

Death Swallowed Up in Victory
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OK, let me get some important questions out of the way- Will the NBA finish its season- will Ohio State play in Autzen Stadium this September, maybe with fans physically distanced from each other- What's going to happen with the economy? On a more micro level, maybe you're wondering what will happen with your job, or what college will look like this fall? It is human nature to want to know what the future holds- We'd like to have some certainty in our lives.

The ancient Greeks had an oracle at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi- when someone came with a question about the future- Should I marry so and so, should we go to battle, the priestess would sit over an opening in the ground out of which inebriating gasses were supposed to rise. The way it worked supposedly was that her rational faculties were put to sleep and she could listen for the voice of the god Apollo, who spoke to her in riddles and strange answers. Out in the lobby, another prophet translated what she said into poetry or prose. It was a very good business, because people have always wanted to know the future.

It makes sense, then, that we would wonder what happens in the ultimate future. What happens when we breathe our last breath? What happens after we leave this earth? Not so long ago there was a best seller about a boy who died and went to heaven and came back to tell about it, and it was a best seller and then a movie because we are so curious about the life after this one.

The believers in the church in Corinth were curious about the afterlife as well. Remember they disagreed about all kinds of things. They had different leaders they revered; they quarreled about their giftedness in the Spirit- they turned the communion meal into a free-for-all, where the wealthy ate first and didn't leave anything for the slaves who came later. So at the end of the letter, Paul addresses a topic that he hopes they can find some common ground on, and that is what happens at the resurrection of the dead.

Remember there were Jews and Gentiles in this church. The Jews had different views about the afterlife. Some of them believed in some form of resurrection, it's unclear whether or not that would include the body. The Greeks valued the soul

more than the body. Here is a quote from the philosopher Plato- "The body is the antithesis of the soul, as the source of all weaknesses as opposed to what alone is capable of independence and goodness," which he saw as the soul.

The Greeks didn't believe in the resurrection of the body- they believed in the immortality of the soul. That was the ideal. The body was going to be discarded. So in this church they have different beliefs about what is going to happen after death; what will happen when some kind of judgment comes when all this is finished.

Paul starts out by reminding them of the good news that he has passed along to them- that is- Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, he was buried, he was raised on the third day. He appeared to Peter, then to the twelve. Then, Paul says, he appeared to more than 500 people at one time. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Then he appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul says, Let me remind you about this experience of Christ.

I wonder if someone said to you, So, you're a Christian. Tell me about your experience of Christ. What would you say? We might be a little flummoxed. But we might also say- Let me tell you a story of God's faithfulness to me. Maybe you'd say, I remember the time I didn't think my marriage would last, but God put us on our feet again. Or maybe you'd say, I remember when I thought my divorce would be the end of me, but God brought healing to my life. I remember a challenge with my health and God gave me what I needed. Or maybe you'd say, I've met Christ in the face of folks at the food pantry, or in the SON shelter, because Jesus said when you serve those struggling, you are meeting Jesus in disguise.

Paul says, I am reminding you, I am passing along to you these experiences of God's presence in Jesus the Christ. What are we passing along to our kids or our grandkids? What is foundational for us when it comes to God's work in our lives? Do you have a story of unconditional love? Do you have a story of forgiveness? Paul says, All these people had an experience of the risen Christ. And then he says, Some of you don't believe there is any kind of resurrection of the dead- he's probably addressing the Greek Christians in the church. But Paul says, if you don't

believe in the resurrection of the dead, then Christ can't be raised, and he says, Your faith is futile.

Now somebody might say, Well, I'm not sure about this resurrection. Maybe when we get to the Apostles' Creed where it says, on the third day he was raised from the dead, you say that a little less loudly, because you are a rational person and you don't know what to do with that belief. Maybe Easter is a challenge for you.

Richard Rohr says that resurrection is just what God does. Resurrection is happening all the time. So Jesus' resurrection fits right into the pattern of how God has set up this universe. Here's what Rohr says- "Most of us probably grew up thinking that the Resurrection was a one-time miracle about Jesus, an anomaly that proved he was God. I believe that Jesus is actually *naming and revealing what is happening everywhere and all the time* in God. Jesus' resurrection is a statement about how reality works: *always moving toward resurrection.*"

Maybe if somebody said, Tell me of your experience of Christ, you might say, Let me tell you a resurrection story, resurrection in my life, resurrection in a relationship, resurrection in our family, resurrection in my church community.

So Paul says, But, in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. Paul says Jesus is the prototype for what will happen to us. He says, As all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. That's a pretty wide statement of grace- all will be made alive in Christ. God is saving the world.

And then Paul says, in a portion of the lesson we didn't read, that at the resurrection of the dead we will have what he calls a *spiritual body*. He tries to explain what the resurrection of the dead will look like. He combines the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul into something new. He puts these two concepts together, the Jewish and the Greek, and he says, We will have spiritual bodies. I'm not sure Paul knows what that means, but he is trying to come up with concept that splits the difference among the people in this church.

Remember Jesus had some different kind of spiritual body when he was resurrected. He came through locked doors to meet with his followers. He ate with them. He said, Put your hand in my side. This a form of presence that we don't know about yet. Paul says, At some point, that's our future too.

Now, when it comes down to details, I don't worry about it. What I can declare is- on the other side of life we will be in God's care. God will have hold of us. I don't worry about the details. I do believe there will be individuality- we will be known, and we will know people- but I believe that will matter a lot less than it does now.

At the end of this chapter, Paul sings out this amazing chorus- Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? Now, in the middle of a pandemic, we might say, death is all around us. Paul, what do you mean, Death, where is your victory? We have not been hit as hard here in Oregon, but if you were listening to this passage in New York City, you might say, It seems like death has been victorious over many lives.

I believe what Paul is saying is, Death is not the final word. There is a good future beyond this life. God is not done yet. I cling to the vision in Revelation that at some point the reign of God will be fully realized here, the New Jerusalem will come down from heaven to this earth, and God will make all things new. No more crying, no more dying, no more cancer, no more covid, no more suffering, no more exclusion, no more oppression.

So what do we do in the meantime? When we don't know the future, how do we live? Paul gives us some guidance at the end of the passage- "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

We can get discouraged in the work. Paul says, Be steadfast. Keep on keepin' on. We can despair over injustice in the world. Paul says, Be steadfast. What small step can you take today? Maybe you are worried about your kids or your grandkids. Paul says, Your labor won't be in vain. God will use our efforts to do God's work in this world. I don't know what the future holds. But God is in the future, Christ walks with us, and our job is to keep on keepin' on, in the Spirit's power. Amen.