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Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, 56-58 (12-55)

Signs of Life

One of the hardest questions I've been asked as a pastor is what happens when we die. And my most honest answer is I don't know exactly. A lot of what we believe about what happens is based on Paul's words in first Corinthians 15.¹

Paul began his letter to the Christians in Corinth by naming their divisions and pleading for the unity found in their faith in Jesus. In the majority of his letter, Paul addresses behavioral matters. Now he turns to an issue of doctrine of faith. Even here, in the final verse of the chapter, he points to the ethical implications of this theology. For Paul, getting the ideas right is not the end, but a means toward the end of living rightly in relationship with God and with people.

Because Paul places the lengthy discussion of resurrection at the end of his letter, we know it's of utmost importance to him. It is his crowning argument for the thesis stated in chapter 1, verse 10: *Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.*²

Paul's appeal for unity and instructions about behavior flow from the resurrection of Jesus and the hope of resurrection of his followers. This is the good news that Paul traveled far and wide and risked life and limb to proclaim.

The arguments in this chapter are complex, with many subclauses and side comments. A thorough discussion would take hours, more than I can cover in one sermon. I'll try to simplify it a bit by summarizing Paul's reasoning in three statements and a conclusion: (1) The core of the gospel is embodied in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. (2) Jesus' resurrection ensures the resurrection of his followers. (3) The resurrection body will be different from our current bodies but no less real. (4) So, hold fast; stay firmly planted.

The core of the gospel is embodied in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.³

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians of their shared history. He preached the good news about the cross and resurrection to them. They accepted it. They continue to stand in it. They are being saved through it.

Paul writes of salvation in the present tense. Christians are being saved. This isn't a past event already completed, nor is it only a future event. It's ongoing, happening by the grace of God, happening by the love of God working in them.

¹ Background from Dan Nighswander, *1 Corinthians: Believers Church Bible Commentary*, Herald Press, 2017, pp. 319-341, 363-364; Working Preacher accessed at https://www.workingpreacher.org/narrative_podcast.aspx?podcast_id=1266; and Pulpit Fiction Notes on Epiphany 5C, 6C, and 7C accessed at <https://www.pulpitfiction.com>.

² 1 Corinthians 1:10, *New Revised Standard Version*

³ 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

Jesus' resurrection ensures the resurrection of his followers. ⁴

Then Paul asks how some can say that there is no resurrection of the dead. If the hope they find in Christ is only for this life, then they deserve everyone's pity. But, in fact, Paul says, Jesus Christ is the firstfruits – the first and the best – of those who will experience resurrection. There is no authentic faith without fervent hope in the future and there is no authentic hope in the future without resurrection.

But, Paul cautions, Christian faith isn't only about "pie in the sky by and by." Resurrection provides incentive for moral living in the here and now. If there is no resurrection, Paul asks, why am I putting myself in danger right now? *If the dead are not raised, then there's nothing more to do than—as the saying goes—eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. But don't be so naïve—there's another saying you know well—Bad company corrupts good habits. Come to your senses, live justly, and stop sinning. It's true that some have no knowledge of God. I am saying this to shame you into better habits.* ⁵

The resurrection body will be different from our current bodies but no less real. ⁶

Paul now addresses questions that he thinks some of the Corinthians are asking about how the dead are raised and what kind of body they will have. These echo many of the questions we have.

Paul's "body talk" throughout this letter is confusing – probably more to us than to the original recipients hearing it in Greek, rather than through a translation. Sometimes the body is a physical person made of flesh, muscle, blood, and bone. Sometimes the body is a corporate unit, such as the Christian community. In his discussion of bodies and the resurrection, Paul adds words referring to soul and spirit. He talks about heavenly bodies and earthly bodies as well as physical bodies and spiritual bodies. It's difficult to understand exactly what he means each time he refers to the body.

Our more wholistic view of body and spirit also causes confusion when reading this letter. To Greeks, their dualistic worldview that separated the physical realm from the spiritual created an impossible barrier to a bodily resurrection. To them, this idea suggested images of zombies, of decayed corpses walking around. Paul dismisses this image as too literal. He urges them to gain an adequate understanding of resurrection bodies by looking at the natural world.

The seed you plant doesn't produce life unless it dies. Right? The seed doesn't have the same look, the same body, if you will, of what it will have once it starts to grow. It starts out a single, naked seed—whether wheat or some other grain, it doesn't matter— and God gives to that seed a body just as He has desired. For each of the different kinds of seeds God prepares a unique body. Or look at it this way: not all flesh is the same. Right? There is skin flesh on humans, furry flesh on animals, feathery flesh on birds, and scaly flesh on fish. Likewise there are bodies made for the heavens and bodies made for the earth. The heavenly bodies have a different kind of glory or luminescence compared to bodies below. Even among the heavenly bodies, there is a different level of brilliance: the sun shines differently than the moon, the moon differently than the stars, and the stars themselves differ in their brightness.

It's like this with the resurrection of those who have died. The body planted in the earth decays. But the body raised from the earth cannot decay. The body is planted in disgrace and

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:12-34

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:32b-34, *The Voice*

⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:34-57

*weakness. But the body is raised in splendor and power. The body planted in the earth was animated by the physical, material realm. But the body raised from the earth will be animated by the spiritual. Since there is a physical, material body, there will also be a spiritual body.*⁷

Paul's point is that our present bodies are not the bodies of resurrection. And even in this present life, the body is important. Paul has a wholistic understanding of human life. It's not just that God values the spiritual half of you and the body is discardable. Paul treats people as whole people. God created people as whole people. God loves and redeems people as whole people. God has a future for people as whole people.

Paul talks about resurrection as transformation. He anchors the message of the resurrection in the story of Jesus. When Jesus died, he didn't just dissipate, and his atoms go off to be with the cosmos. Jesus died. Death was real. But death wasn't final. Jesus was raised as a whole person, and yet a transformed person. For the rest of us, the resurrection isn't a stripping away of the body so the soul can fly free. It's more. It's a transformation of the whole person.

On a practical level, we don't have to be concerned that donating organs and cremating bodies will somehow prevent future resurrection. While we don't know exactly what "the body raised from the earth animated by the spiritual" will look like, there's nothing we can do that will hinder God's transforming power after our earthly bodies die.

As he concludes this part of his letter to the Corinthian Christians, Paul builds toward a celebration of God's victory over death by the resurrection, not only of Jesus, but also of Jesus' followers. Not only does God defeat death, but God also gives us victory through Jesus, the Anointed, the Liberating King.

So hold fast; stay firmly planted.⁸

Paul ends his long, theological discussion with a summary statement about behavior. It's only because Jesus was raised and because his followers will be raised – in fact, they are already participating in the resurrection – that it's possible to do the work of God with confidence and energy. *My dear brothers and sisters, stay firmly planted—be unshakable—do many good works in the name of God, and know that all your labor is not for nothing when it is for God.*⁹ The message isn't to work ever harder, but to let the work of God flow from the abundance of gratitude generated by the victory that God has given us through Jesus Christ.

Because resurrection is real what we do now is not in vain, what we do now for the sake of the gospel is not in vain. That is a word of hope.

Signs of Life

Death isn't merely the last breath. Death is the enemy. It's also all of those forces that diminish life before we take our last breath. Death robs people of life and health and dignity until finally the last breath comes. But God's victory over death brings us hope right now, in this present life, as well as in what comes next.

The title of my sermon comes from a book chosen by Mennonite Church USA, Mennonite Church Canada, and Herald Press for a "Common Read," a shared reading experience focused on specific books written to nurture Christian faith in this cultural moment.¹⁰ In the

⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:36b-44, *The Voice*

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:58

⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:58, *The Voice*

¹⁰ <https://www.mennoniteusa.org/news/common-read/>

book, *Signs of Life: Resurrecting Hope Out of Ordinary Losses*,¹¹ Stephanie Lobdell makes the claim that resurrection matters in the here and now, in the ordinary losses we all face.

Here's what she writes in the introduction: *I don't have some dramatic tale to tell. Instead, what I have is a rucksack of ordinary losses – small deaths along the path of my life that have wounded and grieved me. Some are the result of my own sin, some are the result of others' sin against me, and some have just, well, happened. Among them are the death of illusions, the hopes for my future, the religious zeal I had as a young adult, the image of myself that I portrayed and protected, the death of relationships I thought secure, and the death of expectations.*¹² All of us have experienced losses similar to these throughout our lives.

And here's what she says in the epilogue: *I have borne witness to signs of the resurrection in myself, but not in the ways I desired or anticipated. Whether because of my personality or for being raised in a culture that eschews pain, I once imagined my life as a march from victory to victory. But no. Resurrection requires death.*

We lay the deaths in our own lives before God – the losses, the hurts, the disappointments, and even our sins – and invite God to breathe the resurrecting Spirit of Christ into us. We go into the depths of the tomb with Christ and wait, with nothing but trust to sustain us. We trust that what God did for Jesus, God will do for all of creation, for even me, small though I am.

*It seems that the powers of sin and death are so deeply entrenched within us and in creation that nothing can truly free us. Only when the Kingdom comes in its fullness will these deep wrongs be made right and all death undone. Until then, we cling to the signs. One day, the signs will give way to the destination. Death will be swallowed up in victory. Until then, we wait. We trust. We invite the Spirit of God to move in us. We walk forward, with eyes open for the signs of life emerging around us, in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection.*¹³

My prayer, dear friends, is that you will see signs of the resurrection while experiencing the ordinary losses – the hurts, the disappointments, the sins – in your lives. And that you invite the Spirit of God to move in you as you walk toward the hope of the resurrection. Stay firmly planted—be unshakable—do many good works in the name of God, and know that all your labor is not for nothing when it is for God.

Live in hope. Amen.

¹¹ Stephanie Lobdell, *Signs of Life: Resurrecting Hope Out of Ordinary Losses*, Herald Press, 2019.

¹² Lobdell, pp. 14-15.

¹³ Lobdell, pp. 187-189.