

"Jesus's Resurrection and Ours!"

1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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Our text for this morning provides the basis for what will be one of the most provocative and controversial sermons you've probably heard in some time. I'm going to speak to you about "death," more appropriately "HOPE" in the FACE of death, and what the New Testament has to say about it will challenge everything you thought you knew about the subject. As we have seen in previous sermons on First Corinthians, St. Paul addresses here the dissension and division within a church he had personally founded and had great love for. He responds to the conflict by emphasizing the role of spiritual gifts and ESPECIALLY Christian love to help bring about the healing and unity it so desperately needed. He now concludes his letter by stressing the significance of Christ's resurrection. Paul speaks to this issue because he has learned that there are those in the church who refuse to believe in the "resurrection of the body" as taught by the disciples and proclaimed by the early church. Instead, they ascribe to the Greek notion of the "immortality of the soul"- a completely DIFFERENT understanding of what takes place at death. This text is PARTICULARLY significant in that this is the earliest and most important testimony to the resurrection of Jesus- one that predates even what the GOSPELS say about it.

For the Apostle Paul, the Christian faith STANDS OR FALLS with the resurrection of Jesus Christ. He says that if God had not raised his Son, then we preach an illusion and our faith is in vain. If Christ be not risen, there would be no gospel or "good news" to proclaim, no Easter in our lives, no meaning in our history, no loving purpose being accomplished or divine plan worked out. With the resurrection lies the answer to the GREATEST of all questions: CAN GOD BE TRUSTED? In other words, will God be faithful in his promises to us? If Jesus is nothing more than a dead rabbi, then the answer is "no" and, as he tells the Corinthians, we are still dead in our sins and of all persons most to be pitied for having banked EVERYTHING on the basis of a lie or myth. This is why in the most forceful of terms Paul tells them that Jesus was not ONLY raised from the dead but so we might know this with ABSOLUTE ASSURANCE, that in accordance with the scriptures, he appeared first of all to Cephas (also known as Peter), then to the twelve, then to five hundred at one time, then to James the brother of our Lord, and then the rest of the Apostles. Finally and most UNEXPECTEDLY, he appeared to Paul himself while on the road to Damascus where he was heading to persecute the Christians there. He doesn't tell them HOW Jesus was raised- only that it was A FACT BEYOND DISPUTE.

The subject of death certainly remains a great mystery to us, and because we understand it so little or because we feel awkward discussing it, we cloak our feelings about death in these sweet, sentimental notions of what we think death is or what we would like it to be. I often cringe at such talk because I know that scripture DISPELS some of that mystery and that it paints a much DIFFERENT portrait for us than "the great beyond" where our loved ones are and where "the man upstairs" looks down upon us. Though there are times when death finally brings relief from suffering, NOWHERE does the Bible ever regard death as a "friend" or a "rest stop" for the soul but

regards it as something entirely different.

If we were to ask a regular Christian what he or she thinks the New Testament teaches regarding our fate after death, almost universally the answer would be "the immortality of the soul." This is the idea that at death the soul becomes separated from the body where it goes to God to live forever and ever, the soul being our mind, our emotions and our personality. Because most of present-day culture here in the US and in Western Europe is the product of what we call Western Civilization- a culture which has its roots in Greek philosophy, this is probably the idea of death MOST of us have had since we were a child- that when we die our spirit floats up out of our body and goes to heaven to be with mom and dad, grandma and grandpa, and of course to be reunited with our Divine Source- God,. Well, this is one of the greatest misunderstandings of Christianity- a GREEK idea of death more derived from the PHILOSOPHER PLATO than from the BIBLE.

In a very famous essay, the New Testament theologian Oscar Cullmann contrasted two very famous deaths in order to help us understand what the Bible teaches or DOESN'T teach us regarding death- he looks at the death of SOCRATES and the death of JESUS. In Plato's *Phaedo*, we have the account of Socrates' noble suicide. Prior to drinking the hemlock which will kill him, he addresses his disciples about the meaning of death. He says our body is an outer garment which prevents our soul from moving freely about. For the Greeks, the soul is the seat of our thoughts, our personality, our emotion and will- the soul is eternal and cannot die. However, it is imprisoned in our bodies which are finite, limited, subject to the ravages of age and illness and temptation. To Socrates, if only the soul could be released from its bodily imprisonment, it would then be freed to return to its eternal home. This is what he says happens at death- the body, which is corruptible, dies and the soul is liberated from the body to return to God. According to Greek thought, you can kill the body but you cannot kill the soul.

When Socrates kills himself by drinking the poison, he goes to his death in complete peace in the knowledge that his soul will return to its place of origin- he will be freed from the ravages of age and sickness and suffering. His is what might be called "a BEAUTIFUL death." There is nothing of death's TERROR portrayed here. Rather, death becomes the SOUL'S GREAT FRIEND and thus, to the Greek, it is never to be FEARED but ANTICIPATED and even WELCOMED.

But is this the picture that SCRIPTURE gives us of death? Let's now look at how JESUS died. In Gethsemane, Jesus knows that death stands before him, just as Socrates expected death to come. It says that Jesus began to "tremble and be distressed." "My soul is troubled, even to death," he says to his disciples. Jesus is afraid, not of his arrest or of his detractors, but of DEATH ITSELF- Jesus is AFRAID to die. Death is not welcomed; it is not a friend. Rather, death is the great enemy and it is to be dreaded! In Luke he says to his disciples, "I have a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how DISTRESSED (or afraid) I am until it is accomplished." With death staring him in the face, he cries out, "Father, if it be possible, please let this cup pass." Jesus knows that to die means to be utterly forsaken, therefore he wants to remain as close to his Heavenly Father as he can. However, in the face of death, EVEN HIS OWN GOD must abandon him and he ends up crying from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus understands that to be in the hands of death is to experience suffering and separation from God. It is to find oneself in the hands of God's great enemy.

Can there be a GREATER CONTRAST than that between the deaths of Socrates and Jesus? Socrates is portrayed as serene before his disciples; Jesus trembles just prior to his arrest. With sublime calm, Socrates drinks the hemlock; Jesus, on the other hand, cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" To Jesus, death is not a friend at all but an enemy, the thing to fear above all else. To Jesus, the soul is not liberated from its imprisonment in the body to return to God but rather becomes SEPARATED from God and falls into the hands of the Great Destroyer who destroys both body and soul. In Matthew, Jesus tells his followers, "Do not fear them that can kill the body, but cannot kill the soul. Rather, fear him who can slay both soul AND body in hell." God creates life, both body and soul, while death destroys life, both body and soul.

As a Jew and the product of HEBREW culture, Jesus was not raised with the Greek notion of the "immortality of the soul." He did not believe like Plato that at death, the soul was liberated from the body to be reunited with God. To the Greeks, death was not regarded as real for the soul did not actually die- it continued to live on. Jesus, on the other hand, took death SERIOUSLY. He didn't believe in the "great beyond," that loved ones like mom and dad, grandpa Joe and Aunt Helen were "up there looking down on him." He regarded it for what it ACTUALLY WAS- SEPARATION AND DECAY. For Jesus, there was NOTHING beautiful or peaceful about death.

Now I know what I have just said must be disturbing. To view death as a friend as Socrates and his belief in the "immortality of the soul" did seem far more preferable than the picture of death JESUS gives us, death as the "ENEMY OF GOD," death as the "GREAT DESTROYER," that which is to be FEARED ABOVE ALL ELSE. Wouldn't we much rather go through life thinking that the end will be benign and friendly and NOT filled with separation and terrors and destruction. And where then becomes our hope? If Jesus could find no peace on the night he was arrested, what assurance can WE find to allay OUR fears and give US confidence in the hour of our OWN death? How did the disciples and the Apostle Paul and the martyrs of the early church, how have Christians throughout the ages right up to the present found courage and faith and hope in the face of "the last enemy," "the Great Destroyer?" How was it that Paul was able to declare to the church in Corinth, "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O grave, where is thy sting?"

The answer lies in that Jesus defeated death by his own SUBMISSION to it, by his DEATH ON THE CROSS. He couldn't obtain this victory by simply living on as an immortal soul, thus fundamentally NOT dying. He could only conquer death by ACTUALLY DYING, by entering into the same arena as death itself and experiencing all its pain and separation from God. Jesus dealt with our sins by absorbing them into his body, by assuming our punishment and dying our death on that cross. He bore the penalty we deserved for sin in our lives and as a result, God now regards us as sinless, blameless before him. In this way, Jesus broke the power of sin over our lives, which is also the power of death, so that it no longer had any claims over us. By his resurrection from the dead on Easter morning, it became God's public declaration to those who believed that both SIN AND DEATH had been destroyed, that it was no longer to be feared, that God's enemy, the Great Destroyer had been defeated ONCE AND FOR ALL! Hence, we are assured that in a figurative sense, he who holds our hand on THIS side of death will ALSO be holding it on the OTHER side of that mysterious veil so that we find that EVEN IN DEATH, we are never separated from Christ's presence or God's love. He has borne our punishment and died our death and consequently, we are now FREE from its terrifying grasp. As it says in II Timothy, "Christ has conquered death and has

already brought life and incorruptibility to light."

Well, if Jesus did not believe in the "immortality of the soul," how exactly DID Jesus regard the state of persons after death? In the Old Testament, the Jew believed that at death we became a kind of disembodied spirit that inhabited a shadowy underworld realm called Sheol. When the later prophets came along, they began preaching a physical resurrection that would occur at the Last Day, the Day of Judgment. Jesus affirmed this later view, the "resurrection of the body," something entirely different from the Greek understanding of death.

The Jews did not divide man up into different parts such as body, soul, and spirit as the Greeks did. It says in Genesis, "And God breathed into man and he became a 'living soul'." Our WHOLE BEING is a "living soul"; it is a complete entity in which the body and soul could not be separated. The inner man without the outer had no full existence- it required a body. Where the Greek understanding of death was that the soul broke out of the prison of the body to return to God where it would remain forever free, for the Jew, death was not a release but a destruction of the whole man, both body and soul. Both the inner and outer man died.

During death, the body decayed while the soul experienced a kind of sleep awaiting the Last Day, the Day of Judgment. On that day, the scriptures say that those who are in Christ will be raised up and become a NEW creation, receiving glorified bodies with transformed souls, and NOT ONLY HUMANITY will become new but ALL CREATION as well. For those who are in Jesus Christ, EVERYTHING will become new- there will be a NEW heaven and a NEW earth, in which there will be no more sin and death and corruption. We will return to Eden and that will become our NEW home where we will live with Christ forever and ever. As it says in II Peter, "We wait for a new heaven and a new earth." When Jesus was raised from the dead and given a new, glorified body, he became the prototype that each of us who are in Christ shall become. This is what is meant when the Bible refers to Jesus as the "first-born from the dead."

Because of Easter, death has lost its horror, its "sting" for those who are in Christ. Though it remains as the last enemy, death no longer has any final significance; though we die, new life in a new creation in glorified bodies awaits us. As members of Christ's community, we are now in possession of the Holy Spirit which is the power of life, the power of resurrection. To say that Jesus broke the power of death over us is not to say that we WON'T die for while we are in this world, our body remains mortal and is still subject to sickness and the aging process. However, it DOES mean that even though we DO die, we shall NOT forever remain in the grave. By his resurrection from the dead, he assures us that his fate will also become OUR fate, HIS form as a glorified new being will one day become OURS. As Paul tells the church at Philippi, "We wait for the Lord Jesus Christ, who will conform our lowly body to the body of his own glory." To the Romans, he writes, "If the Spirit dwells in you, then will he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead call to life your mortal bodies also through the Spirit dwelling in you." His resurrection is our GUARANTEE of this! We have the CERTAINTY of victory. THIS becomes the Christian's hope. Thus, Christ's resurrection is both a PLEDGE and a BEGINNING- because HE was raised, we are now assured that in the Last Day WE TOO will be raised.

This past week, I read an interview in *The New York Times* with Daniel Evans, the husband of

Rachel Held Evans who was one of the most important Christian writers of the past ten or fifteen years and who unexpectedly passed away two years ago at the young age of 37. He and a friend-- Jeff Chu—are currently in the process of collecting and publishing her last writings- an unfinished manuscript they call “Wholehearted Faith.” The *Times* interviewer probed them as to her understanding of death and, in particular, the meaning of one of the lines found in her writings, “With God, death is never the end of the story.” Responded Mr. Chu:

*I don't understand it. Do any of us REALLY understand it? I think anyone who claims certainty on what happens after we die is to some degree PRETENDING, because we CAN'T know, but we CAN HAVE HOPE. We can HOPE in resurrection, we can HOPE in some form of reunion with those we love. We can HOPE that memories live on. We can HOPE in some semblance of an afterlife. But I'm not going to pretend to tell you that my imagined vision of what that might be is any more real or accurate than yours or that of someone halfway around the world from a completely different belief system. That would just be absurd.*

Reading his words I found Mr. Chu's reticence to be spot on. You see, DESPITE what the Bible seems to suggest on the subject, no one ever REALLY understands what happens after we die. Instead, it exhorts us all to HOPE, to have complete faith, not in what happens AFTER we die- whether our souls are freed from its imprisonment in the body as the GREEKS believed, or we descend into the dust until that day Christ returns and our bodies and souls are resurrected to live with him forevermore as the HEBREWS affirmed. Neither do we have any real answers as to WHERE this ultimate abode we call heaven is or WHAT IT WILL BE LIKE once we get there- it all still such a GREAT MYSTERY! PERSONALLY, I don't like to concern myself with such questions? Instead, more important than what transpires AFTER WE DIE, we are exhorted to comfort ourselves with a promise made by CHRIST HIMSELF- the one that says he is ALWAYS with us and he will NEVER leave or forsake us and THAT NOT EVEN DEATH will be able to effectuate that. At present, he holds YOUR hand and he holds MINE, assuring us that he will NEVER let go of it, EVER, either on THIS side of that mysterious veil we call death OR on the other. THAT is the hope we are to comfort ourselves with as with each new day, we continue to approach the END of our lives. Only when we are seized by a TOTAL CONVICTION of this one truth and the hope it affords will the Church and, by extension OURSELVES, rediscover the revolutionary spirit and power the Apostles maintained in their OWN lives! Let us pray...

*Eternal Father, strong to save, help us to cling to the belief that Jesus Christ, your Son, has truly triumphed over death--ALL forms of death--and that it no longer has any terror for us. Help us to grasp the promise and to never let go of it that the day will come when we will no longer know sickness or pain; no longer experience fear, depression or guilt; a day when ALL things shall be made new. In his name we pray. Amen.*