

The Everlasting Resurrection

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

April 4, 2010

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“ . . . the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen”

1 Corinthians 15:12–24 (The Message)

Now, let me ask you something profound yet troubling. If you became believers because you trusted the proclamation that Christ is alive, risen from the dead, how can you let people say that there is no such thing as a resurrection? If there's no resurrection, there's no living Christ. And face it—if there's no resurrection for Christ, everything we've told you is smoke and mirrors, and everything you've staked your life on is smoke and mirrors. Not only that, but we would be guilty of telling a string of barefaced lies about God, all these affidavits we passed on to you verifying that God raised up Christ—sheer fabrications, if there's no resurrection.

If corpses can't be raised, then Christ wasn't, because he was indeed dead. And if Christ weren't raised, then all you're doing is wandering about in the dark, as lost as ever. It's even worse for those who died hoping in Christ and resurrection, because they're already in their graves. If all we get out of Christ is a little inspiration for a few short years, we're a pretty sorry lot. But the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries.

There is a nice symmetry in this: Death initially came by a man, and resurrection from death came by a man. Everybody dies in Adam; everybody comes alive in Christ. But we have to wait our turn: Christ is first, then those with him at his Coming, the grand consummation when, after crushing the opposition, he hands over his kingdom to God the Father.

Revelation 21:1-6 (NRSV)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ²And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them as their God;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
⁴he will wipe every tear from their eyes.

Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.”

⁵And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true.” ⁶Then he said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

Alleluia! It is Easter. Christ is risen. And, one day, so shall we!

And so we come to the final phrases of the Apostles' Creed, a perfect setting for Easter 2010. The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting are simple affirmations of the Christian hope, i.e., our confidence that the story ends well. They complete the narrative of the Creed and bring us back to Jesus, for “the end” is not really about an event, but a who.

The resurrection of the body

Earlier in the creed we affirmed our faith that Jesus was “crucified, dead, and buried” and that “on the third day he rose from the dead.” In our study of Jesus' resurrection, we talked about the meaning of resurrection to the ancient Jews and even the Greeks. We learned that resurrection is not the same as resuscitation, being brought back to life. Instead, resurrection is about moving forward from death to a newly embodied life on the other

side of the grave. We can think of resurrection as death's reversal, whereas resuscitation is merely its delay.

It is important to remember that resurrection is about the restoration of the whole person – body and soul, we might say. After his resurrection, Jesus walked with his disciples, ate with them, and even asked one to touch his wounds. Jesus' resurrected body wasn't exactly the same as it was, but it was certainly similar and quite material.

1 Corinthians 15 is a lengthy passage from Paul's letter to the believers in Corinth, Greece. They have an over-spiritualized sense of themselves and of the Christian gospel, leading them to deny even that Jesus was actually resurrected. They thought the exalted Jesus had to be above the "messiness" of an actual material body.

Paul can hardly believe what he hears from them. Deny Jesus' resurrection!? He proceeds to list witnesses who can testify to the truth of the claim. There are nearly 500 and most are still living, Paul writes. And, he goes on, if Jesus wasn't bodily resurrected¹ then Christianity is one big lie and the believers, all those who placed their faith in Jesus, are to be pitied. "If Christ has not been raised," Paul writes, "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins . . . if for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Corinthians 15:17-19).

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth;

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, dead, and buried;
the third day he rose from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and sitteth at the right hand of God
the Father Almighty;
from thence he shall come to judge
the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

But there's more, which is the focus of the passage printed above. If Jesus wasn't resurrected, then we won't be resurrected ourselves. However, as Peterson artfully puts in his paraphrase, Paul writes, "the truth is that Christ has been raised up, the first in a long legacy of those who are going to leave the cemeteries . . . Everybody dies in Adam; everybody comes alive in Christ. But we have to wait our turn: Christ is first, then those with him at his Coming." To translate it more literally, Jesus Christ is "the first fruits of the those who have died." Jesus is the first to be resurrected, then when he returns, the rest of us will be resurrected too! FULL STOP – THE REST OF US??!

Yes, simply put, the creedal affirmation, "the resurrection of the body," is not about Jesus' resurrection, which we affirmed earlier in the creed, it is about our own

bodies. As Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised! Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11).

The Jews of Jesus' day believed that when the Last Days arrived, all the dead would be resurrected. Paul is agreeing with that. Jesus is the first and the rest of us will follow; there just happens to be 2,000 years, so far, between the first person to be resurrected, Jesus, and the rest of the us. To use Paul's agricultural metaphor of Jesus as the "first fruits," God's harvest is underway, it just seems to be taking a long time, by our measure of time at least.

If this all seems just a bit too fantastical and even weird to you, consider our affirmation of Jesus' resurrection. That doesn't seem so fantastical only because we've gotten used to the idea. But once you've accepted as true the claim that Jesus was resurrected and walked out

¹Yes, "bodily resurrected" is redundant, but I feel compelled to say it once in awhile because I think too many Christians don't really understand the meaning of "resurrection," *anastasis* in the Greek.

of the tomb after having died . . . well, then everything is on the table. Being a Christian actually takes a big imagination, a mind and heart that refuses to try and shrink God into a small box that seems “reasonable” to us.

Fleming Rutledge writes²:

A story was told me recently that might be apocryphal but might well be true. The two people in question, both clergy, are very well known in the American church. One of them is a prolific writer of skeptical books calling the orthodox faith into question. The other is a famous preacher of the gospel. The skeptic, seeking to provoke the preacher, says, “My daughter has two Ph.D.s. How can I expect her to believe anything so unacceptable to the modern mind as the resurrection of the body?” The preacher says, thoughtfully, “I don’t know your daughter. How limited is her imagination?”

Our belief in the resurrection of the body is the promise that I will one day again see my grandfather – solid, material, tactile, *real*. And not only see him, but hug him. What could be better news than that.

And the life everlasting

The final affirmation is the great summing up, lifting up for us the point of all this. It is the affirmation that God’s great project will come to its full and glorious consummation. God’s will shall be done on earth as it is in heaven!

Scripture tells the story of God putting right what went wrong almost from the beginning. God created the cosmos, pronounced it good, and made humans in his image. He gave them a beautiful place to live and work. Yet, tragically, they tossed it all away for the chance to be like gods themselves. So God set about to put things right. God chose a people, Abraham and his descendents, through whom this restoration would proceed. In the end, God, in the person of Jesus Christ, would have to do for Israel and all humanity what they were and we still are unable to do for ourselves – simply to love God and to love neighbor.

When we affirm our belief in everlasting life, it is certainly about ourselves, but it is also about much more. It is about the restoration of community and even of nature. God’s renewal of creation and the restoration of loving relationship is what it has always been about. They are the final fulfillment of promises God made through his many prophets.

In his closing chapters, the writer of Revelation shares with us his glorious visions of this new creation and of our eternity with God. It is like reading a stained glass window. In it, each fragment of glass is borrowed from earlier in the story that began with Genesis. The “new heaven and new earth” is from Isaiah 65 and 66. The loud voices from the throne sing from Ezekiel, as well as Isaiah 35 and 65. The water of life evokes for us the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well to whom he promises “a spring of water that gushes up to eternal life” (John 4). There is the tree of life, which we have not seen since Genesis 3 when the humans were exiled from the Garden of Eden, denying them access to this tree that gives eternal life. Whereas Moses couldn’t see God’s face and live (Exodus 33:20), we are told that God’s servants will see God’s face (Rev. 22:4).

All will be well

It is so easy to be caught up in the troubles and terrors of our lives and our world. Too often, we are overwhelmed by our anxieties and fears. Yet, these apocalyptic visions of a day with no death or tears or pain are God’s promises that all will be well. John Ortberg wrote recently of our hunger for joy, rightful hunger because joy lies at the core of the cosmos. The closing visions of Revelation are one big fountain of joy. We may not always know that all will be well, but God knows it. Ortberg quotes a Christian who lived long ago, Julian of Norwich:

² From Rutledge’s sermon on the resurrection of the body in *Exploring and Proclaiming the Apostles’ Creed*, Ed. Roger van Harn, Eerdmans, 2004.

“All will be well,
And all will be well,
And all manner of things will be well.”

The “End” is not an event but a “ Who.” There is no need for a temple in the new Jerusalem of Revelation 21 because the temple is the LORD God and the Lamb, Jesus (v. 22). There is no need for a sun or the light of a lamp because the LORD God will be our light (22:5). It is the Lamb who is the “Alpha and Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end.”

All this we proclaim each time we stand and affirm the Apostles’ Creed. Each phrase of the creed is packed with meaning and with Good News. For nearly two thousand years, we believers have stood together to announce with one voice these truths. And next Sunday, we’ll do it again.

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A Case for the Crusades?

This new series begins Apr 11 in Scott’s 11:00 class

Is it even possible that a case could be made *for* the crusades? Join us as we take a provocative and eye-opening look at the history of the wars to retake the holy lands.

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Also: every Tuesday, a brownbag in-depth Bible study with Scott Engle from 12:00–1:30, Room 127. Very casual! Just drop in!