

## GLORIFIED BODIES

### 1 Corinthians 15:12-20

Last Wednesday a passenger in a taxi heading for Midway airport, leaned over to ask the driver a question, and gently tapped him on the shoulder to get his attention. The driver screamed, lost control of the cab, nearly hit a bus, drove up over the curb and stopped just inches from a large plate window. For a few moments everything was silent in the cab. Then, the shaking driver said, “Are you OK? I’m so sorry, but you scared the daylights out of me.” The badly shaken passenger apologized to the driver and said, “I did not realize that a mere tap on the shoulder could startle someone so badly.” The driver replied, “No, no, I’m the one who is sorry, it’s entirely my fault. Today is my very first day driving a cab. I’ve been driving a hearse for 25 years.”

I have had something similar happen to me in ministry. It was a bright cold February afternoon when I officiated at a service of Death and Resurrection for Bill. I mean it was one of those winter days that almost hurt your eyes with the shining sun and cloudless sky. I was taught that it is my responsibility, during funerals, to remain with the deceased at all times. Consequently, you will find me in the front seat of the hearse. That day was no different. Wearing my black clergy robe with an all-black hearse interior I sat quietly waiting for my driver. Finally, he arrived and as Hal was getting into the driver’s seat, I began talking to him. In that same instant Hal bolted from the car. Slowly, hesitantly, Hal poked his head back in to look around. It was only then that he spied me. Clutching his heart, a very shaken Hal said, “Thank God. I did not see you there! I thought Bill was talking to me!! I may have to go home to change my pants!”

Funerals, life after death, and the Apostle Paul; the perfect combination for an uplifting message from your pastor!! There was a 1992 movie called *Death Becomes Her*. I have never seen it, but here is the synopsis - When a novelist loses her man to a movie star and former friend, she winds up in a psychiatric hospital. Years later, she returns home to confront the now-married couple, looking radiant. Her ex-husband's new wife wants to know her secret and discovers that she has been taking a mysterious drug which grants eternal life to the person who drinks it. The actress follows suit but discovers that immortality has a price. Of course, now that I have read this, I am going to see if I can find it on Netflix!!

The phrase “death becomes him/her” actually refers to someone looking more attractive in death than in life. You know the drill...people line up to greet the family at funeral home or church visitation hours with the primary comment being, “He/she looks so good!”. My siblings and I, veterans of many family funerals of ancient great aunts and uncles, used to look at each other with raised eyebrows whenever we heard this comment made about our octogenarian ancestors. It was not until my first year in ministry, however, that my jaded view of this saying was forever changed.

My church member had battled pancreatic cancer for months, far exceeding her prognosis. Nanny was still in her 50's and at one point in her life had been breathtakingly beautiful. Years of hard living along with her cancer ravaged her appearance. As I took my place in the long line greeting her family, I noticed Nanny's mother, Millie, standing beside her casket – she was positively beaming. I was puzzled by this, but when I finally arrived to greet Millie, she grabbed me by the hand saying, "I want you to meet my Nanny! This is my Nanny!" Following her beaming face, I looked into the casket and was stunned to see a truly beautiful woman with all marks of her illness and hard life erased. From that moment on, I have never made light of this comment for it gave Millie the greatest comfort.

Death – What is that time worn adage, "In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes!" (Benjamin Franklin) It is a known fact that none of us gets out of our earthly life alive. In spite of this, death is a topic just about everyone avoids, clergy included. By invitation, I co-officiated a funeral of a church patriarch shortly after moving from an appointment. As we traveled together from the church to the cemetery, I asked my colleague about her grim countenance, she responded, "I don't 'do' funerals. It reminds me too much of my own!" Needless to say, I was stunned. As a pastor, I would rather officiate at a funeral any day over a wedding! Weddings are often filled with over the top drama...and not all weddings stand the test of time. Funerals on the other hand...

For me, funerals give us the wonderful chance to celebrate the earthly life of the deceased at the same time rejoicing that because of Jesus Christ, life as you and I know it does not end at the grave. I am not saying this is easy, and I have officiated my share of premature death through accidents, illness and tragic suicides. I have learned however, that there is always something to be celebrated and honored in our services of Death and Resurrection.

The grave is really the portal, the doorway to an eternal life of knowing God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit fully becoming who you and I are meant to become! The Apostle Paul has quite a lot to say about eternal life, specifically about our bodily resurrection. *"If we preach that Christ was raised from death, how can some of you say that the dead will not be raised to life? If they won't be raised to life, Christ himself wasn't raised to life. And if Christ wasn't raised to life, our message is worthless, and so is your faith."* When Paul wrote his first letter to the Corinthians, he was facing a controversy in the early church: There were Christians who were saying that there "is no resurrection of the dead" (1 Corinthians 15:12). These members of the Corinthian church were not convinced that the dead would be raised, and for the most part they were simply following the accepted wisdom of the time, which saw resurrection as a rare and altogether extraordinary event. They didn't doubt that Jesus Christ himself had been raised from the dead, but that's because they knew he was the one and only Son of God. For most of these believers, resurrection simply wasn't in the cards for your common, every day, Christian corpses. And can we blame them? When these doubters strolled through graveyards, they saw death - not life. In our more honest moments, maybe we have to admit that we do, too. (Homiletics, 2004)

You all know the Biblical account of Jesus' death. You know the story: after the crucifixion, his dead body is wrapped in a clean linen cloth and placed in a brand-new tomb, which has been hewn in the rock. A heavy stone is rolled to the door of the tomb, and the stone is sealed by a group of soldiers so that the disciples cannot steal the body. Everyone assumes that the story of Jesus is over. He is crucified, dead, buried. The end. In fact, his life is just beginning. And so is ours. On Easter morning, new life appears in the graveyard, and Jesus shocks Mary Magdalene and the disciples when he stands in front of them, raised by God from the dead (Matthew 28:1-20). Jesus comforts them and teaches them and gives them his peace and his power. "Receive the Holy Spirit," he says to the disciples, giving them the power from God that they need to continue Jesus' work in the world (John 20:22). This gift of the Holy Spirit is nothing less than a gift of new and unexpected life, a second birth that is given to all who follow the risen Christ in faith. (Homiletics, 2004)

Did you hear what I just said? Anyone who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ and follows Him as Lord and Savior will receive this gift of second birth – of eternal life. This truly is the entire "Good News" of Jesus Christ! And what's more, Paul is speaking directly to the fact that you and I can expect and greatly anticipate our own bodily resurrection just as Christ's was raised from the dead whole and complete. Paul emphatically refutes and challenges anyone who might believe or say to the contrary in verses 13-15, *"If they won't be raised to life, Christ himself wasn't raised to life. And if Christ wasn't raised to life, our message is worthless, and so is your faith."*

I know you have heard me say on more than one occasion, "My faith has never been about fire insurance. If, when I die, I discover that my earthly walk with Jesus is all I have, then for me, it is enough." Well, in looking at our text for this morning, the Apostle Paul soundly chastises me in this, for while I am preaching Christ for here and now, I am almost suggesting that looking forward to a bodily resurrection is not important! Not at all. I am preaching that our eternal life begins while we are still alive and well and walking our journey of faith with Jesus leading the way. Interestingly, a Christian who lives his or her life focusing solely on life after death is equally to be pitied. In order for you and I to be whole, saved/redeemed, our faith can never be an either/or – it must be a both/and.

When I first realized many years ago, that God was going to resurrect this body, I made my first decision for cremation. If God was going to raise my body from the dead, I wanted to be darn sure I would be put together in a new and improved way!! In all seriousness, this is exactly what God does. When all the dead shall rise in Christ – it will be with glorified bodies. 1 John 3:2 (ESV) tells us, *"Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."* Further on in 1 Corinthians 15, *"Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in 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 shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality."*

Consider the following – since the resurrection of the body stands at the core of the Christian proclamation, the implications of this belief touch every area of congregational life and ministry. (Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 1, 352). Without the resurrection, the Christian faith can be reduced to little more than a moral code to guide well-meaning people about how to live their lives. It is the resurrection that makes sense of the life and teachings of Jesus. Only in the light of the resurrection does it make sense for followers of Jesus to stand with the poor, the outcasts and the oppressed. The resurrection gives the faithful the freedom to live their lives in the shadow of the cross – for without the cross there is no resurrection.

And here is the perfect opening for timeless question – “So, Pastor Tizzy, as followers of Jesus Christ, we can expect a bodily resurrection – wonderful!! Now, can you tell us what life after death is like?” What will we be doing? Who will we see? Will I recognize my loved ones?

Friends, if I could answer these questions, I don't think I would be standing here in this social hall this morning. I do have my “theories/theology of what might happen in the next chapters of our eternal life once we leave earth...but there will be plenty more opportunities for us to explore this together. Still, I would like to leave you with the following piece of hope with my closing story:

The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin wrote his memoirs, *The Gift of Peace: Personal Reflections*, shortly before dying of cancer. People often asked him what he thought would happen to him after he died. By way of answer, he referred to an experience he had during his first-ever visit to Italy, the nation from which his parents had immigrated to the United States. Although the cardinal had never been there before, everything he saw looked strangely familiar: "After years of looking through my mother's photo albums, I knew the mountains, the land, the houses, the people. As soon as we entered the valley, I said, 'My God, I know this place. I am home.' Somehow, I think crossing from this life into life eternal will be similar. I will be home." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.