

Sermon 4/1/18 God's Will for the New Creation I Corinthians 15

Dear Worshipers at the Empty Tomb of our Lord:

Christ is risen! (He is risen indeed! Alleluia!)

Today, as we celebrate the physical resurrection of the corpse of Jesus, the apostle Paul points us to the End of the resurrection story, to the fulfillment of God's ultimate will and purpose for his creation:

"In Christ all will be made alive, but each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the End will come..."

So along with our traditional Easter greeting, we add another acclamation of the Church: I say, "Christ has died; Christ is risen;" and I say "Christ will come again!"

That's how the resurrection story ends; that's our future; that's what's in store for all who belong to Jesus.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again!

But we are not there yet!

Oh, Jesus has already won the victory; the sting of sin and the power of the law have been removed.

- The grave no longer holds terror for those who are baptized into the death of Jesus
- In faith we have been united to the physical resurrection of Jesus

And yet, the final, ultimate victory has not happened...at least not fully.

- People who belong to Jesus still struggle with sin
- People who belong to Jesus still get sick
- People who belong to Jesus still die

And if there is one thing Paul wants to make perfectly clear to the Church, it's this: as long as even a single human body is still in a grave, Jesus isn't finished yet.

Only when every gravestone is obsolete and every Christian corpse stands redeemed and restored, joined again with a redeemed and restored soul – body and soul together, the way God intended it to be ---only then will we see God’s ultimate will for his creation.

Only then will the resurrection story of Jesus reach its crowning chapter.

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again!

But we are not there yet, so while we wait, Paul wants to clear up a couple of misunderstandings about the resurrection.

I. Trouble in the Text

A. Narrow Hope in Corinth

Paul was writing to the church in the Greek city of Corinth, and in Greek mythology, everyone knows that once you die, only your soul makes the trip across the River Styx into the underworld. No bodies allowed.

B. Nagging Doubt in Corinth

And it’s likely that the culture in the greater metropolitan Corinth area would have been very skeptical of the idea of resurrection. One famous Greek playwright wrote: “When the dust hath drained the blood of a man, once he is slain, there is no resurrection.”

Dead is dead. Period. End of story.

Even if some thought the soul lived on in a kind of vague afterlife, no one but no one thought something as vulgar as a corpse had a promising future. If you offered a Greek ghost a body, they would probably turn you down...they would not have any need for it.

This narrow hope for a vague kind of life after death did not include your body. And some Greek philosophers suggested there was no hope for your soul, either: when you died, there was no resurrection, no afterworld, no existence; nothing at all.

Their skepticism led to the nagging doubt that this life is all there is, there isn't no more.

C. Fake Good News

So it's no wonder that the church in Corinth has drifted a bit from Paul's original message. The Corinthians combined narrow hope and nagging doubt with the message of Jesus. They were bringing the basic presuppositions of their culture, their theater, their philosophy and entertainment with them into the Church.

And the result? It sounds like some Corinthian Christians were suggesting that we should be content with life we have in the here and now, rather than imagining some mythological life beyond death. Others seem to have looked forward to a happy, future for their souls without regard for their rather embarrassingly physical bodies.

Fake News

And Paul says, that kind of thinking is just not compatible with faith in Jesus. What at least some of the Corinthians Christians believed, Paul says, isn't the Gospel anymore; it's fake news, fake news about our bodies, fake news about our future, fake news about the Good News.

It might make sense in the story our culture tells, but that kind of thinking does not make sense in the resurrection story of Jesus.

IF - THEN

So Paul takes us through a string of IF-THEN statements, almost like a programmer cranking out code.

- If physical bodies aren't raised then Christ is not raised
- If Christ is not raised then your faith is worthless
- If your faith is worthless then you are stuck with your sins and the dead people you love are just dead

- If you are stuck with your sins and the dead people you love are just dead then this religion is a lie, we have no hope, and followers of Jesus are pitiful, disillusioned losers.
- If you don't have the actual resurrection of the body, Paul says, then you don't have Jesus.

II. Gract in the Text

But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead. That's Paul's basic message in I Corinthians 15

- Your faith is not worthless
- You are not stuck in sin
- The people you love, even if they are dead, are more than corpses
- You have a strong and powerful hope

Because Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

And more than that, Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again!

In fact, you have a concrete, tangible sign of that coming again. You have the resurrected body of Jesus, what Paul calls the "firstfruits" of those who have fallen asleep.

A. Firstfruits: Blossoms in Spring

Firstfruits are the first evidence of more to come. Ie Peonies

- They are like blossoms in spring
- We just have experienced spring this past month
- The air gets warmer
- The sun is out more
- One day just the first of the flowers are beginning to open
- Everywhere you look trees and flowers are in full bloom

The blossom is the first evidence of more to come.

B. Firstfruits: Solo that Begins the Symphony

Firstfruits are also part of the whole that is still coming.

- Like the first installment of an inheritance payment
- A solo that begins a symphony
- The firstfruits come first but belong to the rest that is coming after

Remember the musical piece Rhapsody in Blue by George Gershwin?

- It starts out with this haunting clarinet solo
- Then comes the piano
- Then the whole orchestra
- And the theme you hear first in the clarinet gets picked up by other instruments and expanded
- The solo comes first, but it is part of the whole that is still coming

To experience the firstfruits is to already experience what the whole harvest will be like.

C. Firstfruits: First Ripe Apple on the Tree

Ever been to an apple orchard and there's always that first ripe apple on the tree. All the other fruit is green tinted but you find that single deep red fruit. And when you take the first crisp bite, the juice runs down your chin.

The smell, the feel, the taste, the experience of that first ripe apple tells you what the rest of the harvest is going to be like.

D. Firstfruits: Harvest Offering, Thanksgiving and Dependence

In the Old Testament, firstfruits are part of the prescribed offering to God. When the first grain was ripe, on the first day after the first Sabbath after Passover...which is today the Sunday of the Resurrection!

- On this day Jesus rose from the dead

- God's Old Testament people would bring in the first of the harvest grain to God's house as an offering

To set aside the firstfruits as holy to the Lord acknowledges the God from whom this harvest came. But it is also a statement of trust: hail or lightning or locusts or war could destroy the harvest at any minute.

To bring in the firstfruits is to express your dependence on God for the rest of the harvest.

E. Jesus as Firstfruits

The image of firstfruits puts all of those thoughts together. And Paul says, Jesus is like that.

- He is the first evidence of more to come
- His bodily resurrection is the first permanent, physical, New Creation resurrection in history
- But it is not going to be the last!

Jesus is the first installment, the opening solo of the New Creation: His resurrected body is part of the New Creation even now, ahead of time.

And if you want to know what the New Creation is like, then look to Jesus and his living body that eats and walks and talks and loves and shares with those he loves. The New Creation looks like Jesus when he walked on earth the 40 days after his resurrection before he ascended into heaven.

He is the firstfruits offering, set aside as holy to God even as we, God's people, depend on God for the rest of the harvest that is still to come.

"In Christ all will be made alive, but each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, what he comes those who belong to him. Then the End will come..."

III. Trouble in the World

It's clear what Paul wants us to believe, to believe firmly, without doubt.

And it's also clear that believing firmly, without a doubt isn't any easier for us than it was for the Corinthians. Like them, we bring the presuppositions of our own culture, our theater, our philosophy and entertainment with us into the Church.

Narrow Hope and Nagging Doubt

A. Narrow Hope in Our Culture and Church

We tend to imagine our souls after death like the life force of Obi-Wan Kenobi of Star Wars fame after he dies, a kind of glowing version of our physical selves. Remember how Obi-Wan Kenobi left no embarrassing corpse behind when he died.

In fact, in entertainment for young and old, we Americans seem to be content with the soul living on without a body. But we don't imagine a corpse having a future.

Our culture doesn't have much interest in a resurrection of the physical body. This kind of narrow hope for a vague kind of life-after-death-without-your-body has affected even the Church.

I heard of a book written by a Christian for parents to read to their children. It is about going to heaven when you die. In the book going to heaven was described this way:

- You get wings like the angels
- You get to run and play
- Everything is perfect and peaceful
- There was no hint, no mention of a bodily resurrection from the dead
- The soul's spiritual existence apart from the body is described as good enough in this book
- Unfortunately the soul's spiritual existence apart from the body is good enough, too, for much of our American culture

B. Nagging Doubt in Our Culture and Our Church

If the narrow hope typical of our culture has infiltrated the Church, then so has a nagging doubt that this life is all there is, there isn't any more than what you see in the here and now. This doubt arises from the skepticism that seems to characterize our age like no other.

One of the basic tenets of Postmodernism, the dominant philosophy in the air we breathe, is the idea that there is no perspective-free access to ultimate truth.

- There is no unbiased vantage point from which one can objectively observe the universe.
- All of one's understanding of Truth is shaped by our human culture, our human language, the way our human brains work in our human bodies.

Are the Postmoderns right?

- It is true that we think about the world from the way our human brain works.
- We are shaped by our human culture and language and body

So by nature--- human nature ---we may have these nagging doubts about a physical body in the afterlife.

By our human nature we wonder about ultimate Truth.

IV. Grace in the World

Go back to I Corinthians. Go to the Word of God.

The Apostle Paul doesn't ask us to trust in some abstract objective truth.

A. Jesus as Tangible Truth

The Ultimate Truth enters into our human culture - Jesus – True God and True Man

- He can be seen
- He can be heard
- He can be touched
- He was mocked and tortured

- He was crucified
- He was raised
- He walked among His followers for 40 days after his resurrection
- He was touched – “Put your finger in his nail marks and your hand in his side”

Jesus speaks God’s eternal Word in human language.

- The only way we are going to find truth is through the presence of Jesus – His physical resurrection
- The foundation of the faith that Paul wants us to cling to today is not some abstract principle
 - it’s a human body
 - the human body of Jesus
 - that body that was once a corpse but now is alive forevermore

B. Jesus as Firstfruits

So now take our narrow hope and our nagging doubt to Jesus.

- He is the first evidence of more to come
- His resurrected corpse is the first installment
- The opening solo of the New Creation symphony

Our resurrection life looks and feels like Jesus’ resurrection.

- He is the firstfruits offering
- Set aside as holy to God
- We as God’s people depend on God for the rest of the harvest that is still to come

Your resurrection and my resurrection!

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

And there is more to come: “In Christ all will be made alive, but each in turn; Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. Then the End will come...”

And that ultimate End is Jesus, the battlefield champion, placing his resurrected foot on the neck of the final enemy---Death---declaring total victory forever and ever.

That Paul says is the End of the resurrection story. That is God's ultimate will for his creation.

But we are not there yet.

- We who belong to Jesus still struggle with sin
- We who belong to Jesus still get sick
- We who belong to Jesus still die

As long as death holds captive even one physical body that belongs to Jesus, Jesus isn't finished with His victory work.

- Only when every gravestone is obsolete
- Only when every Christian corpse stands in a New Creation
- Only then will we see God's ultimate will for his creation
- Only then will the resurrection story of Jesus reach its crowning chapter

Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again!