

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Fourth Presbyterian Church  
Easter Sunday  
April 1, 2018

**If For This Life Only**

1 Corinthians 15:1-8, 12-26

Imagine, with me, that you are going to the graveside funeral of a friend.

You arrive at the cemetery a little before 2:00 in the afternoon on a beautiful spring day.

As you step out of your car, the sun is pleasantly warm,  
and a gentle breeze is blowing.

You look around and are a bit perplexed  
because you are the only one in the graveyard  
except for a couple of cemetery workers  
who are preparing the burial plot for the funeral.

You ask them and discover that you have misread the obituary.  
The funeral isn't until 3:00.

So having an hour with nothing to do, and soaking in the beauty of the day,  
you decide to wander through the graveyard and read the stones.

Nearest you is an older section

where there are monuments to some of the sons of local families  
who had fought and died in the world wars.

You imagine the grief of their mothers and fathers on the day they heard  
their sons had been killed in action.

You wander a little further to a family plot.

There you see gravestones that tell another tragic story:  
A young mother and infant child who died only a few days apart.  
The husband and father is buried beside them,  
having died many years later.

You pass several newer gravestones of various shapes and sizes  
marking men and women, husbands and wives,  
who lived well into their seventies, eighties, and nineties,  
one even made it to 102.

From a distance you are drawn to a magnificent monument  
which seems to have attracted to itself several concentric circles  
of the nicest headstones in the cemetery.

This massive obelisk is of polished marble, ornately carved, standing much taller  
than anything else in the graveyard.

On all four sides are words acclaiming this man's great achievements,  
and listing the important offices he once held.

You notice a crack that has begun to form in the base of this grand testament,  
slowly creeping upward, year by passing year.

You wander beyond these impressive graves toward the far edge of the cemetery  
and you come to a small stone that you almost missed,  
very old, with one corner having crumbled off long ago.

The name is so worn it is illegible.  
There are no other plots nearby.

As you ponder these many names and dates  
and wonder about the stories that lie buried in the ground,  
you begin to visualize these people who once lived, and breathed,  
each speaking with the unique sound of his or her voice.  
Men and women who played on the ground as children,  
labored hard as adults, loved their families, laughed and wept,  
and who once walked on the very ground where you're standing  
grieving loved ones,  
or choosing their own burial plot.

Many of the gravestones tell of the faith and the faithfulness of these children of God  
whose bodies are in various stages of decay.

And you wonder, to what end?  
What does their faith in Jesus Christ mean now?  
And what will your faith mean when you have breathed your last  
and lie under a monument in the ground?

Will you become a tiny soul, fluttering away above the grave,  
preserved somewhere in the clouds to float for all eternity?  
Is that the future for which these people hoped?  
Is it now what they experience?

Even this involves loss.  
Can a bodiless soul enjoy the beauty of this spring day  
and breathe the fresh air that blows through the trees?  
Can it feast on a sumptuous meal?  
Or enjoy the taste of good wine,  
or a cool drink of water on a hot day?  
Can a spirit warm its hands by the fire in the wintertime?  
Can it kiss its children on the forehead or embrace a spouse?

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Your thoughts are suddenly interrupted by the backfire of an old car  
as it enters the graveyard road.

You recognize the car as belonging to Pastor Paul Tarsus  
of the Corinthian Presbyterian Church.

He will be leading the funeral service that will begin in less than an hour.

Pastor Paul parks near to where you are standing and gets out of his car,  
carrying a scroll of parchment rolled up in one hand.

He greets you with a warm hello and comments on the beautiful weather.  
He notes that you look troubled,  
and he wonders aloud how you are coping  
with the loss of your friend.

So you decide to ask Paul your questions:  
for these people who are buried here under these markers,  
what does their faith in Jesus Christ mean now?

Of course, you cringe just as soon as you ask the question because you know that once you get Paul started on a theological topic, it's hard to get him stopped.

Paul says,

“What their faith gets them now is the same thing it gets you and me, and the same thing it got them when they were alive:  
Hope!

Hope that they will be raised up on the last day.

**God raised Jesus Christ from the dead,  
and Christ was the first fruits of those who have died.  
Because Christ has been raised,  
we too have hope that we will be raised, body and soul.**

You confess to Paul that this is a difficult thing to believe.

“I know we say it in the Apostles' Creed – ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body’ – but I find it hard to understand.

I'm comfortable with saying that Christ was raised because Christ was the Son of God, but how can it be that we will all be raised?

For one thing,  
wouldn't the world be a little overpopulated?

Paul, of course, has an answer for you:

‘The resurrection of the body  
is the heart of the Christian hope.

*“If there is no resurrection of the dead,  
then Christ has not been raised.”*

It's as simple as that.

*“...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.*

*If Christ has not been raised,  
your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.”*

‘If Christ has not been raised,  
then these who rest here beneath the ground have perished  
and are gone forever.

‘And I tell you the truth,’ says Paul,

*‘If for this life only we have hoped in Christ,  
we are of all people most to be pitied,*

and I may as well give up this preaching job and stick with tent-making.

But, my Christian friend, believe the good news:

Christ has been raised from the dead,  
and the best is yet to come!

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Noticing that you still look a little doubtful,  
Paul tries another tack.

Remember the story of the Creation, when God made the heaven and the earth,  
and created men and women in the very image of God.

When God finished the creation, what was the final verdict?

*“God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good!”*

If the creation, in all its created goodness – its physical, bodily goodness –  
is not fully redeemed at the end of time,  
then has God truly been faithful?

**God redeems what God creates.**

And God’s plan for the fullness of time is to restore the whole creation  
back to it’s original, intended goodness.

Nothing of God’s good creation will be lost to God.

And consider this:

If God were only interested in saving our souls – in some spiritual form without a body –  
why would God have come down to us in the form of a man,  
with flesh and blood,  
breathing the air we breathe  
and eating the harvest of the earth?

God came as a human being to save human beings.

God became part of the creation in order to save the creation.

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Paul becomes quiet for a few moments.

Then he points off to the woods at the edge of the graveyard,  
where the Redbuds and the Dogwoods are bursting forth in bloom  
amidst the bright green of spring leaves.

“Just look at that!” he says.

“What good would eternal life be  
if we had to give up a sight like this?  
Or if we could never again hear the birds celebrating the dawn?  
Or smell the aroma of freshly baked bread?  
I have to believe in the resurrection of the dead.  
Otherwise I would be so afraid of dying,  
so afraid of losing the goodness of this life,  
that I would never be able to truly live.”

With that Paul excuses himself  
and makes his way to the burial plot which has now been prepared.

From the entrance of the graveyard the family of your friend begin to arrive.  
They gather around the coffin  
as you and others arrive and gather around behind the burial tent.

Pastor Paul begins to speak about your friend's life.  
All that he had loved.  
He assures us all that this love  
will endure in God's heart.  
That God will hold every moment of this life  
forever before him.  
God will not forget who this person was,  
but will remember so that when all creation is restored,  
he will be raised and transformed.  
He will once again experience the joy of relationship,  
but without the pain of separation.  
He will once again see and hear and taste and smell and feel  
**the goodness of the creation,**  
but without the brokenness  
that now corrupts the good.

Paul's proclamation at the graveside is no longer the logical prose of explanation,  
attempting to answer every rational question with scientific accuracy.  
It is, rather, the poetry that imagines the unimaginable.  
It is the song that evokes the deepest hope of the human heart.  
It is the cadence that calls forth enduring, sustaining  
faith... not in our human understanding...  
but in the God  
whose power and love are beyond everything  
we can comprehend.  
*O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God.  
How unsearchable are God's judgements;  
how untraceable are God's ways!*

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After the service you speak to the family and say a few awkward words of consolation.  
Hope is real,  
but so is the pain of separation.  
Expressions of grief are still appropriate.  
But somehow you feel more freedom to grieve  
because of the hope  
that this parting is not final.  
In this hope,  
there is a strange freedom to enjoy this life,  
to love the living of each day,  
and to live each day to the fullest,  
knowing that death, when it must come,  
is not the last word about us.  
For Christ was raised from the dead.  
This is our proclamation.  
This is the solid ground on which we stand.  
This is our hope,  
as we live and die with the creation...  
and await the final fulfillment...  
of all that God has promised.  
Amen.

(First preached at Loch Willow Presbyterian Church, Churchville, Virginia, February 11, 2001)