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East Liberty Presbyterian Church
January 29, 2012
I Corinthians 15:12-20
“Resurrection Songs”

About twenty years after the death of Christ, the apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to help refute the arguments of those who insisted that there is no resurrection of the dead. Here we are, almost twenty centuries after the death of Christ, and the topic is still relevant. In fact, it is especially timely for us, given that much of our current beliefs about death and resurrection are more in line with Paul’s opponents than with Paul himself.

In this section of his letter, Paul sounds more like a lawyer than a pastor, which is not necessarily a bad thing. He is arguing with the philosophers and Greek thinkers who insisted that the human body is nothing more than a prison in which the soul is held captive until released at the time of death. The key idea for the Greeks was that the realm of the gods was a spiritual place that earthly flesh could never attain. Our souls migrated to that place after death once they were freed of the weightiness and messiness of our mortal bodies. Doesn’t that sound quite familiar and modern? In response to this view, Paul argued that we cannot easily walk away from a belief in the resurrection of the physical body since that act is at the heart of the Easter story and the center of our Christian faith. Paul wrote, “If Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain” (I Cor 15:14).

Now I recognize that this is a difficult topic to speak on, and not just because of the recent event of my mother’s death. How does this topic fit in with having a group of bluegrass musicians join us in worship? The truth is that, for several years now, I had wanted to invite the Allegheny Drifters to join us in worship; and when we spoke last year about coming today, I asked them to play some old-time songs related to the topics of death and heaven. Because in the old standards of “Amazing Grace,” “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?,” and “I’ll Fly Away,” there’s a core message of faith that merits a closer look by us today.

However, the fact remains that we are usually uncomfortable talking about death and what happens to us after we die. When the subject comes up, we often want the simplest, most comforting answers possible. As a humorous side note to this topic, a company that sells Internet games decided to play a prank on April Fool’s Day two years ago. So in their long disclaimer, you know, those long paragraphs we never read but always agree to, they changed the language to say this: “By placing an order via this Web site on the first day of the fourth month of the year 2010, you agree to grant us a non-transferable option to claim, for now and forever more, your immortal soul.” Anxious to make their purchase, 88% of the customers clicked the box to sell their souls. The other 12% who chose not to sell their souls were rewarded with a cash credit for their piety.¹



It's true. We can't be bothered to read the fine print on the long disclaimers and Internet contracts, so we simply scroll to the bottom and click "I Agree." Likewise amidst the swirl of emotions associated with the loss of a loved one, we don't want to struggle with reading the fine print of faith about the life to come. We want a simple answer, something that can be summarized in a sentence or two. So like the Greek philosophers of old, or the saccharin sentiments printed on memorial cards at funeral services, we condense the topic of life after death down to this formula: Our bodies are imperfect fleshly vessels containing our souls, which are freed at death and move to God's spiritual realm which we call "heaven."

The problem with this formula is that it contains no reference to Jesus Christ, whose resurrection on Easter is our primary source for what faith teaches about life after death. Whether we begin the conversation by wondering what happens after we die, or whether we start with how Jesus was raised from the dead, the two topics are intertwined and cannot be understood apart from one another. Likewise, the entire topic is shrouded in mystery, in that whatever happens to the body and soul after death is essentially unknowable. No one can say with certainty what resurrection or an after life entails. We are necessarily dealing an area of faith, not science.

Here's where Paul's words from twenty centuries ago hit us right between the eyes. He argues that it is strange for Christians to affirm that Jesus was raised from the grave, in a form that allowed Christ to eat, drink and be touched as the risen Lord, but then to deny that God will similarly raise our bodies. Here we are in church singing Easter hymns and believe that "up from the grave Christ arose", but we question the possibility of *our* own resurrection. When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he set up his argument like a row of dominoes: If the resurrection of the dead is impossible, then Christ was not raised, which means God did not raise him, which means our faith in God is misplaced, which means our sins have not been forgiven, and we of all people are most to be pitied. If the first domino falls, then believing Christ has secured our redemption also falls. And in a similar way, there's a row of dominoes for our modern arguments: If the bodily resurrection from the dead only happened to Christ, then it doesn't apply to us, which means that life after death only involves a spirit-version of ourselves, which means that this earthly life is less consequential than our heavenly life; which, to modify Paul's words, if for only the life to come we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

At this point, you may be feeling conflicted. We like our simpler, modern version of life after death: how our spirit moves out of a fleshly prison into a new freedom in Christ in heaven. And yet the scripture witness speaks of a bodily resurrection, how Jesus walked and ate with his disciples as a risen Christ, thus being the first expression of a general resurrection for all who die. I suggest that we need to set back up all the dominoes that have been knocked down and consider this important question once more with a few additional points in mind.



First, belief in the resurrection of Jesus is how we affirm the life of Jesus. Jesus did not come to earth to give us a new philosophy. Nor did he live and teach and heal others on earth as a brief sideshow before his main accomplishment of being resurrected from the dead. No, Jesus' life on earth--his sacrificial love, his commitment to justice for all, his message of redemption--is what we affirm when we profess faith in Jesus Christ, the one who was raised from the dead. That is why we stand beside the poor and oppressed, why our daily, bodily, lived-out lives are precisely where God calls us to be most faithful. When Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life," those words were meant to refer to both our present and our future realities in Christ.

Second, I can understand why we are afraid to believe in our own resurrections. We've seen what can happen to this earthly flesh. We've seen the ravages of age and disease, not to mention the horrors of war, genocide, and starvation. But don't we also profess that "With God all things are possible"? Yes, our bodies die; they are embalmed or cremated or waste away, yet is anything too wonderful for our God? A false theology about only spiritual resurrection may give us easy comfort now, but it is not what Paul would have us cling to in our times of need. Paul is adamant: Christ has been raised from the dead. His was the first fruits of a resurrection promised to us. This will involve a transformation, a movement from physical reality to spiritual reality, but if you wish to understand it, look not to Hallmark or bestselling paperbacks, but to the example of Christ the resurrected Lord.

Third and finally, it is hard to talk about these things. The promise of life after death is not meant to be understood like a road map; it is meant to be embraced as a loving promise. Later on in chapter 15, Paul concludes this section by saying, "At the end, Jesus hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power, putting all his enemies under his feet; and the last enemy to be destroyed is death." (1 Cor 15:24,25) No more death. No more loss, no more brokenness, no more tears or goodbyes. It's hard to speak about that because it is something that goes beyond mere words. But it's a bit easier to sing about it. When we sing, we're not trying to win an argument. We're simply trying to share good news or ease a troubled soul. Which is why we gather in church, to pray, to comfort one another, and mostly to sing resurrection songs. And we have so much to sing about. He who was dead is now alive. If we live, we are the Lord's, and if we die, we are the Lord's. So whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. That is something too wonderful for words. Thankfully, we can sing that song together.

AMEN

¹ "I Disclose...Nothing," Elisabeth Rosenthal, New York Times, January 22, 2012, Sunday Review, p. 7.

