

Pastor's Message – 2/20/2022  
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

You may be wondering why I'm still talking about resurrection and Easter, especially since that was our subject last week. But, I and the Worship Committee are already knee-deep in preparing for Lent, Ash Wednesday, Holy Week, Maundy Thursday, and Good Friday. We are already looking forward to Easter as should all of us.

There is an unexpected bonus in this post-Christmas season in reading/praying about/reflecting on the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians today, Paul's great "resurrection chapter," for these two Sundays, last week Sunday and today. In this chapter, the centrality and importance of the Easter event is declared, and our thoughts turn toward the purpose of keeping Lent with Ash Wednesday next week already and Easter Sunday forty days after that. Without the resurrection, there would be no faith, no church, no hope, no Living Lord, and all people would have only darkness in this life and a permanent death at its conclusion.

Our reading from 1 Corinthians today follows on the heels of last week's reading on the same subject: the resurrection of the dead. Paul is addressing a very difficult subject by using human metaphors, ideas, and words. These are matters of faith, so we have to be careful trying to impose literal interpretations when he is trying to explain the unexplainable. This may be another question for Paul from the church at Corinth: "What will our post-death/post-resurrection bodies be like?"

He answers using several analogies:

1. It will be a spiritual body not like our physical body.
2. It will be like a seed planted, the old must die before the new body is present. (Paul's biology is faulty here; but it's a good metaphor for new life at our Easter.)
3. Creation has many kinds of bodies (v. 39). So, we will be given a glorified body fitting for us at that time.

The fact is, we don't know anything definitive about life after death. Yes, I'm sure you have heard about the near death experiences of some people. But these anecdotes do not translate into anything empirically scientific.

We *do know* what our faith teaches us, and the central text on this is chapter 15 of the Apostle Paul's first letter to the Christians at the Greek city of Corinth. There, the Bible teaches us that clearly: *when we die, our physical bodily existence is over. Done. Finished. Gone and never coming back.* Our *existence* is not over, but whatever the form of this existence, it has nothing to do with the way we look now. Our height, weight, eye color, hair, bone structure, skin color — all of that and more is gone forever. "Flesh and blood," he writes, "cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable."

The reality of death is central to our Christian faith, but not so much to our popular culture. In fact, what we see in many movies is the idea that dead people continue to hang around with living people — as ghosts. In the classic romantic film *Ghost*, a young man played by Patrick Swayze — who himself died of cancer in 2009 — is killed by a mugger, and then his ghost stays close to his girlfriend to protect her from danger. There are movies and even a television program about zombies: the living dead. I have seen a new program advertised: called “Ghosts” and a haunted house. There have been plenty of Hallmark movies about people who remain alive after death and still walk the earth in some shadowy form. There have been lots of other movies, like “Heaven Can Wait” and “Heaven is For Real.” We don’t really know what the afterlife will be like – if there even is an after-life – but we sure speculate about it. And so, we don’t know what kind of body the resurrected will have.

There were Jews at the time of Jesus, such as the Sadducees, who completely denied any resurrection. The rabbis speculated at length on the nature of the resurrection body. And some Jews in the time of the New Testament were greatly influenced by Greek thoughts of immortality, even as present-day Western thinking is similarly influenced. Now, if the Corinthians (remember, Corinth was a city in Greece) were completely Greek in their thinking, it is difficult to understand their asking this kind of question. They might have asked, "How are dead bodies raised?" or even, "Why does the immortal soul even need a perishable body?" The Greeks thought of the soul as being imprisoned in the body and released at death. They would not be likely to ask, "With what kind of body?" But this is peculiarly part of Paul's argument. The argument that follows is what the Jews would call "haggadah," or speculation.

I have a question for you: assuming you are going to heaven, what age will you be in heaven? This question has been asked by many people. Will kids be kids in heaven? Will elderly people be elderly? Or is there one “ideal” age that everyone will be in heaven? The Bible does not give a specific answer to this question, so we can only speculate. Here are a few possibilities:

a. the age we were when we left earth?

Some have argued that we will enter heaven at the age we reached when we died here on earth. Some will be children, some will be middle-aged, and some will be elderly. There is no Scripture to either support or discount this idea.

b. 33 years old?

Others believe that we will all be about 33 years old, because that’s how old Jesus’ body on earth was when He was crucified. Here’s the Bible passage where that idea comes from: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when

Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. (1 John 3:2)

The theory here is that Jesus's earthly body reached the age of about thirty-three when He was crucified, rose back to life, and ascended into heaven. Since Jesus's body was 33 years old when He went back into heaven, they say, our bodies will also be 33 years old, because we will be like Jesus. 33 years old is also thought to be the optimal age for our bodies here on earth, and so, some people believe that we will all be about 33 years old in heaven.

It is important to point out that the Biblical argument for this is very thin at best. Could our heavenly bodies all look like they are 33 years old? Sure. But this would be a foolish thing to assume from the scarce evidence we have.

Remember the Pharisees' question to Jesus about the woman who was widowed seven times? They asked Jesus: "Now then, at the resurrection, whose wife will she be of the seven since all of them were married to her?" (Matthew 22:28) Many people say that the first thing they want to do when they arrive in heaven is see all their friends and loved ones who have passed on before them. I wonder if that should be our primary focus? Are those the kind of questions we should be asking? We will be far more occupied with worshiping God and enjoying the wonders of heaven. I believe reunions with loved ones are more likely to be filled with recounting the grace and glory of God in our lives, His wondrous love, and His mighty works. We will rejoice all the more because we can praise and worship the Lord in the company of other believers, especially those we loved on earth.

Our new life in heaven, I believe, will be more like the Facebook post I saw recently about the Webb Telescope. People were excited about the launch of the Hubble Telescope, but, even though that extended the range of what we could see, there is still more that we can't see. The Webb Telescope will extend our range even more, but there is still more to see. Our new life in heaven will finally reveal to us the full extent of the glory and majesty of God and overwhelm everything that came before us in life on earth and finally give us all the answers beyond our understanding in this life.

It's like the difference between "Answer Churches" and "Journey Churches." "Answer Churches" pass out the answers from the pulpit or in Sunday school each Sunday morning to eager folks in the pews, Bibles open, with pads and pens promptly scribbling all the wisdom down. Then there are the "Journey Churches" where the pastor and congregation challenge themselves to set out on, or continue on, the life of faith without knowing just how things will come out -- save that God will be with them. The congregation and pastor are not given any guarantee their faith will bring them health, success, long life, or any of their dearest desires. Faith is no protection against the hurts, tragedies, and pains of life, but it does promise

us something better, something that the folks who long for clear and inarguable answers do not understand -- God will be with us to help us make it through and help us grow in strength in the process. Perhaps this is something Paul had in mind when he wrote that phrase in the eighth chapter of Romans, "Nothing shall separate us from the love of Christ." This is all we really need.

The kingdom of God is a reality that is experienced in this life and comes to us in its fullness at death. We do have a strong taste of this realm through so many of our experiences of life. I have marveled at the brightness of the planet Venus in the southeastern sky early in the morning this last week or so. The Greeks named those experiences Goodness, Beauty, and Truth, even though they were not thinking in biblical terms at this point. In the Bible, the kingdom is said to come to us when we pause to wonder at creation or nature.

We sense the kingdom when we care for the poor and the disadvantaged. We are close to the kingdom when we hold out for righteousness and justice even if it costs us much. We have already stepped into the kingdom when we have walked across the artificial boundaries of race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation. The kingdom is this all-encompassing coming together that God desires for creation and humanity, a togetherness that is completely fulfilled on the other side of death.

The central point of our Bible reading for today is: "Physical bodies cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor can dying bodies inherit what will last forever." Paul has been writing about the necessity of the resurrection of the dead. So, does it even make sense to ask, "How will the dead be raised? What kind of bodies will they have?" Ultimately, heaven "age" is irrelevant. What kind of bodies we will have is irrelevant. If we will know and recognize our families and loved ones in the next life is irrelevant.

When we are raised in glory, we will be given a body suitable for the resurrected life. Whether this will entail another kind of anatomy, or simply an improved one -- with special eyes, better hearing, upgraded hearts, and the like -- is anyone's guess. Paul doesn't speculate on the particulars. In the life to come, we will be able to listen to God more closely, know God more deeply, love God more fully, and serve God most faithfully. In effect, what Paul is announcing throughout this passage is that the resurrection completes us. Ultimately, we become who we were truly meant to be all along.

When the present is past and the future is now, God will be there to grant us life again and to lead us forth into a glorious new future. When the long journey is over and we've reached our intended destination, we will find that our end is also our beginning -- together at last with God.