

1 *Corinthians 15:12-21, 50-58 (NRSV)*

¹²Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; ¹⁴and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. ¹⁵We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that he raised Christ—whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. ¹⁶For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. ¹⁷If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. ¹⁹If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

²⁰But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being.

⁵⁰What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴When 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.”

⁵⁵“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, 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.

Christ is risen! Alleluia! . . . Now, the question is “So what?”

The Corinthian Christians would probably say they were on fire for Jesus, but Paul knew that their enthusiasm was a mile wide and an inch deep. They prized certain spiritual gifts, such as speaking in tongues, above all else. They had concluded that, because it was all about the spirit, what they did with their bodies didn't matter. Besides, their physical bodies would be left behind soon enough. In their fervid embrace of the “spiritual” they had come to an over-spiritualized sense of themselves and of the gospel.

And most astoundingly to Paul, they had even come to deny that one day, all people would be resurrected just as Jesus had been resurrected. Paul knew that their denial of bodily resurrection¹ – and there is no kind of resurrection that isn't bodily; it is what the Greek word meant – underlay all the other mistakes they had made. Thus, all of Paul's lengthy letter to them which we know as 1 Corinthians, builds to the climactic argument for Jesus' resurrection and our own in chapter 15.

In this portion of the letter, Paul tells them that hundreds of people saw Jesus after his resurrection and that most of them are still alive. Go find them and ask! And Paul tells them the great truth that we too can sometimes forget – if Jesus was not resurrected, then we've believed a lie and are to be pitied for it. For if Jesus was not resurrected, there is no Christian gospel to be proclaimed. Paul knows full well that without the resurrection, Jesus was just another failed would-be messiah executed by the Romans.

Further, Paul writes, just as Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised. Paul uses a harvest analogy: Jesus is “the first fruits of those who have died.” One day, the harvest will be completed. Paul understands that we are naturally curious about this future resurrected body and in portions of chapter 15 he strives to find suitable analogies, though he knows

¹The “big” book on the resurrection is N.T. Wright's, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. It is a massive volume with which anyone who wishes to deny the resurrection (or deny that it means bodily!) will have to contend for years to come. Wright's newest book also deals with these subjects and is much more accessible to laypeople: *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*.

that the effort will fall short. It is even foolish to speculate. All Paul knows is that as Jesus died and was then resurrected, so shall we die and then be resurrected upon Jesus' return. Our resurrected body will be like Jesus' resurrected body. Like Jesus, our mortal bodies will one day put on imperishability. This is the victory God gives us through Jesus Christ.

Rev. Michael Reeves on the "So What?"

Every week we express what we believe – that Jesus Christ was crucified, buried, raised in three days, and sits at the right hand of the Father. We are united by the very bedrock of our faith – that Christ arose. There is no other option in our belief system according to this passage...if the resurrection is false, our faith is in vain and has no foundation. The resurrection of Christ that we celebrated last week is of first importance, but so what? What does that really have to do with us today?

Another key question that comes from this passage is what kind of attitude and behavior is evident in our life because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead? This year we have focused on the Holy Habits of faith that we should exhibit as disciples of Jesus Christ. The idea is that as we intentionally work on these habits, we will become more mature as disciples and be equipped to live out God's plan and intention for our life. Paul puts it this way in this passage: "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." Peterson puts it this way in *The Message*: "With all this going for us, stand your ground. And don't hold back. Throw yourselves into the work of the Master, confident that nothing you do for him is a waste of time."

That raises another critical question: How are you fitting into God's overall plan? One way we can approach that question is to review what God has done through St Andrew since we began a common journey in 1986. We have challenged new members to support this community of faith with their prayers, presence, gifts and service and while some did not fulfill those vows, many did and the result has been growth and blessing beyond our expectations in 1986. And here we still hold fast to a mission of making disciples. So since you became a part of the St Andrew family, have you been one who has worked on those vows of support and participation, or have you been a casual spectator?

For more than a year we have come to a place of identifying what our strategic plan is to be God's people, united in faith and common purpose, and with faith in the unlimited possibilities in front of us. Over the next few weeks we will be exploring what it is expected in being united and what it means to be unlimited. What an exciting journey we share! We are asked to reflect our faith by being a part of something greater than ourselves. I hope that you will make every effort to not miss a Sunday as we consider some other relevant questions about our faith and our future as a church.

So what?

You'd think that after Paul brings his argument to its grand climax in v. 54-57, he would go on to talk about our glorious future with God in the restored and renewed cosmos, the new heavens and earth, but he does not. Instead, with the chorus, "Where, O death, is your victory?" still ringing in our ears, Paul writes, "Therefore . . . your labor is not in vain."

My work for Jesus is not a waste of time? That's the big "so what" of Easter and resurrection?

In a word, yes. Too many Christians have this idea that we get through this life so we can get on to the next life, where we can leave all this behind and enjoy some sort of eternal, disembodied bliss. However, the biblical story is not about a world left behind, but a world put right. Easter doesn't point us toward some faraway place we imagine to be "heaven," but to the marriage of heaven and earth in this place.

God promises Abraham that all the families on the earth will be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). Micah brings God's promise of a day when swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (Micah 4). Isaiah brings the promise of a new heavens and a new earth, where there will be no infants who die young, where lions and lambs will feed together, where people build homes and plant crops (Isaiah 65).

These are all images of God's creation as God intended it. This is the hope to which Easter points us. Jesus' resurrection is the first fruits of the new heavens and the new earth; it embodies God's victory over death.

Thus, Paul's "therefore" of 15:58 makes perfect sense. It is because of Jesus' resurrection that we can come to our God-given work confident that it is never in vain. Easter is the concrete proof that God's victory has been won and that it will come to its full and glorious consummation. Our part now is to press ahead without fail, to do all that we can to excel in building for the kingdom of God. And in this, the Spirit of Christ strengthens and encourages us so that we might be bold like Rahab, obedient like Abraham, and forgiving like David. Always inviting, always giving, always serving . . . always and in all things. None of it goes to waste.

“Physical body” v. “Spiritual body” in the NRSV (15:44)

Whenever readers come to 1 Corinthians 15, they are nearly always confused by, and often misled by, the regrettable translation of verse 44: “It [our body] is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body” (NRSV). Understandably, we assume that Paul is contrasting our current physical, i.e., material, body, with a resurrected spiritual, i.e., non-material, body. This is how we are used to understanding words like “physical” and “spiritual.” But this translation leads us to exactly the wrong conclusion about Paul’s meaning. Indeed, it is the very mistake that the Corinthians have made and Paul is trying to correct!

Richard Hays at Duke Seminary is widely recognized as one of the foremost Pauline scholars of our day. In the following passage from his 1 Corinthians commentary in the *Interpretation* series, he helps us to see what Paul is actually saying in the Greek about our resurrected bodies. He writes:

Whereas our present bodies are “sown” (in this life) perishable, dishonorable, and weak, the resurrection body will be raised (in the next life) imperishable, glorious, and powerful (vv. 42–43). Paul thus produces an impressive piece of visionary preaching, extolling the glories that await us. He is seeking to make the resurrection of the dead seem appealing rather than appalling to the Corinthians.

Yet the last item in this sequence is the one that he is driving toward: “It is sown a natural body [*psychikon sōma*], it is raised a spiritual body [*pneumatikon sōma*]” (v. 44, NIV). This is the nub of his argument. This last contrast, however, presents a vexing problem for translators (cf. 2:14, where the same contrast occurs). The phrase *psychikon sōma* is notoriously difficult to translate into English. The NRSV’s translation (“physical body”) is especially unfortunate, for it reinstates precisely the dualistic dichotomy between physical and spiritual that Paul is struggling to overcome. In any case, *psychikon* certainly does not mean “physical.” Furthermore, although *pneumatikon sōma* is easier to translate, “spiritual body” sounds like an oxymoron. What sense are we to make of this?

By far the most graceful translation of verse 44, and the one that best conveys the meaning of Paul’s sentence, is found in the *Jerusalem Bible*: “When it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit. If the soul has its own embodiment, so does the spirit have its own embodiment.” That is Paul’s point: our mortal bodies embody the *psychē* (“soul”), the animating force of our present existence, but the resurrection body will embody the divinely given *pneuma* (“spirit”). It is to be a “spiritual body” not in the sense that it is somehow made out of spirit and vapors, but in the sense that it is determined by the spirit and gives the spirit form and local habitation.

All of this is a bit hard to follow in translation, but the drift of Paul’s argument is clear in the Greek, where his use of *psychikon* in verse 44 is explained by the key reference to *psychē* in the story of the creation of Adam (v. 45). Paul’s use of the difficult term *psychikon sōma* is determined by the fact that he wants to cite Genesis 2:7 (LXX) in support of his position: “The first *man*, Adam, as scripture says, *became a living soul* [*psychē*]; but the last Adam has become a life-giving Spirit” (v. 45, JB). The *psychē* is linked with Adam, the initiator of decay and death, but Christ, by his resurrection, becomes “life-giving Spirit” (cf. v. 22), the initiator of a new order of humanity. The body associated with Adam (which Paul therefore calls *psychikon*) is mortal and bound to the earth from which it came; on the other hand, the body associated with the risen Christ (which Paul therefore calls *pneumatikon*) will be immortal and stamped by the image of “the man of heaven” (vv. 48–49). . . . A similar point is made somewhat more clearly in Philippians 3:20–21:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control [cf. 1 Cor. 15:23–28], will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body. (Phil. 3:20–21, author’s translation)

READING WITH HEART & MIND, MAR 30 — APRIL 6

Monday, Matthew 28 Matthew’s resurrection account. How does it differ from Mark’s? What perspectives do they share?

Tuesday, John 20 & 21 John’s resurrection account. How might you account for its length? What can you infer about the nature of Jesus’ resurrected body?

Wednesday, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 The first portion of Paul’s great chapter on Jesus’ resurrection. What does he claim?

Thursday, 1 Corinthians 15:12-34 Does the resurrection claim really matter? Why?

Friday, 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 Paul tries his best to understand Jesus’ and our own resurrected bodies. Don’t be thrown off by v. 44; read the text box on this page.

Saturday, Job 19:25-27 In the light of Jesus’ bodily resurrection, we can now understand Job’s confidence that one day he would, in his own flesh, see God.

Sermon Notes

Get the Monkey Off Your Back: Making Sense of Creation and Evolution

A New *Something Else* series begins next Sunday, April 6 at 11:00

The debate around issues of creation and evolution isn't going away. Instead, it seems to get more and more heated, with a lot more talk than understanding. In this series, we'll try to make sense of the debate and see that Christian truth claims are not at odds with scientific claims.

**Taught by Scott Engle at 11:00 in Festival Hall on Sunday morning.
today: A world religions Q & A next week: Faith, Science, & the Bible**

Spring Bible Academy starts tomorrow!

To register go to www.thebibleacademy.com

We've got another great class line-up for this spring. There will be the usual offering of diverse, interesting, and meaningful classes during the day and in the evening. We've also got another one-day Saturday workshop scheduled. As always, childcare will be provided. Please join us . . . and register soon.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Because the Christian claim that Jesus was bodily resurrected is so astounding and so counter to our own life experiences, many people are tempted to find a way around it. They want to build a Christian faith on a foundation of Jesus' "spiritual" resurrection and the disciples' "experiences" (read visions) of a risen Christ. Discuss why Jesus' bodily resurrection is so fundamental to our faith. Do you believe in Jesus' bodily resurrection? If so, why? What do we lose if we try to construct a Christianity without Jesus' bodily resurrection? Are we expected to accept the claims of Jesus' bodily resurrection on blind faith?
2. The problem for many Christians isn't that they *disbelieve* in the resurrection of the body, but they simply *don't know* the Christian proclamation. They don't know that when we stand to say the Apostles' Creed each Sunday at St. Andrew, affirming our belief in the "resurrection of the body," that we are talking about our own bodies, not Jesus'. (The affirmation of Jesus' resurrection happens earlier in the creed). Why do you think that this has never been explained to so many Christians? Why would this claim about our resurrection have been so important to Paul? What are some reasons why the Corinthian Christians would have denied it? Is it just too fantastical? Is it because it is at odds with the idea that when we die our souls go off to heaven and that is the end of the story? How can we grow more comfortable with this Good News as it has been proclaimed for 2,000 years?
3. The resurrection hope is grounded in God's material creation, this cosmos in which you and I live. What is "the work of the Lord" in which we are to excel? To what does God call us? What responsibilities has God given us? Is it only "church work?" What, specifically, are you doing now, this month, this year to build for the kingdom of God? To put it another way, what are you doing in the *present* because of our *future* hope?