

“What Happens When I Die?”

Luke 23:32-43, 1 Corinthians 15:42-50

Today we will explore the question “What happens when I die?” This is a question that concerns all of us because we will all eventually die. We all want to know what will happen to us when we die. There are some things we can be pretty sure won’t happen: you won’t have to pay taxes; you won’t have to take out the garbage; and you won’t have to worry about what to make for dinner. A lot of the things that occupy our time and minds in the here and now will certainly not be a concern after we die. These are negatives; things that won’t happen. But what can we do with assurance in a positive way. **What will happen?** For that, we turn to the Scriptures.

Our primary text for today is from chapter fifteen of 1 Corinthians, which was written by the Apostle Paul. Unlike last week’s reading from Romans, in which Paul was introducing himself to a church that didn’t know him, the church at Corinth knew Paul very well. He had been there. He had done some important foundational work in the creation of that church. They had a close relationship with Paul. You know what happens when you are close to someone: You are more real with them. You let your true self show – the good, the bad and the ugly. We are fortunate that Paul had such a close relationship with the church in Corinth, because in his letters to them we get an intimate look at the problems they faced and we see Paul’s uncensored response. 1 Corinthians is a very honest letter to a church with some serious problems.

The subject matter in chapter fifteen is an issue that was very troubling to Paul. Some people in the church were asserting that Jesus wasn’t really raised from the dead. This was a big problem, because Paul’s message, and all Christian preaching, depended on the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead, defeating the power of death and sin, and vindicating Jesus’ life and teaching in the face of the earthly powers that had sought to silence him. This is of first importance to Paul. Unlike some other beliefs or practices that were not central to the Gospel, Paul affirms that the resurrection is non-negotiable. It happened, and it is essential to our faith. With certainty, Paul tells us that **Christ has been raised from the dead**. He’s seen him, as have many other people in the early church. He and many others through the centuries have experienced the power of the living Christ. Jesus Christ is risen and alive. There is no question about it, Paul says.

Now this may not seem to be of great personal significance to you, but it is. Not only does the resurrection confirm God’s forgiveness of our sins in Christ, but it is the visible demonstration of God’s power to give life beyond the grave. Jesus defeats the power of death, and because Christ is raised, Paul tells us that **we shall be raised from the dead**. Jesus’ is what Paul calls the “first fruits”. Jesus’ resurrection is a foretaste of what we will all experience. So, the Biblical answer to the question, “What will happen when we die?” is that we shall all be raised to life. We won’t wallow in dust and decay, we won’t lose our identity and consciousness, and we won’t cease to exist. No, we will be given new life beyond the grave.

That said, this poses another important question. “What will it be like?” Are we going to float around on clouds playing harps? Will we be disembodied spirits? We will become ghosts, waiting to be investigated by the Ghost Hunters, or needing a psychic to tell us its time

to “Go into the light”? Not at all! Paul tells us that the death of our physical body is the prelude to life in a new sort of body. He likens death and resurrection to the planting of a seed: The seed appears dead and dried out, but it sprouts to life in a way that looks very different from the seed itself. Paul goes on to make several important contrasts to life on this earth and the resurrection life which is ours in Christ.

First of all, our earthly bodies are perishable. The resurrection body is imperishable. You know how it is with our current bodies: We get old, we get sick, our arteries clog up, our bones get brittle, and we are all subject to various problems based on our genetic inheritance. Our earthly bodies are perishable. They don't last. They wear out. They die. But the resurrection life is not like this. We will be in a constant state of renewal – without illness or decay.

Next Paul says that, while our earthly bodies wind up in a state of dishonor, we will be raised in glory. He's referring to the fact that a dead body is nothing glorious to behold. In ancient Jewish culture especially, a dead body was viewed as unclean and to be avoided if at all possible. In our day, most of the dead bodies we encounter are in funeral homes where they have been artificially treated to resemble a person who is asleep. But without this, a dead body is subject to constant decay, and quickly becomes something very nasty indeed. There is no dignity or beauty in a corpse. And yet Paul says that, after our bodies die, we will be raised in a new kind of body that won't break down or decay, and won't ever be seen as a source of contamination or impurity.

Paul follows this with a contrast between our earthly bodies of weakness and resurrection bodies of power. You all know how limited these earthly bodies are. We are bound in space and time; we are all confined within certain boundaries of strength, endurance, intelligence and insight. But the resurrection body will have much a much broader range of abilities. When we look to the stories of Jesus' resurrection for guidance, we notice him having much greater freedom than an earthly body would allow: he appears at will in different locations without having to walk from place to place, and he even goes through locked doors. At the same time, he can be touched, and in one instance is even described as cooking fish. He is also able to disappear from this physical world while remaining eternally in the presence of God the Father. It's hard to imagine, and that's why all Paul can do is give us metaphors for the resurrection body. But this much we can say – the new body will not be subject to the same limitations as the earthly body.

Paul's final contrast comes as he says that the earthly body is physical, while the resurrection body is spiritual. There are groups that have looked for a resurrection of the dead into physical bodies that are essentially the same as our current bodies, yet free from age, disease or death. But Paul is saying that the resurrection body is going to be life on a whole new plane, not limited to this earthly, material realm. As with the resurrected Jesus, our new bodies will be of a spiritual nature.

Did any of you ever have an old IBM personal computer running on a 486 system? Some of the first ones didn't even have a hard drive. You accessed software of off big floppy disks that you had to use each time you started the computer. Internet access was nothing like it is today - you were lucky if you even had email. Do you remember the old monitors that only

displayed characters in green? Compare that to what a computer can do today. Their abilities are a world away from what those first computers were like. They are still computers. They share some things in common, but are exponentially more powerful. I suspect that resurrection body will be something like that. There will be continuity, but a huge expansion of capacity.

You might be wondering, **“When will this happen?”** The best answer to this question is **one word: Mystery!** I know that there are people who try to harmonize all the Bible has to say about resurrection so as to develop a coherent description of everything that will happen to us when we die. The truth is, there are times when the Bible talks about us going directly to be with God immediately when we die – as in today’s gospel reading when Jesus tells the thief that he will join him in paradise that very day. On the other hand, the Bible talks about a time of resurrection at the end of earthly history when all the dead will be raised. Paul seems to talk about both, as did Jesus. How this will work out in practice is a mystery. The language of a general resurrection of the dead at the end of time comes to us through a certain type of religious literature – which I mentioned last week – called Apocalyptic. It’s a highly symbolic, metaphorical type of language, which makes it a little hard to know how literally to understand it. Some would try to combine the two perspectives by saying that when we die we immediately go to be with God, but don’t receive our resurrection bodies until the end of history and the final judgment. But truthfully, the nature of Biblical symbolism is such that we should be careful in thinking we know exactly how this will take place. This especially so because God exists outside of time – being the creator of time itself – and so our definitions of before, during and after may not be very meaningful in God’s eternal realm. Suffice to say, even though we die, yet shall we live, as God raises us to new life in Christ.

The practical question flowing from all this is, **“What do I do about it?”** Paul tells us, “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.” Resurrection and eternal life are certainties we can count on. We don’t need to be caught up in speculation or worry over what happens when we die. The question for Paul is how we live now. It’s how we live now that influences the way we enter eternity. And even then, as Jesus shows us from the cross, God’s grace is prevalent. He asks God to forgive the unrepentant people who are crucifying him. He promises paradise to the thief who has a last minute change of heart. It’s in light of this amazing grace, that Paul tells us to focus all our attention and energy on serving God in Jesus Christ. In our daily lives; in our work in the world; in our relationships and service in the church – Christ is to be the model for our lives and the goal of all that we do. For when we dedicate our lives to Christ, we have the assurance that nothing we do is in vain. We will live in God’s eternity and experience Christ’s resurrection, so that nothing will ever separate us from God or take us out of God’s hand. Because Christ is risen, we can have confidence that we also shall be raised. Alleluia. Amen.