

The end of the road ... for death!

1 Corinthians 15:19-26

April 4, 2010

If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world ...

We gather today to celebrate Easter, to remember the resurrection of Jesus. But we don't always agree on what that means. Even within the church, there are differing opinions about the meaning of Jesus' resurrection.

Some folks are uncomfortable with the notion of a bodily resurrection, believing such an idea to be outdated, unnecessary, too literal. Many understand the resurrection of Jesus as symbolically true, spiritually true. The spirit of Jesus and his message outlives his death, lives on in us, could not be "put down" by the powers of this world. Resurrection faith is expressed this way in a more convincing, "palatable" form.

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But the bodily resurrection of Jesus is not unnecessary. It is essential to the gospel. It is the heart of the gospel. The gospel without the bodily resurrection of Jesus is like the exodus without the exodus! It is as if God were to say to the Hebrew slaves in Egypt: "Be happy! Know that I am with you. You will live and die as slaves, never leaving the land of your oppressors, but be glad I am with you."

The heart of our faith is that, one day, we too will be raised with Jesus. At every graveside, we pray this prayer:

Eternal God, who breathed into lifeless dust and created man and woman in your image, we now return to the earth the lifeless body of your servant, believing that as you raised Jesus Christ from death, you will breathe life into us again so that we may live with you for ever.

When Paul wrote the words we read this morning, he was not addressing unbelievers, people who had no faith in Jesus. He wrote to people in the church, believers, men and women who put their faith in the resurrected Jesus, but who found the idea of bodily resurrection unnecessary and even repugnant.

That idea was repugnant to them, because they saw body, matter, as the problem. It is the limitations, the frailty, the fallibility of this body and this world from which we must be saved! Resurrection sets our souls free from the body. Why would we want to bring it back?

Such a disparagement of the body and the material world is common among many different religious expressions. And it is an understandable posture, given our experience in this “vale of tears.” Faith offers us a way out.

But Jesus faith, resurrection faith, does not offer a way out, but a way forward. It does not promise escaping the body, but redeeming it. It does not promise escaping this world, but redeeming it. It is a faith in love with what God has made, and it makes a far more radical, if less palatable, claim.

But the truth is that Christ has been raised from death, as the guarantee that those who sleep in death will also be raised ...

Who are we talking about? Who are those who sleep in death? My father, Lynne’s father, Bob Sheridan, Bonnie Blankenfeld, Bill Kimball, Dick Swanson, Ardythe Townsend, Dick Morris, Lory Hornung. All of them! Jesus’ resurrection is the guarantee of new life for all of them!

For just as all people die because of their union with Adam, in the same way all will be raised to life because of their union with Christ.

All! All?

The meaning of “all” may provoke debate among us, but it is clear -- at least to me! -- that all means all, that our hope in Jesus is not selective or exclusive, but embraces all of humanity, all of us, because of our union with Christ. And who does make us one with Christ? We don’t make it happen. Christ does!

But each one will be raised in proper order: Christ, first of all; then, at the time of his coming, those who belong to him ...

When are we raised to life? *At the time of his coming.* In other words, not yet! Our resurrection, the resurrection of any of us, is something that has not yet happened. Who has been raised so far? One man -- Jesus! The world we hope for, the life we long for, the kingdom we live for ... is not yet!

This is an important point. Our hope is not for the “escape” of the soul to heaven, now, but for resurrection, one day. Jesus did not die and go to heaven. Jesus died and was raised to life by God! Think about it! Think about what we have to look forward to!

Then the end will come ...

Then the end will come. The end of the road. The end of the road for death!

The last enemy to be defeated will be death ...

Our hope is not for life after death -- as if death continues its sway over all of existence, but we are somehow able to survive it -- but for the end of death!

God himself will be with us! He will be our God! He will wipe away all tears from our eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared!

It is a world, a life, hard to imagine. But could any world be more desirable? Could any hope be more compelling? Could any vision of what is to come make us want to love and care for this world any more? Could any story make us more grateful for what our God has done and will do for us?

If our hope in Christ is good for this life only and no more, then we deserve more pity than anyone else in all the world ...

Put your hope in Christ! Welcome his gifts of wisdom and courage and grace that allow you to live this life well.

Put your hope in Christ! Look forward eagerly, expectantly, joyfully, to the day, one day, when God will raise you, along with all those who belong to Christ, to a life that is ...

Well, we will just have to wait to see what it is like, won't we?