

12 Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 14 and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. 15 We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that God raised Christ—whom God did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. 16 For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. 17 If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. 18 Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. 19 If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

20 But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. 21 For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; 22 for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. 23 But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 24 Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. 25 For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. 26 The last enemy to be destroyed is death. 27 For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “All things are put in subjection,” it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. 28 When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all. **(New Revised Standard Version)**

I received a call one Thursday afternoon, many years ago, letting me know that Phyllis, a parishioner of mine, was nearing death. When I had stopped in to see Phyllis earlier in the week it was evident that she had declined and was not well. Her daughter, Honore, wanted me to know that the doctor had said it was likely only a matter of days then. Honore had been up to visit the day before, but couldn't make it up that day because of the weather. I assured her that I would see Phyllis that afternoon and say final prayers with her. I also asked her permission to share this news with one of our deacons who had a special relationship with her mother and permission was quickly granted.

The deacon eagerly agreed to accompany me on a late afternoon visit to offer prayers and commend her dear friend and our beloved sister in Christ to God's continuing care. Phyllis had always been a small woman, but in her last weeks, every time

I saw her she seemed smaller and smaller. It grew increasingly difficult for her to communicate, and that day she was unable to utter any comprehensible words. But it was evident that she knew we were there. We prayed, and sang, and read a Psalm. Our deacon gently rubbed her back as I rested my hand on Phyllis' hands. We stayed awhile after we were done praying and then our deacon assured Phyllis that she was dearly loved, we wished her peace, and we went on our way.

Our deacon was crying as we left the room. She had begun to cry as we sat together at bedside, but didn't make that evident until we left. She apologized for her tears, but she needn't have done so. Illness and death are sad, sad things. No matter how much it may be a blessing for one to be released from earthly suffering, it is sad for those who are left behind. This sweet, sweet woman no longer looks up at visitors with a gentle smile. Even before her death she ceased to tell the wonderful stories that she used to tell. The ending of this precious, human life was indeed sad.

Often in the face of death, platitudes are offered. You all could recite them, I'm sure. Here are just a few examples. "She's not really gone, she's just passed into another room." "He's in a better place now." "She's smiling down on us." No one wants to see anyone else suffer, and it is often our impulse to try to make the suffering less by lessening the experience with our words. And often we find words that we cloak in Christian faith to try to make them even more powerful and comforting. But as many grieving people will tell you, often the platitudes we're offering don't comfort; sometimes they even alienate. I heard this just this week from a colleague who lost a brother in a car accident when they were both teenagers. Words like these from Christians pushed her away. They can be heard as saying, "Your pain is out of proportion. It's really not that bad. You shouldn't be sad." And if we attach to these messages the name of God or Jesus, they can become especially heavy burdens for the griever to bear. It's as if they hear "If you were really faithful, you wouldn't be sad." Is that what anyone needs to hear when they're terribly sad?

Our faith has more to offer than that. Our faith takes death very seriously. Paul suggests in his first letter to the Corinthians, the book from which we've been reading

the past few weeks, that death is an enemy of God, one of many evil powers and forces that will ultimately be conquered by God. Paul paints a picture of a battle that will take place at the end of time in which all the powers of this world will be made subject to Jesus with the final victory being the ultimate conquering of death itself. There's a lot about this battle scene that Paul paints at the end of our reading today that makes us uncomfortable, but can we take comfort in the validation it offers to our experience of the tragedy of death? Our faith doesn't teach that death is not all that bad; our faith teaches that death truly is that bad. It was that bad for Jesus when he hung on a cross, crying out his sense of God forsakenness. And it is that bad for us. Even if the one who dies is ready to die and feels closer to God in dying, those who love that person are rarely ready for the loss and it really is that bad. I once prayed with a man shortly before he died and his wife shared with me that he was ready to close his eyes and never open them again, but she was not ready for that to happen. This is a perfect picture of the tragic nature of death in human experience, even when the death is not especially tragic.

I am quite certain that many of you, faced with the tragedy of death likely at least one time, if not many times, in your life, through appropriation of platitudes, and the soaking up of conventional wisdom, have gained an understanding that we don't really die when we die, that there's a part of us, some of us call it the soul, that never dies, that simply passes into another room. This belief carries with it the understanding that this earthly life is something we escape; these bodies are cages that keep our souls confined. There's something about this belief that is immensely comforting to many and has been for many years, since the earliest days of the church actually. There were Corinthians who believed it, who couldn't wait to become wholly spiritual beings, to leave their bodies and this earth behind, who were lessening the tragedy of death by believing that we don't actually die. But, this is not what our faith teaches. And when we cling to this belief, as comforting as it may seem, we cut ourselves off from the deep hope that our faith has to offer.

Our faith teaches resurrection, the resurrection of the dead, the resurrection of the body. This is a teaching that is grounded in the witness of Jesus Christ, one who died, truly died, didn't slip into another room but one whose cold and bloodied body was laid

in a dark tomb. And one who was raised, not one who arose, but one who was raised by God from the dead, in body, mind, and spirit he was made alive; he walked out of the tomb, in the flesh; he let his disciples touch him again, he ate with them; he was alive again, never again to die.

Our faith teaches that as it was for Christ, so it will be for those who belong to Christ. We hear this in our passage today, "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died." This language of first fruits returns later in the reading. The idea being that like the first fruits that appear at harvest time, an abundant harvest will follow. As it was for one, so it will be for many. Those who belong to Christ can count on being raised in body from the the dead. This idea made the Corinthians uncomfortable. The literal translation of the phrase rendered "resurrection of the dead" in chapter 15 of this letter is "Raising of the corpses." The Corinthians found this idea offensive. And most of us find it pretty creepy, or at least confusing, ourselves. I don't know about you, but when I hear "Raising of the Corpses" I picture zombies stiffly exiting a graveyard. And when confronted with this idea of bodily resurrection, we ask all sorts of questions about how this could be, about what this means, about what kind of body we'd be raised with, about why our bodies are worth raising anyways. We'd need to keep reading in chapter 15 and need one or two more sermons to wrestle with all that. Let me know if you're interested.

But for today, I just want you to grasp the distinction between the more common belief in the immortality of the soul and the Christian teaching of resurrection. Our more common belief in the immortality of the soul suggests something about **us**, that there's a part of us that never dies. But the teaching of our faith, the teaching of resurrection of the body, suggests something about **God**, and I quote a scholar here, resurrection suggests:

that God acts for those who are dead... Human beings are not immortal and do not have immortal souls; they die and are powerless unless God acts to grant life beyond death. Jesus shared this reality of human existence. He did not raise himself, or even "arise", but was raised by God. Christian hope is in the resurrection, not in immortality; it is hope in God, not in ourselves.

This is deep hope. This is hope that validates this earthly existence we've been given, these bodies we've been given, that says that what God created, God will redeem, that says that in time, all that is broken will be made whole. Not that we will slip away to be an ethereal spirit floating with other ethereal spirits somewhere out there, but that we will take on flesh again, and they will take on flesh, and we'll be able to hold one another again, to hear hearts beating, to listen to breaths drawn. This is hope. Deep hope. And this is what our faith teaches.

As the deacon who made that last visit to Phyllis with me was drying her eyes she said, "I'm no good at this. I just don't want to let go of this world. I know I shouldn't be this way, but I am." Nothing about our faith tells her she shouldn't be this way. God hasn't let go of the world that God created, and God doesn't expect us to either. Surely God weeps with us at all the ways this world is broken. But we know in Christ, that brokenness, that death, will not have the final word. In too many words I said to the deacon, "You're very good at this." And then we drove home.

Resources in addition to scripture which significantly influenced or were cited in the writing of this sermon:

Boring, M. Eugene and Fred B. Craddock. 2004. The People's New Testament Commentary. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press

Hays, Richard B. 1997. First Corinthians in Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Permission granted by Honore Jones and the deacon mentioned for the telling of the stories herein.