

## “Not Today”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau  
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church  
1 Corinthians 15:12-26  
May 5, 2019 - Third Sunday of Easter

Less than twenty years after Jesus died on the cross, an Apostle named Paul preached in the city of Corinth. It was a bustling Greek town known for having “wealth without culture.” It was kind of a Sin City — a place of energy and commerce that had a reputation for lacking depth. There Paul found a community willing to listen to his proclamation of Christ, crucified and risen.

A church emerged. And Paul went on to other places to continue his work, but he and those Corinthians wrote letters back and forth over the next few years. The Corinthians asked questions, tattled on each other, and argued with Paul. He wrote back with teaching and instruction. There was at least one letter before 1 Corinthians, but it is lost to history.

These letters come before the Gospels are written, and they give us a window into the theology, the disagreements, and the issues with which the early Church was wrestling. In our reading this morning we find Paul on a pretty good rant. Some of these Corinthians have made a mistake in their thinking, and he’s determined to correct it. Paul got word that some are doubting the end-times resurrection of the dead that he has taught. They’re down with Jesus being resurrected, but they’re questioning whether there will be a bodily resurrection of the faithful in the future.<sup>1</sup>

We’ll talk a bit more about what the confusion is and see if it has any bearing on our lives. But first, a reading from chapter 15 of 1 Corinthians:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We 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. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. 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.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the background of the issues in 1 Corinthians 15 are expertly laid out in the *New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary* on 1 Corinthians written by J. Paul Sampley. I am deeply grateful.

We could spend hours picking apart this situation, but I'm pretty sure some of you have Cinco de Mayo plans, so I'll give you the quick version of What in the World is Going On Here?

The word "resurrection" meant different things to different people. The question was up for debate in Judaism. Some Hebrew Bible texts seem to point toward a time in the future when God will raise the dead. Those Pharisees we run into in the Gospels, of which Paul was one in his previous career oppressing followers of Jesus, argued in favor of a bodily resurrection for the faithful. But others disagreed with them.

In the Greek world of Gentiles — who made up most of Paul's new congregation — belief about the physical resurrection of a dead human ranged from "That's impossible, obviously" to "Yeah, I think that could happen to a special person in a miraculous moment." So when Paul came in with his belief that at the end of the age all will be raised in final consummation of God's work of salvation and victory, it was likely shocking news to these folks

Nobody in the Corinthian church was arguing that *Jesus* wasn't raised from the dead. (I'm not certain how Paul would've handled *that*, but it would not have been pretty.) They accepted that the son of God, the Christ, the Messiah would be resurrected that one time. But...the rest of us? With our less-than-divine bodies? What would God want with those? The body is just a bag of bones and flesh in which the soul resides — so this "resurrection of the body" must have some other meaning...

And that's what gets Paul all riled up.

No, no, no, no, no! This is really important, Corinthians!

You can't spiritualize it — turn it into some metaphor or something. You can't put quotations marks around it and make it "resurrection" of the body. Paul was adamant that Christ's resurrection was a *flash-bang* transformative event, and that God's big love and salvation project was both accomplished in that moment and is ongoing and incomplete until the end, when God will finish off God's last enemy — *thanatos* — death.

Paul, who spends so much of the rest of this letter trying to convince the Corinthians to focus on the present moment in caring for one another in community, finds himself reminding them that there is a crucial future-orientation to this whole Jesus thing. They can't just dismiss what Paul has taught them about what God will do! These two truths -- that Christ was raised and we will be too — are absolutely inseparable. For Paul, you can't have one without the other!

I think it's fair to say that Paul would not love the way our congregation seeks to encourage curiosity and questions and wrestling with doubt. But, according to his own theology, Christ is here, not Paul, and so we are left wondering what this weird little passage has to do with us today.

Fair warning, we're going to read more from this chapter next Sunday, and we might actually find some helpful stuff in there about the mechanics of bodily resurrection through Paul's lens. But in what we have read already — is there Good News for us?

"We could not become like God, so God became like us. God showed us how to heal instead of kill, how to mend instead of destroy, how to love instead of hate, how to live instead of long for more. When we nailed God to a tree, God forgave. And when we buried God in the ground, God got up."

So wrote Rachel Held Evans in her book *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. For those of you who read Anne Lamott's latest book this spring, Rachel Held Evans spent the past decade carving out a spot as one of the leading voices of the next generation of thoughtful, progressive Christian writers. She wrote not as a pastor nor a seminary professor, but as a person gifted with deep spiritual wisdom. Rachel spent her childhood in Birmingham, and then as a teenager her family moved to Dayton, Tennessee — which is the town where the Scopes Monkey Trial took place in 1925. Rachel's first book was titled *Evolving in Monkey Town: How a Girl Who Knew All the Answers Learned to Ask the Questions*.

In her books, blogging, editorials in newspapers and magazines, and public speaking, Rachel Held Evans told the story of growing up in an evangelical Christian world of certainty and how that started to break down for her and would eventually evolve into a renewed faith that embraced questions, and with questions, embraced more people than she had been taught to love in her church growing up. Her writing was brilliant and moving and laugh-out-loud funny at times. She was a fresh voice speaking to the Church.

After spending weeks in the hospital due to an infection, and then a bad reaction to treatment that caused seizures, and a medically-induced coma to protect her brain from the seizures, Rachel Held Evans died yesterday morning. She was thirty-seven and leaves a husband and two young children. Every pastor and church nerd I know had been following and praying, knowing what a gift this woman was to us. I ask you, Paul, what good news have you?

God cares about bodies. With our very impressively-evolved brains, we still have a tendency to draw a line between body and soul. When bodies break down, or when they don't work the way we want them to, or when they develop infections or they mess up and start dividing cells in unhealthy ways, we stand ready to strip the soul from the body as if only velcro held them together. Souls are detachable, like Peter Pan's shadow.

But Paul reminds us that God cares about our weird bodies — toenails and bellybuttons and eyebrows and armpits. God is invested in broken bodies and chubby bodies and pain-filled bodies and boney bodies. God is not waiting for you to fit into *whatever*, because God needs whatever parts of you can help care for other bodies long before it's time to go down to the shore. When you go for your tacos and you see that word *carne* on the menu, remember that we have a whole theology connected to *carne* because God cares so much about bodies as to become *incarnate* and feel hunger and thirst and pain and death.

What else you got, Paul?

We in the historically mainline denominations spend a lot of time complaining that the evangelical side of Christianity is too focused on the afterlife. We say that they talk too much about locking up a spot in heaven, which leads to a dereliction of duties with regard to the needy before us here and now, not to mention caring for creation. We point out that eternity has a deeper meaning than “far into the future” and that Jesus calls for us to make the kingdom of God a reality on this earth, starting today!

We have a really good point about that.

But I do think Paul offers a helpful reminder that we are part of a story that stretches not just back through the millennia, but far beyond our little lives as well. There are chapters ahead written by the author of time — holy, magical chapters that we can't conceive of any more than we could have conceived of smart phones while we listened to Nirvana in our flannel in the 90s.

There is more to come. God is not on pause. And when we remember that, we more easily see what God is up to in our midst, raising the living to pull off miracles great and small.

Paul reminds us that the resurrection of Christ is tied up with us in a way that we couldn't untangle if we wanted to. We are different because of Easter. We are transformed. Not only in some lovely intellectual way, but the very courses of our varied lives are transformed by this resurrection. This resurrection means that I moved to Alabama and that I met all of you and that I have made mistakes here and been forgiven and that we will laugh together and weep together and help a few people along the way.

In the end, I give thanks to Paul today for the reminder of God's victory over death, even if he and I might get into a shouting match about how that all works out. Death does what death does. Death arrives as a vulture, tearing the too-young from the not-ready. Death arrives like the moon, the next thing, expected and on schedule. Death arrives like an old friend running late for a lunch date when we, the old and satisfied, are the ones who have been waiting. Death arrives for all.

But death only gets one word. And it is not the last word.

As Presbyterian Frederick Buechner puts it, "Resurrection means the worst thing is never the last thing." We don't deny it. We don't relish in it. We don't make it an idol. And so we will weep and will spit fire and we will make eternal sounds of despair, but in Christ we are told not to fear death.

That is a wild story we tell. It's hard to accept.

We are sorry Paul — okay, not really — but we need our room for questions and doubts and messiness. With a wink to the reader, Rachel Held Evans wrote:

"It's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair. Most days I don't know which is harder for me to believe: that God reanimated the brain functions of a man three days dead, or that God can bring back to life all the beautiful things we have killed. Both seem pretty unlikely to me."<sup>2</sup>  
Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> *Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*