

Text: I Corinthians 15: 12-22
Title: Useless Preaching and Futile Faith
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One spring afternoon, while I was teaching at Chicago Christian High School, a senior class was engaged in discussion when the lanky boy in the front row was suddenly shook from his slouch. His head popped up, his face scrunched up, and he blurted out, "Wait! We believe what?"

Bewilderment clouded his eyes as 12 years of Christian education whipped past in a few seconds. He dredged up countless hours of Bible class, replayed sermons, revisited retreats, and rifled through Sunday school lessons. He wasn't "spiritual but not religious;" he was conventionally religious. He wasn't a dolt or a dullard; he was a solid student. He had done camps, conventions, and catechisms, he was thoroughly indoctrinated, but he missed this high point of the faith.

Wait! We believe what?

I responded:

We believe in the resurrection of the dead. You say it every time you say the Apostle's Creed. We believe in some manner of resurrection.

Stunned!

Flummoxed!

He said he believed in the resurrection of Jesus but the rest of us go to heaven. He believed in Easter but when we die our souls are whisked-away to while-away eternity in fluffy clouds, warm lights, and praise music. He knew Jesus rose from the dead, but he missed the part about us.

Maybe you did too....

Dear friends, this morning we stand on the precipice of a great mystery. Left to our own devices we have little but murky impressions and the faint light of speculation. Martin Luther, the great reformer of sixteenth century, puts it this way:

When I lay sucking at my mother's breast, I had no notion how I should afterwards eat, drink, or live. Even so we on earth have no idea what the life to come will be.

At the edge of a great mystery maybe our first breath should be humility, mindful of our place. We will all die, but none of us knows for sure what happens next. None of us knows if something essential to who we are survives death. We confess, we hope, we believe, we have faith but we don't know what comes next in any empirical, verifiable, manner.

Therefore, we turn to scripture. We listen to the voice of text and tradition. We wrestle with ideas, instincts, and impressions. And even this morning we hope that the voice of God will be heard.

Paul wrote to the Christian community in Corinth in response to a variety of questions, squabbles, and misunderstandings. One of those issues was the resurrection of Jesus. There were those who denied the physicality of the resurrection. They thought the resurrection was a spiritual reality that had little impact on anything of substance.

So, Paul first offers a concise summary of the resurrection appearances, including the way in which he encountered the resurrected Christ. And then, he constructs a logical framework to make a case for that which suspends logic:

If there is no resurrection then not even Jesus was resurrected.
If Jesus was not resurrected then all of this is a useless lie.
Since Jesus was resurrected, then all in Jesus will be resurrected.

Paul doesn't explain the mechanics or metaphysics of resurrection. He doesn't offer much in the way of timing, the details of transformation, or the texture of a resurrected body. He simply proclaims:

Listen I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed – in a flash, 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 all be changed.

I Corinthians 15: 51-52

Truth be told, scripture seems little concerned with what happens after death and is far more concerned with what we do with life. Scripture doesn't say much about what Jesus did after he died, it says more about what he did while he lived. And yet, right at the center of our faith there is resurrection ~ not resuscitation, not revival, not reincarnation, but resurrection.

Jesus, in some bodily form, rose from the dead.
And, you and I, in some bodily form, will rise from the dead.

As the Heidelberg Catechism Question and Answer 57 puts it:

How does “the resurrection of the body” comfort you?

Not only my soul will be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but even my very flesh, raised by the power of Christ will be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body.

Now. There is a tendency, it has roots in Corinth and I have a strong dose of it, to see the resurrection of Jesus Christ
as something spiritual,
as something internal,
as something psychological,

as something metaphorical,
as something in keeping with our experience and modern sensibilities,
sensibilities informed by history and science and reason.

But Paul will have none of that. For him the resurrection is a physical reality. Jesus appeared in some bodily form and so will we....

My father was murdered a long time ago and a little over a year ago my mother died suddenly and expectedly. My grandmother and her sisters lived into their late nineties and early hundreds. We all, my mother included, thought the same would be true for her. But on Thanksgiving morning of 2017 my mother passed away. I wrote this for my mother's funeral:

Scripture can be interpreted in a variety of different ways, but to the extent that something essential and recognizable about who we are exists into eternity, and to the extent therefore that we are able to recognize one another.... I believe that my mother and father are reunited. That's all my mom ever wanted in this life or the next. And therefore, I believe that my mother is literally happier and more at peace today than she's been for 32 years. Thanks be to God.

Despite scripture's nuance and ambiguity, I'm going to believe that my parents are together. But, Paul isn't writing about that kind of hope. Paul is writing about the dead being resurrected in some manner. Paul is writing about my dad's body in Iowa and my mom's body in Michigan.....

I know that goes too far. That's more than we can fathom. And it's impossible to account for all the bodies that are nothing more than cosmic dust. I know that there are all sorts of ways to hold the doctrine of the resurrection lightly. I was reminded recently that the only doctrine for which we have verifiable proof is depravity, the rest is all hope and trust and scriptural speculation....

And yet, Paul proclaims, as quaint and irrational as it sounds, that Jesus of Nazareth was resurrected from the dead. And therefore, death doesn't have the last word. And therefore, all that is, all that was created good by God, will be restored to the *shalom* that God intended. And every broken heart, every war-torn country, every suffering soul, and every ravaged body, will be transformed, salvaged, and resurrected from death to the life that God intends.

It seems a truncated view of the resurrection that that which is essential-you ~ soul, spirit, spark, something ~ is raised to be with God, but the body disintegrates and is annihilated. Soul and body are God's creation and share in Christ's resurrection....

If this body is but the husk that holds the soul, then this world is little more than a launching pad to some other existence. And, if this body is meant to be discarded than everything here but a passing fancy. Joy is insignificant and suffering is insignificant; they just serve to set the stage for the spiritual....

But, if there is resurrection!
All of this is put to rights.

N.T. Wright gets at it this way:

Resurrection isn't a fancy way of saying "going to heaven when you die." It is not about "life after death" as such. Rather, it's a way of talking about being bodily alive again after a period of being bodily dead.... None of the resurrection stories in the gospels speak of the event proving that some kind of afterlife exists. They all say instead: "If Jesus has been raised, that means that God's new world, God's kingdom, has indeed arrived; and that means that we have a job to do. The world must hear what the God of Israel, the creator God, has achieved through his Messiah."

Dear friends, that's the mystery that we celebrate, trust, and proclaim.

That's the mystery to which we respond with heart and soul and mind and body.

For, if there is no resurrection ~ the gospel has no substance. It is but a comforting compilation of stories and sayings. If there is no resurrection ~ faith is just a positive feeling and we could just as well have faith is flying pork. If there is no resurrection ~ the witness of the church is but a host of lies. If there is no resurrection ~ sin holds serve and death has the last say. If there is no resurrection ~ then God seems impotent to create in the first place, for surely a God defeated by death could not make the abundant wonders of life. If there is no resurrection ~ than this preaching is useless, this faith is futile, and we are but a fool's parade.

But, if there is resurrection then the very fabric of creation is changed. If there is resurrection then everything is different than what it seems. Let resurrection not be limited by our feeble imaginations or the restrictions of rationality.

To quote C.S. Lewis:

We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.

Dear friends, to add to the list that we've been building these last weeks:

You belong to God in Christ.

You are gifted for the common good.

You are the Body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it.

You are loved in order to love until love wins.

You are who you are in the triumphant light of the resurrection.

You will be resurrected.

Thanks be to God. Amen.