

PORTRAITS OF JESUS: The Resurrection and the Life

A sermon by

The Rev. Dr. Douglas E. Nagel

Sunday, April 21, 2019

TEXTS: John 11:17-27 and John 20:1-20

John 11:17-27

When Jesus arrived, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb for four days. Now Bethany was near Jerusalem, some two miles away, and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them about their brother. When Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, while Mary stayed at home. Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

John 20:1-20

Early on the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene came to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the tomb. So, she ran and went to Simon Peter and the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved, and said to them, 'They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.' Then Peter and the other disciple set out and went towards the tomb. The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and reached the tomb first. He bent down to look in and saw the linen wrappings lying there, but he did not go in. Then Simon Peter came, following him, and went into the tomb. He saw the linen wrappings lying there, and the cloth that had been on Jesus' head, not lying with the linen wrappings but rolled up in a place by itself. Then the other disciple, who reached the tomb first, also went in, and he saw and believed; for as yet they did not understand the scripture, that he must rise from the dead. Then the disciples returned to their homes.

But Mary stood weeping outside the tomb. As she wept, she bent over to look into the tomb; and she saw two angels in white, sitting where the body of Jesus had been lying, one at the head and the other at the feet. They said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping?' She said to them, 'They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him.' When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there, but she did not know that it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, 'Woman, why are you weeping? For whom are you looking?' Supposing him to be the gardener, she said to him, 'Sir, if you have carried him away, tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away.' Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him in Hebrew, 'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher). Jesus said to her, 'Do not hold on to me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and say to them, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God."' Mary Magdalene went and announced to the disciples, 'I have seen the Lord'; and she told them that he had said these things to her.

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, 'Peace be with you.' After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.

That great American philosopher got many things right and said them in a fun way. Theodore Geisel, also known as Dr. Seuss, wrote the following, “How did it get so late so soon? It’s night before it’s afternoon. December is here before its June. My goodness how the time has flown. How did it get so late so soon?”

Live long enough and you discover the truth of that little poem. When you are young, you mistakenly think that death is something that only happens to old people. You reach adolescence and you discover a classmate who passes away from a disease or in a traffic accident. You realize then that death is something that happens to old people and sometimes to other people, as well. This year, I qualified for Medicare. Now I am keenly aware that death happens to people my age.

Unfortunately, there are no exemptions—no opt-outs---no free passes. No one gets out of this life alive!

Death is the riddle of human life. It is the fundamental human problem everyone faces. The Apostle Paul calls it “the last enemy to be destroyed.” (1 Corinthians 15:26)

Even when death occurs, we try to clean it up. We attempt to cosmeticize it so that the deceased looks like he or she is merely sleeping. As death approaches, we marginalize those who approach their end in hospices and nursing home facilities.

We see in a mirror dimly, as the Apostle Paul writes. Yet, we all want to know. What happens next? The oldest book in the Old Testament is likely the story of Job. We are not the first to seek an answer to the question, “What happens next?” In Job 14:7-14,

‘For there is hope for a tree, if it is cut down, that it will sprout again, and that its shoots will not cease. Though its root grows old in the earth, and its stump dies in the ground, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth branches like a young plant.

“But mortals die, and are laid low; humans expire, and, where are they? As waters fail from a lake, and a river wastes away and dries up, so mortals lie down and do not rise again; until the heavens are no more, they will not awake or be roused out of their sleep.

“O that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath is past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me! If mortals die, will they live again? All the days of my service I would wait until my release should come.”

Truly, such a statement is the plaintive cry of most human hearts and representative of the human condition. We hunger for more of life and we would love to know what happens when our life is at an end. However, we can only truly know that by dying. Millions of people in every culture believe in or hope for some sort of afterlife, whether it is the “happy hunting ground,” the reincarnation of the Hindus, the teachings of Spiritualism, or the Christian understanding of Heaven.

On the flip side are materialists who believe that this life is all there is. When the brain and heart cease to function, existence stops. Even so, death is still the enemy. Whether you believe in an afterlife or not, you will still struggle to survive. You will fight for and cling to life.

Woody Allen has written, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality by not dying.”

He has also written, “You are living in a random universe. You are living a meaningless life. And everything you create, or you do is going to vanish with the sun burning out and the universe will be gone and it’s over. My conclusion is that the only possible way you can beat [this conclusion] even a little bit is through distraction. . . Making movies is a wonderful distraction.”

Yes, I suppose they are.

Mr. Allen, if the universe is totally random, why try to derive any sense of meaning from it? There is none, at least in ultimate terms. Why create movies, or art, or music? Are such endeavors just a means of whistling past the graveyard? Is it simply irony you are trying to communicate by creating something meaningful that is ultimately fated to disappear from the earth and posterity?

The late Stephen Hawking has written, "I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

I am not afraid of the dark. I simply believe that you can only have darkness because of an absence of light. Mr. Hawking, why strive so hard to understand a universe that is indifferent to your existence? Why seek so desperately for knowledge that ultimately perishes with you and can only benefit those who remain for a brief time after you are gone? What is the point?

It is this same attitude that is expressed by the Apostle Paul as he writes in the later part of 1 Corinthians 15:30-31:

"And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you—a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it? If the dead are not raised, 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.'"

It is the cry of the materialist and the Schlitz beer drinker. "You only go 'round once in life, so you'd better grab for all the gusto you can get!"

Henry David Thoreau wrote, "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them." Desperation is despair. Despair is being without hope. Hope demands a song.

Contrast Thoreau's words with the Christian liturgy for the funeral service which says, "All of us go down to the dust, yet even at the grave we make our song, 'Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!'"

Christians never lose their song!

Christians are dissatisfied with the way the world is because they believe the world was not created to be this way. Sin has distorted our world and our relationships---our relationship with God, with one another, and with the Creation.

The result is death.

This is what the Apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:12, "Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned---" He later continues in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Christians have believed, from the inception of the Christian church, that death is an enemy to be overcome. Death is not part of God's original plan and purpose. It is the destroyer of hopes, the interrupter of dreams, and the decimator of families.

Scripture sees death as the unnatural separation of the body and the spirit. Even in the Old Testament, there is a description of the aging and death process that becomes in the basis for hope of life beyond the grave.

Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 records these words, *“Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; on the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern, and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.”*

This was the Old Testament view. Ashes to ashes refers to the earthly/physical portion of our existence. The “breath or spirit” returning to the God who gave it references the soul or personality or spirit that animates this flesh we call home.

Because of the event we celebrate this Easter morning, Christians believe in the resurrection of the body. Resurrection is not merely the raising of the dead as in the case of Lazarus. It is not merely the reanimation of the body like the zombies who populate movies and the television series, “The Walking Dead.” Neither do we believe in an ethereal existence in another realm of disembodied spirits. Such a view defined the Greek belief in immortality.

At the center of the Christian faith is the idea of reunion, reintegration, restoration and improvement beyond this life. We believe in the resurrection of the body. We base this on Jesus’ resurrection and his promise to those who put their trust in him.

The Resurrection Body is a new body, a different body, a qualitatively improved body, but consistent with the body we have now. Can I understand it fully? Can I explain it adequately? No! However, it is certainly my hope!

I do not want this body, even with its new parts back. I want the new body God has promised.

Jesus’ resurrection body was the same and different. His disciples could recognize him by his scarred hands and feet and wound in his side. He ate, drank, and could be touched, yet He could also appear in a locked room. Last week we recited the Apostles’ Creed where we stated together, “. . . I believe in the resurrection of the body.” Older versions of the creed read---“I believe in the resurrection of the flesh”

That was Job’s hope. In Job 19:26-29, we read, *“O that my words were written down! O that they were inscribed in a book! O that with an iron pen and with lead they were engraved on a rock forever!*

“For I know that my redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold Him, and not another.”

The Easter hope and promise is that our full redemption is incomplete until our bodies are redeemed. Signs of aging are the first indicator that this world is not our home and that we are just 'passin' through.'

Unless you are under twelve years of age, I am sure you can relate to this list of the truths we discover as we age.

1. Everything hurts and what doesn't hurt doesn't work.
2. The gleam in your eyes is from the sun hitting your bifocals.
3. You look forward to a dull evening.
4. Your favorite part of the newspaper is "20 Years Ago Today."
5. You sit in a rocking chair and can't get it going.
6. Your knees buckle, and your belt won't.
7. Your back goes out more than you do.
8. You sink your teeth into a steak, and they stay there.
9. You're asleep, but others worry that you're dead.

The promise inherent in the Easter proclamation "He is risen!" is the promise of a new resurrection body. Christians believe that Jesus has defeated sin on the cross creating a new order of things. With the death of sin comes the death of death. Jesus said, "*I am the Resurrection and the Life.*" (John 11:25)

In 2 Timothy 1:10, the Apostle Paul will later write to his young protégé, Timothy, "*This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.*"

Paul also emphasized to the church at Corinth the critical importance of the Resurrection. He writes, in 1 Corinthians 15: 16-22, "*For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile, and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*"

"But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ."

Finally, our own resurrection and the redemption of our body is tied up in Jesus' resurrection and in Jesus' second coming. Jesus is the prototype. What will the resurrection look like to us? The Apostle John gives us a hint in 1 John 3:1-2, "*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.*"

We will be like Jesus.

Our resurrection body be like His. That will require a radical change that only God can accomplish. Jesus was dead. Jesus spent three days in the tomb. God raised Jesus from the dead. Now He lives forevermore. This is our hope as well.

In discussing the resurrection, the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, "*Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*"

What will our bodies be like? In this chapter, Paul uses the example of an acorn. Planted as an acorn, it rises again as an oak, different, but consistent with the pattern imprinted in its genetic code. It is different, but somehow the same.

Lazarus was dead. Jesus raised him. He later died a second time. Jesus was dead. According to the creed, "He was crucified, dead, and buried. On the third day, he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead."

Jesus is alive forevermore. He will return for His own as He has promised. The resurrection of our bodies is the precursor to the life everlasting for us.

In John 17:3, Jesus prays for his disciples and says, "*And this is everlasting life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.*" Eternal life begins with knowing and putting trust in Jesus Christ. Eternal life begins in the here and now and lasts through all eternity because the relationship with a Living Lord begins now and extends beyond this life. Henry Wade Dubose wrote, "Everlasting life means infinitely more than unending existence. To be sure, it means life that will never end, but it also means a new kind of life. It means life of such a quality that it is fit for eternal fellowship with God, and for eternal joy and peace in His service. For that heavenly quality of life, we are indebted to the transforming grace of God."

Nikolai Ivannovich Bukharin was a powerful man in the Politburo of the Soviet Union. He was the editor of the national newspaper, Pravda, and a soldier in the Bolshevik Revolution that forced communism on Russia in 1917.

In 1930 he travelled to the Soviet city of Kiev to address a huge assembly of workers. His topic was atheism. For over an hour he hurled insult, argument and proof against God and His claim to be the Creator of the world.

By the end of his speech the large crowd was cowered, beaten and fearful. Gazing around the room for several moments in triumph, he finally asked, "Are there any questions?" Deafening silence answered his challenge and every eye was lowered to the floor.

But then an old man began to shuffle to the platform. He struggled up the steps and finally stood next to Bukharin. Slowly he surveyed the crowd. Then he raised his arm upward and cried out an ancient Russian Orthodox greeting, "Christ is risen."

Indeed, Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Because He lives, we, too, shall live. . . forever!

Soli Deo Gloria! To God alone be the glory!

AMEN.