

“Resurrected in the Body”
May 10, 2020
St. Paul’s UCC Church
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1 Corinthians 15:20-23, 51-57

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Growing up, my sister and I had two dogs: Frisky and Taffy. We got Frisky when I was in third grade, and Taffy, about two years later. Frisky was a black and white border collie “mix” (which was just a fancy way of saying mutt), smart as a whip, very fast, very hyper. He and I got along famously. Taffy was a cocker spaniel, and not so smart. But she was very sweet. She was my sister’s dog.

My sister and I loved playing with Frisky and Taffy. One of our favorite games was “pumpkin.” This involved a bright orange pumpkin intended for collecting Halloween candy. My sister or I would throw it, and Frisky would race after it and bring it back to us. That was it. That was the game. Pumpkin. Frisky loved it. Taffy loved it too, but her version of the game was to wag her stump of a tail and pee a little as she watched Frisky fetch the pumpkin for us. All in all, it was a great game.

I remember hours upon hours of playing pumpkin, laughing with my sister, chasing after Frisky, making fun of Taffy; I also remember certain occasions – right in the middle of pumpkin – growing very serious, looking at my sister straight in the eyes, and as Frisky was running and Taffy was peeing, I would say in my most solemn voice, “You know, someday, Frisky and Taffy are going to die.” My poor sister. I’m surprised she still talks to me.

I sometimes wonder if that’s why I went into hospice ministry for a while. To try to work out my questions around death, I mean. Some of you may remember that I was a hospice chaplain before I became your pastor here at St. Paul’s. I wonder if I did it, at least in part, because I was so interested in death, and wanted to find out more about it. To solve the mystery, so to speak.

Well, I hate to tell you: I didn’t solve it. Not in hospice, and not since. I have not figured out death. If anything, death is even *more* of a mystery than it ever was.

But maybe I’m not that different from you. Maybe you wonder about death too, like, What happens after we die? Where, exactly, are we going? What will it be like? What will I be like?

The Apostle Paul seems pretty certain on the subject of death, though, doesn’t he? In our scripture lesson for this morning, from 1 Corinthians 15, Paul is really on a roll here: “Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain!” Whoa, Paul, take a chill pill! You’re so worked up!

But I guess Paul had pretty good reason to be all worked up. You may remember from last week that Paul is writing to a bunch of people who are really not getting along with each other. The Corinthian church was a church rife with conflict. I mean, these people would argue about anything! Their latest beef is about the resurrection – what happens after you die. Some of them apparently claim that there is no resurrection of the dead at all; others beg to differ. Paul can’t believe that they are even having the argument to begin with. He can’t believe that a people who worship a resurrected God

could ever say there's no resurrection of the dead... like what's Jesus, then, chopped liver?? See, Paul's saying that if humans are not resurrected from the dead, that means that Jesus, being a human, could have never been resurrected. And if that's the case, then we Christians are a real sorry lot.

But let me pause for a second here. Paul is saying that we are resurrected from the dead, just like Jesus. Let that sink in for a second. You will be resurrected. You will be raised. In your body. Just like Jesus.

One of the things we tend to do a lot in our culture is separate our bodies from our so-called souls. I've heard a lot of people – good, church-going people – over the years talk about how, when we get to heaven, it'll just be as our souls. No bodies to be found.

But that's not actually the Bible's understanding of death at all. As one of my favorite theologians, Frederick Buechner puts it,

The Biblical understanding of us humans is not that we *have* bodies but that we *are* bodies. When God made Adam, God did it by slapping some mud together to make a body and then breathing some breath into it to make a living soul. Thus the body and soul which make up a person are as inextricably part and parcel of each other as the leaves and flames that make up a bonfire.¹

But a lot of us don't actually believe that. We believe that when we die, somehow, our souls magically slip from our bodies and go join Jesus' soul up in the clouds somewhere. Well. I'm sorry to say that if the Apostle Paul heard you saying that, he'd have a conniption fit. He'd totally lose it.

Jesus was raised from the dead. In his body. He was what Paul calls the "first fruits of those who have died." After him, then, we are raised. In our bodies. Just like Jesus. We are raised in our bodies, in *these* bodies: blood, tissues, arms, legs, hair – the works! – all of this will be raised. Which actually, if you think about it, seems totally consistent with the way God works. With God, bodies matter. Flesh and blood matters. Bodies matter so much, in fact, that God actually *became* one. In Jesus Christ, God is a body. Not *has* a body – God didn't put on a body like a garment – but *is* a body.

In Jesus, God is a body... because bodies matter to God. God created this whole embodied, material world, and called it good. God loves material. God loves matter. God loves bodies. So it makes a lot of sense that God would want to resurrect, and redeem, our bodies. Not just our souls, but the whole package. It makes a lot of sense that God would resurrect *all* that we are. And so when we get to heaven (wherever that is! that's a whole other sermon), we will experience heaven *in our bodies*, as bodies.

¹Buechner, Frederick, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (HarperOne, 1993), pp. 41-43.

I know, I know – this raises a ton of questions, though: like, if my body is going to be raised, what will I look like? What age will I be? How fabulous will my hair look? (Maybe that's just me). But these are real questions: *which* body will be raised? Our bodies change, grow, age, so which one? Another question: *where* will all these bodies go, exactly? Bodies take up space – they're material, with mass and dimensions – so heaven must be a *huge* place to hold all the bodies that have been raised. How does *that* work exactly? Another question: my loved one died a few years ago. If God resurrects bodies, then where is he, or she, now?

For that last question, I would say this: I know your loved one is redeemed in their body. I know that because that's what happened to Jesus. But what that actually looks like right at this minute... I'm not so sure.

But I do know this: the person you loved, they're with God. Or better: wherever your loved one is, God is with them. Psalm 139 says: "Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make the grave my bed, you are there." In other words, there is nowhere, not even death, not even the grave, where God will not find us, seek us out, and stay with us. With *all* of us: soul *and* body.

I think Paul gets this too. For all his high-falutin' theology, I love that he ends this chapter with poetry. It's almost as if he's gotten to the end of his understanding. He realizes that even he can't fully grasp the mystery of death and resurrection. So he ends with poetry, with a song:

Death has been swallowed up in victory.

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

At the end of the day, all of it becomes a mystery again.

But what we do know is this: God loves bodies. God became one, after all. And: God will redeem *everything* that we are: body and soul. The details of how that is going to work exactly are hazy, so I guess, for now, poetry and song will have to do.

Thanks be to God.