

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
April 11, 2021

The Difference Easter Makes

1 Corinthians 15:29-34

"Now if there is no resurrection...." Now hold on a minute, didn't we settle that last Sunday? We spent over an hour together singing, praying, giving, preaching, sharing the bread and the cup, proclaiming and affirming that there is a resurrection. Christ is risen! That's what Easter was all about. So what do you mean Paul, "If there is no resurrection..."?

Apparently, some folks in the church at Corinth weren't as settled on this matter, at least not as much as we declare that we are. For reasons that we can't completely nail down, some of the brothers and sisters in Corinth 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 redemption more as a matter of escape from the physical world, including the body, than as a matter of redemption 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's a preview of the ultimate reality of God's reign. Jesus' resurrection means that God's judgment of the world, God's intervention to set things right, is underway. God is bringing his purpose for humankind to completion. Having conquered death, God is drawing all reality, the whole cosmos, to a different destiny, namely, life.

If that's not true, if that's not what has happened, and is happening, then what was last Sunday all about? What's this Sunday all about? Why bother with church? If the dead are not raised, why come together to worship? If the dead are not raised, why invest our time and talent and treasure in the ministry of this congregation? If the dead are not raised, why reach out to care for the sick? Why partner with other congregations in the work of NETS? Why tend to the buildings and grounds? Why make our gifts to the Annie Armstrong Offering? Why prepare sermons and songs? Why speak out for racial justice? Why address the needs of the poor or give our attention to the forgotten? If the dead are not raised, why be who we are and do what we do?

Some might say we should do these things because it's the right thing to do. Or because it contributes to the community and makes other people's lives better. Or because it promotes the common good and helps create a more just society. Or because it strengthens the church's reputation and attracts individuals to join us. All of these may be good and legitimate reasons for devoting ourselves to the worship, work, and witness of

God's people. But they don't necessarily require the raising of dead bodies. They don't anchor us in Easter. They don't turn the spotlight on our need for transformation.

One commentator has said of today's text: "To proclaim the resurrection of Christ is to enter a world made new by God and therefore to lead a transformed life as well, even in the present age."¹ How great is the transformation we need? How great is the transformation God has accomplished in Christ? It's the difference between being dead and being alive. That's the scale of our problem and the scope of our redemption. As Paul says in Ephesians, "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved" (2:4-5). And this salvation, which culminates in the transformation of our mortal bodies, fully conformed to Christ at his coming, works its way back into the present and shows up in the way that you and I live our lives now.

In a class many years ago, the renowned psychiatrist Robert Coles said, "A highly regarded psychiatrist recently told me in despair: 'I have been doing therapy with a man for 15 years. He is as angry, as self-centered, and as mean as he was the first day he walked into my office. The only difference is that now he knows why he is so angry and mean.'" The psychiatrist had provided his client with insight about how his childhood emotional wounding had affected his adult behavior, but the man still hadn't changed. So Coles asked, "Could we conclude that what this man needed wasn't just information but transformation? But is transformation possible for human beings?"²

Because of Easter, the answer is yes, we can be changed. Attitudes can be overhauled. Actions can be altered. Habits can be broken. Patterns of behavior can be reshaped. Relationships can be restored. Wrongs can be righted. Now this doesn't mean we will be completely transformed this side of the final resurrection. Only at Christ's coming will those who belong to him be fully remade into his likeness. But that's no excuse for taking sin lightly or ignoring attitudes and actions that weaken the meaningfulness and integrity of our life together in the church and in the wider world. Remember that because Christ is risen, we already have access to the life-giving power of God that can reform us and reshape our behavior, within and beyond the congregation.

As we make further progress through and eventually out of the coronavirus pandemic, we start thinking even more about what life will be like on the other side of this experience. What lessons will we learn? Will it change us for the better? One psychologist, who's skeptical about the human ability to change, has written about how our behavior is usually shaped by our immediate context. He says:

This is why we may predict that however grave its social impact, the coronavirus pandemic will eventually become a memory. Most of the lessons of coronavirus—the clarified priorities; the acute awareness of life's fragility and worth; the new appreciation of simple social pleasures; those grand promises we make to ourselves when our taken-for-granted assumptions are temporarily violated—will fade with time, becoming mere tales of contexts past. And we will go back to being short-sighted, self-focused, conflicted, and as mired in trivial preoccupations as ever. Only by becoming aware of this default mode in our system do we gain the possibility of subverting it.³

Short-sighted, self-focused, conflicted, and mired in trivial preoccupations. Paul certainly had to deal with plenty of these behavior patterns in the church at Corinth. His aim in today's text isn't simply to help the Corinthian believers get their theology of the resurrection straight, but most of all to get their behavior straight. Paul knows that there's a hidden connection between the Corinthians' denial of resurrection and their divisive, self-satisfying conduct. "If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die'"

(v. 32b). Rather than using their mortality as an opportunity to repent and be made new, some in the congregation had decided to party like there's no tomorrow. Without a vital hope that in the end, God would raise them up just as he had raised Christ up, some of the Corinthians had taken life and collapsed it into the here and now, seeking short-term gratification rather than long-term glorification.

Remember that being in the body of Christ doesn't immunize us against the danger of living only for the present. True, there's something to be said for being in the moment, devoted to a life of holiness in the here and now. In fact, sometimes our awareness of limitation and death, our sense of our own vulnerability, can sharpen our spiritual perception and intensify our commitment to make the most of the opportunities right in front of us. There's nothing wrong with a little "carpe diem." Hopefully, one of the things we've learned during COVID-19 is not to miss out on the people, places, and relationships that are right around us every day.

But at the same time, our sense of mortality can drive us into treating life as a an all-too-brief allotment of time, where the primary goal is to grab what you can while you can, pile up experiences, squeeze in as much activity, and leave behind as much productivity, as possible. If you only live once, then go for it. But I suppose a lot depends on what you're going for.

When an interviewer asked the American singer Kesha about the best response to uncertainty, she said: "You may or may not only live once, who knows if the world is going to explode in two days. Why would we sit around ... and be mean to each other? Why don't you just love each other, love yourself, live in the moment, and ... party? That's kind of my message."⁴ That advice probably wouldn't have served Paul's purposes in the church at Corinth very well. There, the brothers and sisters in Christ, while they could certainly do a better job of loving each other, needed more than an exhortation to party harder. In fact, from a couple of other references in the letter, we already know that they had lots of issues with eating and drinking. Turns out that in this case, what they needed most was to be served a generous portion of eschatology. In other words, to remember that when the risen one returns, his people will be raised too. So live accordingly, like risen people, in the here and now.

Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg said, "The evidence for Jesus' resurrection is so strong that nobody 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."⁵ An unusual event that produces unusual lives. Lives where we embrace the reality of death. Lives where we suffer through selfless service of others. Lives where we avoid self-indulgence. Lives where we live in the moment, but for more than just the moment.

Just prior to today's text, Paul tells the Corinthians, "If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (15:19). In other words, if Christ has not been raised, and therefore you are not raised, now and in the future, then death has the final word. Life, suffering, faithfulness, service to Christ and his church—it's all pointless, meaningless. If Christ has not been raised, there's no use for us being here together today. We're just deceiving ourselves. This is just one big Sunday morning mirage. "But Christ has been raised from the dead..." (15:20). Sin is conquered. Death is defeated. God will be all in all (15:28). Easter makes all the difference. The difference in who you are, what you will be, and how you live now.

¹ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) n.p.

² Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Stay Salt: The World Has Changed: Our Message Has Not* (Charlotte: The Good Book Company, 2020) 137-138.

³ Noam Shpancer, "Lessons from the Pandemic: What Coronavirus Reveals About Us." *Psychology Today* (March 23, 2020).

⁴ Quoted in Alicia Cohn, "Why YOLO Is the New WWJD." Christianity Today website. January 4, 2013. <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/january-web-only/why-yolo-is-new-wwjd.html> (April 7, 2021).

⁵ Pannenberg, in a conversation with *Prism* magazine.