

## GOOD NEWS FROM THE BATTLE LINES

I Corinthians 15:1-11, 24-26, 30-32, 54-58

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on Easter Sunday, April 12, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### Focus Texts

*(Verses 1-11)*

*Now I should remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.*

*For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.*

*(Verses 24-26)*

*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. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

*(Verses 30-32a)*

*And why are we putting ourselves in danger every hour? I die every day! That is as certain, brothers and sisters, as my boasting of you—a boast that I make in Christ Jesus our Lord. If with merely human hopes I fought with wild animals at Ephesus, what would I have gained by it?*

*(54-57)*

*When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:*

*‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’*

*‘Where, O death, is your victory?’*

*Where, O death, is your sting?’*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*(Verse 58)*

*Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.*

In the four churches I have served in three regions of the country, on this Sunday each year the sanctuary is filled, attendance is the higher than at any other service during the year, including Christmas, and the atmosphere is charged with energy, especially when the day is as gorgeous as this one.

On Friday, one staff member saw me printing off the umpteenth draft of this sermon and quipped: “You ready for your big weekend? This is like the Christian Olympics.”

It is.

I later thought: “If the service is like the Olympics, the sermon needs to sail through the air like the javelin, not plop and thud like the shot put.”

Normally on Easter, I preach one of the Gospel stories of women finding the tomb empty and racing to tell disciples that Jesus is risen,<sup>1</sup> or I preach about the risen Jesus appearing to a variety but limited number of people, most of whom he already knew.<sup>2</sup>

These conventional stories of the empty tomb and resurrection appearances form the bookends of the early Christian belief and claim that God raised Jesus from the dead. Indeed this is the belief and claim that draws us here today – no matter what stage of formal belief we have concerning it. It is the belief and claim without which Christ’s birth would have passed unnoticed, rendering us with no real reason to celebrate Christmas.

Occasionally, I venture into an Easter sermon about the nature of the resurrection and remind people that the resurrection is ultimately a mystery that cannot be adequately comprehended through science nor described through linguistics – as evidenced by the contradictory phrase Paul uses – “spiritual body.”<sup>3</sup>

- Is it a spirit?
- Is it a body?

Clearly this thing that happened on Easter morning is a mystery, more to be accepted and believed than to be analyzed, understood, and described.

If narratives of empty tomb and resurrection appearances describe the “what” of the resurrection, and if phrases such as “spiritual body” seek to describe the “how,” I want today to talk about the “why” – the “why” of resurrection.

Why was Jesus raised from the dead? Why believe it? What is at stake for us?

## I.

Unlike the writer Raymond Carver, to whom my 2007 Easter’s sermon referred,<sup>4</sup> I find it difficult to believe in resurrection without believing in God, and, with the Apostle Paul, I find it difficult to believe in God without believing also in the resurrection. Follow me along here:

- If we believe that the human creature is simply a collection of mass or energy, created by virtue of happenstance rather than intention, and if we believe that emotions like joy and hate and anger and jealousy and ecstasy and love are simply chemical or physiological reactions within our brains, then I am not sure we can believe in resurrection as anything other than a physiological occurrence, and I am not sure we can believe in a God who is any way active or personal.
- But if on the other hand we hold open the possibility that there is a God, and that God has the capacity to be active among men and women, plants and animals, then I maintain it is both logical and necessary to believe in resurrection.

Let me explain.

Even if we believe that an active and personal God exists, we still know, based on our experience, that life falls short of what any concept of a good and loving God would will. In our experience,

- There is evil
- There is pain
- There is suffering
- There is injustice

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12; John 20:1-10.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 28:16-20; Mark 16:9-20; Luke 24:13-49; John 20:11-21:25.

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 15:35-57, especially vs. 44.

<sup>4</sup> “Easter and Raymond Carver,” a sermon preached by Larry R. Hayward at Westminster Presbyterian Church, April 8, 2007.

- Bad things happen to good people
- Good things happen to bad people.

In the words of Ecclesiastes:

What has been is what will be,  
And what has been done is what will be done;  
And there is nothing new under the sun.<sup>5</sup>

For a good and caring God to exist with any credibility, God has to *come* and *experience with us* the heartache and suffering and pain we go through in this world. A God who is not willing to suffer with us is a God on whose credibility we cannot rely, a God to whom we cannot relate at the hour of our deepest sin and greatest need.

Furthermore, because of the intensity and massiveness of human suffering, it is not sufficient that God simply suffer *with* us. God must suffer the *worst* of what we suffer and be victim to that which *victimizes* us. God must “descend into hell.”<sup>6</sup> Indeed, God must die.

But even if God does nothing more than suffer and die – which is a lot – God will still only be a *companion* to us in our suffering and an *antidote* to our isolation. As such, God will not be worthy of the titles he claims and others claim for him. “Lord of lords, King of kings, God of gods.”

For God to be God, there must be

- Some sense in which God overcomes our suffering
- Some sense in which God conquers the evil that lies behind it.

In fact, for God to be God, God has to overcome the greatest of our enemies – Death:

- The natural, poignant, but still often unwanted deaths of people we love at the end of long and fruitful lives
- The sudden deaths of infants and children
- The angering deaths by accident, overdose, suicide, murder
- The horrid deaths brought about by starvation, disease, poverty, war, genocide, natural disaster.

For God to be God, we want an end to the way Death pays its surprise visits

- To police in Pittsburg
- To people learning English and citizenship in Binghamton
- To baseball pitchers in California
  
- To earthquake victims in Italy.

For God to be God, we want some sense in which the “good news” means what it meant when it was first used in the Bible:<sup>7</sup>

- “good news from the battle lines”
- good news from the battle God wages against the powers that threaten to destroy us.

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If the resurrection has occurred, then why is death hanging on, like the smell of a morgue? Why is it still making headlines – in newspapers that grow thinner by the week and fewer in number by the month?

The answer is this: While the resurrection of Jesus Christ has indeed occurred, it has come from *outside* history *into* history. Its fulfillment has not yet been completed in our world. Hence, the appearances of the risen Christ point to the day to come.

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<sup>5</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9.

<sup>6</sup> This provision of *The Apostles’ Creed* is often omitted by churches; its inclusion bears witness to the point in this paragraph.

<sup>7</sup> II Samuel 4:10.

Then comes the end [writes Paul],  
When [Christ] hands over the kingdom  
To God the Father,  
After he has destroyed  
Every ruler and every authority and power.  
For he must reign  
Until he has put all his enemies under his feet.  
The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

According to Paul,

- The appearances of the risen Christ tell us that the ultimate victory has been won, but battle skirmishes continue.
- They tell us that all will be well in the end, but the end is not yet.
- They tell us that death has been conquered, but its effects are still felt and known, like a storm that has passed through town and dissipated, but left damage, cleanup, and insurance claims in its wake.

“Then comes the end,” says Paul; “when [Christ] hands over the kingdom to God the Father...”

In the meantime, we live toward “the end” in the present, and we even allow “the end” to live toward us. Armed with the power of the resurrection, sustained by the identification Christ established with us in our suffering and his, we lean into the end, like desert pilgrims leaning into wind and sand, sensing oasis ahead.

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This javelin I have sought to throw today is, I believe, a summary and restating of I Corinthians 15, the only place where, according to a scholar I know, Paul claims we have to believe a particular thing.<sup>8</sup>

- Paul’s claim is not about the “how” of a “spiritual body”
- Nor about “who” arrives first at the empty tomb.

Rather, Paul’s claim is that in order for faith to be anything other than “in vain,” the resurrection of Christ is a necessary component to it.

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Interspersed within Paul’s words about the necessity and significance of the resurrection, are words he lifts up in praise of human effort. Sometimes he points to his own efforts:

...I am the least of the apostles [he says], unfit to be called an apostle...But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace towards me has not been in vain.

I fought with wild animals [he says later]. Wild animals.

Sometimes, he calls others to similar, Herculean efforts:

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

Paul’s emphasis on the resurrection leads him to call himself and others to the power, the energy, the drive, the determination to carry on, to live toward the hope the resurrection is.

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Good people of Westminster Church:

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<sup>8</sup> From my handwritten notes quoting Dr. Beverly Roberts Gaventa on a paper on this passage by Doug King at the Moveable Feast Preaching Seminary in January 2009.

- Members and friends
- Visitors and family
- People *from* the community and travelling *through* this community

I ask you: *Can you believe the resurrection in such a way that it empowers you, leads you to carry on?*

- Do you get up every day – and nearly every hour of the night – to the sounds of a newborn who just cannot quite seem to stop crying? Because of the triumph of God in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the holy and maternal, holy and paternal labor in which you engage is not in vain.
- Do you spend every waking ounce of “energy, intelligence, imagination, and love” trying to adjust to your own disability, trying to fight for the disability of one who lives in your household and bears your name? Because of the triumph of God in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the holy labor of diplomacy and battle you wage is labor that is not in vain.
- Do you take every step the doctor advises so that you might experience the fulfillment of that holy commandment to “be fruitful and multiply”?<sup>9</sup> Do you seek the enactment of that commandment through adoption whether you are married or single? Because of the triumph of God in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the holy effort you make with science and with nature and with human law is labor that is not in vain.
- Do you arise every morning to hit the pavement – asphalt or electronic – to seek to fulfill those holy commandments – “fill the earth and subdue it”<sup>10</sup> and “six days you shall labor”<sup>11</sup> – seeking meaningful work because you have never really known anything but supporting yourself and your family, being productive, being of use?
- Do you get up every day to try to make a small contribution to the healing of the global economy?
- Do you get up every day to help keep our country safe from every kind of attack – old and new, known and unknown?
- Do you get up every day trying to make this community a place where teachers and nurses and firefighters can live?
- Do you seek to make this community a city in which the poor and immigrant survive, the elderly find dignity, and the young learn to their capability?
- Do you get up every day to try to live and teach “the things that make for peace”<sup>12</sup>?

Christ died  
Christ was raised  
Christ appeared.

Therefore,  
My beloved,  
Be steadfast,  
Immoveable,  
Always excelling in the work of the Lord

Because you know  
That in the Lord  
Your labour is not in vain.

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<sup>9</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 1:28.

<sup>11</sup> Exodus 20:9.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 19:42.