



“As All Die in Adam, So All Will be Made Alive in Christ”

Scripture – 1 Corinthians 15:19-26

Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones

Sunday, April 15, 2018

Five pastors and four seminarians were meeting at Brick Presbyterian Church in New York, when one of them tossed out a challenge. If you had to reduce the Bible from its 66 books to only five, which would you choose? Think about it. If our church family could have only five books of the Bible, which would you nominate?

Right off the bat, I would have to say, “Genesis and Exodus.” We must have the story of beginnings and how God is Creator of all there is. Next up is Exodus because the Ten Commandments are essential, as is the declaration that God liberates the people from slavery because God is just and wants us to be free from all that oppresses us.

With two down and only three to go, we still have such giants as Isaiah, the Old Testament book most quoted by Jesus and containing the dream of God that all the people of the earth are to live together in peace. Still eager to be included are the Book of Psalms, the four gospels, the letters of Paul, and the other writings of the New Testament.

The real tussle would break out in trying to reach agreement on which of the four gospels we would choose. I would expect wrestling in the aisles and people tossed from the balcony. Advocates for Matthew would point out that he has the Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer and “as you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” Luke’s proponents would not roll over and capitulate. They would remind everyone that Luke is the only gospel with the parables of the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal son. Surely we are not going to throw those overboard?

And how could we give up the Gospel of John? “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it” and “For God so loved the world...” Not to mention Jesus washing the feet of the disciples and calling on us to love one another.

If we survived the battle over which gospel to keep, I suspect we would have one choice out of all Paul’s Letters. Romans would take the prize because it contains most of Paul’s theology. That would mean 1st Corinthians would not make the cut. The 13th chapter is Paul’s statement on love. “Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” What would we read at weddings?

And that brings us to today’s passage from the 15th chapter in which Paul writes about the resurrection. On Easter we read one of the gospel accounts of the women going to the tomb early on Sunday morning and finding it empty. Today we consider a different Easter passage; words that were penned *before* the gospels were written. The 15th chapter of Corinthians is the earliest passage in the Bible focused on the resurrection of Jesus.

While many are fond of plucking passages from scripture with no regard for its original context, it helps to know that when Paul wrote, he believed that the end of the world was soon. Very soon. Paul thought he might still be around when God brought human history to a conclusion and the world became what it was always meant to be. A place where the instruments of war are hammered into farming implements, where the enslaved are liberated, where the poor are no longer scrounging for food and shelter, and where all have plenty – plenty of food, clean water, clothing and shelter; plenty of respect, good health, meaningful work, and loving bonds with others.

As Paul assumed he was living in the final days, this likely shaped his statement: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Notice that Paul takes for granted that early Christians believed that Christ gave them hope for the living of their days. Christ gave them hope that God would give them strength and courage to face their trials. Hope that their sins were forgiven. Hope that God was leading the world to a better day.

However, Paul says that if your hope is only for *this* life, you have missed something essential. You will also be resurrected to eternal life. He says, “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.”

Many grew up in the church with the idea that, prior to Jesus, people did not believe in life after death. Not true. One of the beliefs that distinguished the Pharisees from the Sadducees was that the Pharisees believed in life after death.

Paul seems to assume that the recipients of his letters – the congregations in Corinth, Rome, Galatia, Philippi, and so on – knew the stories about the empty tomb because he does not mention it. He is focused on the *meaning* of Christ’s resurrection. It means that the resurrection was not something that only happened to Jesus. It will also happen to us.

Programmed as we are in the scientific method, it is challenging to believe in something we cannot observe or measure. Yet, many people have had their heart stop beating and remember visiting another realm before doctors brought them back. Many others have claimed that they were visited by a loved one who was deceased. However, if we have not personally experienced such a thing, we can remain skeptical.

Part of the problem is that most of us identify ourselves with our physical body. However, if our soul – our essence – is nonmaterial, then our life in God can be both now and after our physical body withers. Thoughts are not physical; no one has ever seen one, yet we know they exist. Why couldn’t our core identity be of a non-physical nature?

Writer and speaker, Ann Weems, a life-long Presbyterian, suffered a devastating blow when Todd, her twenty-one year old son, was murdered. She collapsed into a dark night of the soul. She said: “All the stars fell from my sky.” Struggling with her grief, she did what came naturally to her – she wrote. She found herself writing psalms of lament like the ones she discovered in scripture. She tucked each one into a desk drawer, occasionally retrieving one and pouring over it. Later she mentioned them to a friend who convinced her to publish them as a gift for all who weep.¹ Another close friend asked her if she would ever be comforted. Learning to live with a hole in her heart, yet clinging to her hope of eternal life, she replied, “Not until God wipes away every tear from our eyes.”

To his first century audience, Paul wrote, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” However, if Paul were alive today, he would turn that sentence on its head and say, “If for the next life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

The resurrection is about life after we die, but also focuses on the *quality of life* before we die. Regrettably, many voices in the church have focused the resurrection spotlight solely on life after death.

I suspect most of us were told that the reason for believing in Jesus was so that we would go to heaven. Paul and other New Testament writers claim that it focuses not only on eternal life, but also everyday life. Eternal life is a full life – what Jesus called an abundant life.

I read where a pastor talked one of his members, a heart surgeon, into letting him be present in the operating room during open-heart surgery. If there are any surgeons here this morning, rest assured. I will not ask you to sneak me into the operating room. Years ago, when I was a hospital chaplain, I witnessed a gall bladder surgery and that was enough for me. I identify far too much with the patient.

However, this pastor – who also likes to jump out of perfectly good airplanes – stood in the operating room while the surgeon attempted to repair a woman’s heart. The pastor was fascinated by the doctor’s delicate work and when the surgeon was finished with the procedure, the pastor watched as the physician gently massage the women’s heart to coax it into beating again. But her heart did not respond. So, the surgeon massaged her heart again. Nothing.

At that moment, the pastor became aware that he might be witnessing his friend, the surgeon, lose his patient. His own heart began to race as he realized that he might watch this woman die on the operating table. The doctor became more aggressive with the woman’s heart. Still no response. Finally, the surgeon knelt down beside the woman and took off his surgical mask and said, “Mrs. Johnson, this is your surgeon. The operation went perfectly, your heart has been repaired – now tell your heart to start beating again.” And when he said that, her heart began to beat.²

The resurrection of Christ is God calling our hearts to start beating again. If you suffer from depression, you can be lifted from the cold darkness of the tomb. If you struggle with an addiction, you can be lifted from the agonizing darkness of the tomb. If you are living with a terminal illness, you can be lifted from the frightening darkness of the tomb. If you have become cynical and frustrated with the world, you can be lifted from the bitter darkness of the tomb.

When we feel as if the earth has entombed us, God wants to help us roll away the stone so that we can breathe again.

NOTES

1. Shannon J. Kershner, “Easter Promise,” April 1, 2018.
2. Chris Girata, “Get Up and Live,” *Day1.org*, April 1, 2018.

Prayers of the People ~ Richard Jolly

God of life, God of hope, God, yes, even of resurrection (!), we come to you this morning struggling to fully comprehend the startling message and the life-changing declaration you have for us. We are amazed, we are moved, we are staggered, by how profound your love is for us and for your world. As we are comforted and challenged by the life, death and resurrection of your Son, Jesus, and guided by Scripture and the mystery of the Holy Spirit, we stand in awe before you and your Good News.

And yet, we cannot help but to grapple with the radical nature of your message. So, we ask, O God, that you be with us this morning. Speak to us as we seek to more completely understand who you are. Help assuage our doubt O God – forgive us our lack of trust and courage – and grant us the peace and the assurance that you give when

we but listen. Above all, help us to integrate your message of new life into the way we live our lives. For, as was Jesus, we, too, are called to hope. We, too, are called to love. We, too, are called to witness your truth to a broken, reeling and hurting world.

We also come this morning to offer our thanks and praise for your countless gifts – for the changing seasons, for your wisdom and guidance, for how we see you in the Easter story. We offer our thanks for this church, for the church universal, for all who seek to follow you in the many ways you are revealed. We thank you, too, for your constant presence, the unending opportunities you give us to serve others and the challenges you present us to confront while secure in the knowledge you will be with us.

Through our worship this morning we pray that we might again renew our commitment to do your work in the world, and to your message of hope, reconciliation and peace. For truly, as we commit to and engage in how you would have us live, our lives become filled with purpose and meaning and the peace of Christ. And so, enable us, O God, as we begin a new week, to be refreshed, strengthened and inspired to be the people, and the person, that you call us to be.

This we ask in the name of your Son, who taught us to pray,

Our Father, who art in Heaven, Hallowed be thy name. Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.