

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 22, 2018

Heavenly People

1 Corinthians 15:35-49

In the opening section of this morning's text, it sounds like Paul may be giving a tip of the hat to Earth Day. After setting up an imaginary debate with someone who's asking about the form of a resurrected body, Paul starts talking about seeds and animals. He references wheat, birds, and fish. He even points us to the skies, and urges us to gaze for a moment at the sun, moon, and stars. Then he brings us back down to earth and the topic of human bodies.

While Paul would probably support many of the ideals and aims of Earth Day, his primary point isn't about the dangers of plastic pollution. In this particular situation, he's actually stressing that the whole universe, both the celestial part and the terrestrial part, is composed of different kinds of bodies. And each body has its own particular glory, given to it by God. So knowing that God is the one who determines each kind of body should keep us humble about speculating on the nature of the resurrection body. In one respect, we simply won't know until we know. Only when Christ comes in saving judgment, and the final harvest happens, will we grasp the full scope of who God intends us to be.

This is the stage of his argument where Paul shows the congregation a PowerPoint slide with a chart contrasting our present bodies with our kingdom bodies. Present body, perishable; Kingdom body, imperishable. Present body, dishonorable; Kingdom body, glorious. Present body, weak; Kingdom body, powerful. Present body, natural; Kingdom body, spiritual. In fact, says Paul, that may be the best way to describe the bodies that God's people will have when they inhabit the new creation that God is bringing about in Christ. It will be a "spiritual body."

At first, a "spiritual body" sounds like an oxymoron. We often associate "spirit" or "spiritual" with things that are invisible, intangible, immaterial. But Paul insists that "spiritual" doesn't mean disembodied. Whether in this present life or in the life of the world to come, there's always a body involved. The issue is, what kind of body? In the world remade by God through Christ, a world filled with and driven by the Spirit, only a Spirit-filled, Spirit-driven body will do. As Paul says at the beginning of the section immediately following today's text, "I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (v. 50).

This doesn't mean there's no connection or similarity between our mortal bodies and our resurrected bodies. Go back to Paul's analogy of the seed earlier in our text. He's saying that what you plant is what you get, and that what you plant is not what you get. If you plant a tomato seed, you'll get a tomato. But at the same time, what you plant is only a seed, and what you harvest is really quite different from the seed, though it's still a tomato. So it is with the resurrection body, says Paul. There's continuity and discontinuity. There's similarity and difference. Big difference. Paul doesn't say, "Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be improved." He doesn't say that "the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and God will blow the dust off of us and smooth off our rough edges." No, Paul says that "we will be changed" (vv. 51-52).

Chris Spielman was a successful football player in both college and the NFL. His wife Stefanie waged a lengthy battle with cancer before she died. As Chris was trying to prepare their young children for their mother's inevitable death, he brought together both emotion and strong religious belief. He writes:

I put an arm around each one of them and said, "Mace, Aud, Mommy isn't going to get any better."

They started crying. They weren't inconsolable, but the news profoundly affected them. I think, in their hearts, they knew this was coming.

Then I said, "But there is one way she can get better. When she gets to heaven, she's going to get a whole new body. She's going to get to do the things that she loves to do. You know, Mom loves to run. She loves to dance. She loves to play. She'll get to do those things she loves to do, and she won't ever have to worry about being sick again. That's something we should be very, very happy about."

Audrey asked, "Is her hair going to grow back?"

Chris told Audrey, "Yeah," and then added, "it's going to be more beautiful than you ever remember it!"¹

Here was a parent consoling a child with the good news of the resurrection of the body, a body that will be both similar to and very different from the body of this present life. A spiritual body. A body like the body of Jesus.

When Christians reflect on the life of heaven, we don't look to our own instincts or ideas about what lies beyond this present world. We don't flip through the channels to see who's saying what about near-death experiences, out-of-body experiences, or what a psychic medium told them. We don't focus on formulating abstract theories or laying out general principles about the nature of the kingdom to come. Instead, we as Christians focus on what God has already done for the resurrected Son. We look to the body of the raised Jesus. That's where we get our clues about what lies ahead for God's people.

But that's exactly where Paul was running into problems with some of the people in the church at Corinth. For reasons that we can't completely nail down, some in the Corinthian congregation were saying that there is no resurrection of the dead. Maybe they thought that because they were already so rich in spiritual gifts, which even Paul himself acknowledges, they were therefore already living in a state of resurrection. In other words, spiritually speaking, they had already arrived. Or maybe they thought of themselves as so spiritually refined that the very notion of the rising of the body, corpses being given life, was a crass and embarrassing concept. Or maybe they thought of salvation more as a matter of escape from the physical world, including the body, than as a matter of salvation of the body.

Whatever the specifics behind their objection to the resurrection of the dead, Paul responds to these Corinthians by reminding them that the resurrection of Jesus can't be separated from the resurrection of those who believe in Jesus. The latter follows from the former. The raising of Jesus wasn't a one-of-a-kind miracle that God performed in order to impress the world or to show that Jesus was special. The raising of Jesus was, as Paul describes it, the beginning of a much greater harvest (15:23). It meant that God's judgment of the world, God's intervention to set things right, is underway.

To reinforce this linkage between Christ's resurrection and the resurrection of those who belong to him, Paul pulls out another chart. This one compares Adam and Christ. Paul says think back to when we first started this church. Remember those home Bible studies when we explored Genesis 1-3. Recall how Adam's sin brought death on all humanity. But then remember what we taught you about the gospel, how Jesus' resurrection transformed our

ultimate destiny from death to life. Let's build on that, says Paul, by thinking about Adam's own body. Adam, the initiator of decay and death, had a body that was mortal and bound to the earth. But think of Christ as a new Adam, as the one who initiates a new order of humanity. Christ's risen body is Spirit-driven and immortal. In short, Adam came from the earth, whereas Christ came from heaven.

So if you want to know what God's design and purpose is for you, don't look to Adam, who was of the earth. Look to Christ, who was, and is, of heaven. By God's grace, grace that calls forth and creates your faith, you have been brought into fellowship, a close connection and bond, with Christ. Part of what this means is that God's purpose is to transform you into the likeness, the image, of Christ. And that includes your body. Paul told the Philippians essentially the same thing when he wrote, "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (3:21).

The transformation of our bodies is a future event associated with the coming of Christ, when death, our greatest enemy, is finally and fully overcome. But being heavenly people isn't something confined to the future. While we wait for God's final triumph, the setting right of all things in Jesus Christ, God is already remaking us into people who live out a heavenly kind of existence. True, Paul spends a lot of time reteaching the Corinthians about some deep and heady stuff, especially the resurrection of the dead. But the main reason he brings their thinking about heaven into shape is because he wants heavenly behavior to follow from it.

Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg once said, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that no one would question it except for two things: First, it is a very unusual event. And second, if you believe it happened, you have to change the way you live." That last piece may be the hardest part of all. Not just believing in and preaching the resurrection, but practicing the resurrection, individually and together. The power for that kind of change, and that kind of living, comes in the form of the Holy Spirit. When Christ comes again, our bodies themselves will be completely animated by the Spirit. But even now, in the midst of our sin and brokenness, the Spirit works to form a heavenly mindset inwardly and to generate heavenly behavior outwardly.

Return with me to the story of Stefanie Spielman, whom I'm told you about earlier. In the midst of her battle with cancer, what impressed others most was the way that Stefanie lived her life. At one stage, her disease made it hard for Stefanie to keep her balance, so she got a three-wheel bicycle. One day a neighbor saw Stefanie riding through the neighborhood along with her sister, Sue. The neighbor wrote a letter to Sue that included these words:

Emotion flooded as I watched the two of you. . . . I felt sad, while the picture was so beautiful to me. . . . [We] are so grateful to God to know you and Stef, your husbands and your family. For us you live as people from another planet, citizens of "no ordinary country," a glorious thing to see.²

God has called us to be people who give the world a preliminary picture of another world, the heavenly realm, animated by the power of the Spirit and filled with the glory of God. This is the kingdom we experience, anticipate, and embody, because Christ has been raised from the dead.

¹ From Scot McKnight, *The Heaven Promise: Engaging the Bible's Truth About Life to Come* (New York: WaterBrook, 2015) 35.

² Quoted in McKnight, *The Heaven Promise*, 40.