get the last word?

In my best moments, it does for me.

Thankfully, even when my faith in that is a bit weak, Jesus remains faithful to me...to us. It's like he says, OK, I know it's weird. And hard to believe. But just hang on to me...to what you have been told. Trust me.

Belief in our own resurrection is something we just sort of have to try on. There's no logical way into it. We try it on and ask, does this give me hope?

I think deep down, for me anyway, it does. If I spend too much time thinking about it and wrangling with words, it slips through my fingers. It's a belief that operates on a different level than my logical brain does.

But in the end, when I can get the words out of the way, hope has room to well up. In spite of the bad we see around us, that hope helps us trust that the bad will not win. It helps us see the glimpses of new creation...of new life...when they bubble up.

And we can trust that what God did for Jesus, God is doing and will continue to do for us, until at last we will all live and walk in the new creation.