

1 Corinthians 15: 1-26; 51-58

Benjamin Franklin once said, "...in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." Our reading this morning pushes back on this little nugget of wisdom. In it, Paul acknowledges the reality of death. He also acknowledges the fact that death does not have the final word. Because of Jesus' resurrection, death is defeated and we will live again. Sorry, Mr. Franklin. It appears that life, not death is the sure thing.

Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian church to address the divisive issues that were tearing them apart. Last week we heard Paul's poetic description of Agape love. This kind of unconditional and sacrificial love desires wholeness for all people. It's the guiding principle that helps believers live and work together as the Body of Christ. Today's reading takes this thought through to death and beyond. Because as Paul so beautifully reminds us in 1 Corinthians 13:8, "love never ends."

Many of us don't like to talk about death. The subject evokes feelings of sadness and loss. It reminds us that one day, our time on earth will come to an end. It also reminds us that we are not in control. No matter who we are or what we achieve; we all share the same fate.

We can avoid talking about death, but we can't deny its reality. Our lives are filled with subtle and obvious reminders of death's existence. Every day, our news reports the latest number of Coronavirus fatalities. This weekend we will remember the men and women who died while serving in the armed forces. Even our beloved hymns talk about death. Next time you sing one of yours, notice how the final verse often speaks about the hope we have in God's provision after we die.

The death of a loved one raises the question, "What's next?" These poignant moments make people wonder...and hope...that life will continue beyond the grave. As Christians, we believe that it does. Jesus' resurrection on Easter established victory over death. His bodily transformation assures us that we too will live beyond the grave.

The resurrection is one of the core beliefs of our Christian faith. We believe that in Jesus Christ, God became human, died on the cross, and on the third day rose again. These actions are in agreement with the Scriptures. They have cosmic and salvific significance for all people.

We also believe that these actions are intertwined. You can't pick one and reject the rest. If Jesus didn't come, then clearly, he couldn't have died and risen again. If Jesus didn't die, then "rising again" doesn't even make sense. If Jesus didn't rise again, then he was a martyr, not a Messiah. Jesus' significance to every person is grounded in the facts of his death and resurrection.

The Corinthian Church was divided over the general resurrection of the dead. This teaching is articulated in our creeds and is embraced by the church today. It states that at the end, God will raise all of the dead back to life. Some of the people in Corinth sided with the Pharisees, who rebuked Jesus' resurrection because he was raised before everyone else. Others were influenced by the Greeks who didn't believe in a bodily resurrection of the dead.

Paul devoted this section of his letter to show his readers, both then and now, that Jesus' resurrection is at the center of our faith. He wanted us to know that because Jesus rose from the grave as he promised, we know that what he said is true...that he is God. Because Jesus rose from the grave, we have certainty that our sins are forgiven. Because Jesus rose from the grave, he lives and represents us to God. Because Jesus rose and defeated death, we know that we too will be rise again.

Paul also wanted us to understand that resurrection isn't just a do-over, a revival or a resuscitation. Resurrection is a game-changer. It's a transformation that affects the whole person...body, mind, and spirit.

When Jesus rose on Easter morning, he wasn't a disembodied spirit. Jesus was raised as a whole person. His experience shows us that the physical bodies God will create at the general resurrection will be recognizably us and at the same time unrecognizably different. Like Jesus, we will be transformed. The physical and emotional problems that limit our bodies and minds in this life will be gone. Jesus' resurrection proclaims that death is a one-time thing, but life in God is eternal.

Paul wraps up this section of his letter with these words, "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (vs. 57). This powerful statement reminds us that Jesus' victory over death is our victory as well. Death no longer needs to be a source of dread or fear. It has been defeated. Because of Jesus Christ, we have hope beyond the grave.

Hope, like faith and love, is a powerful force. It arises from our faith in God's love. Hope is a light in the darkness and a burst of color in the dreary landscape of despair. It declares that through death, God will bring us to life on the other side. And God will also bring to life the loved ones we have lost.

Our reading ended at verse 57, but there's one more verse in this important chapter. In verse 58 Paul writes, "Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

Paul is encouraging us to throw ourselves into the life of discipleship. He is reminding us that the Holy Spirit will use our words and the actions to breathe resurrection life into the lives of the people we serve. It's important for us to remember that God works through us, especially when we hesitate to keep helping someone or participate in a ministry because we don't see any results. Paul is encouraging us to have a heavenly perspective in all we do. This perspective keeps us focused on the One who is able to transform the things we do today into something that has eternal results.

Who do you know that is scared, discouraged, and in need of a word of hope? Make some time this week to share the good news that it's life, not death that has the final word. Trust that the Spirit will use your words and actions to breathe resurrection life into their situation. And may this same Spirit continue to grow us in deeper in faith, as we follow Jesus Christ into our world. Amen.