

THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY
EIGHTH AND CONCLUDING SERMON IN THE SERIES ON THE APOSTLES' CREED
I CORINTHIANS 15:42-57
NOVEMBER 23, 1986

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The Apostles' Creed, written some 1900 years ago, concludes with a stirring proclamation, a proclamation that can touch you at your deepest level. This proclamation, like so many other tenets of the Christian faith, is too often taken for granted, so we miss the magnificence and the sheer audacity of faith it proclaims. "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." What do we mean by "resurrection of the body?"

Notice that the creed does not say we believe in the immortality of the soul. In fact, nowhere in the Bible--Old or New Testaments--is the immortality of the soul mentioned. In much of the church's history, the phrases--immortality of the soul and resurrection of the body--were used interchangeably; but, they were not so used in the Bible, nor at the time the Apostles' Creed was written. In fact, the phrase "resurrection of the body" is used intentionally to refute the popular Greek belief in the immortality of the soul.

When I spoke at Temple Beth Am last week, I attempted to explain how the biblical faith was translated into terms that were intelligible to the Greek gentiles. The Greek world-view was quite different from the Hebrew world-view. The church had to do major battle to keep its biblical faith intact. The Apostles' Creed was such an attempt. One of the major struggles between the Hebraic biblical faith and Greek thinking was the controversy over immortality or resurrection.

To the Greek, the idea of resurrection was preposterous. When Paul arrived in Athens, the capital of Greece, the home of the great philosophers and poets, he witnessed to his new found faith in Jesus. The Greek audience listened attentively to him until he stated that Jesus was raised from the dead; then, they laughed and scoffed. No doubt the Corinthian church was having the same controversy because Paul devoted a great deal of space in his Corinthian letters explaining the Christian belief in resurrection. But, even so, the church became more Greek than Jewish. A tragic example of misunderstood, poor theology that has hurt the church is the substitution of the immortality of the soul for the resurrection of the body.

The Greeks believed that a person has a body and a soul. The soul is an entity that enters a person at birth and at death is released into immortality. While on this earth, the soul is imprisoned in the body which, like the material world, is evil. The goal of a religious person is to free the soul from its imprisonment in the evil body so that it can be united with God. The soul is freed through prayer, denial of the desires of the flesh, and the subjugation of the body. You can see how this philosophy has crept into the church. The ascetics fasted because eating is sinful. Celibacy was chosen by a holy and pure person because the sex act is evil.

Salvation was narrowed to the soul. The goal of salvation was to get one's soul into heaven. A sharp line was drawn between sacred and secular, and the secular was seen as something less important or significant, something dirty and evil; while the sacred was seen as holy. For example, the church differentiated between sacred and secular music, defined by whoever was drawing the line at the time! Separation into sacred and secular is a Greek idea, contrary to the Bible. Paul wrote "Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." (I Corinthians 10:31)

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Increasingly, in our day also, the concern and ministry of the church became smaller and smaller, narrower and narrower, as if the church were only concerned with the soul, in the Greek sense. Healing the body became the sole province of the doctor. Healing the mind became the sole province of the psychiatrist. Death became the province of the mortician who provides counseling, grief therapy, and the place to hold the funeral. Education became the province of the school and the teaching of morality, family life, and sex education was gladly consigned to the school by the church and home.

Justice became the province of the politicians, and we naively bought the propaganda, "Religion and politics don't mix." Concern for the planet became the province of environmentalists, and world peace became the province of the "government experts." After all, we are told, they are in the know. Who are we to understand all the subtleties and intricacies? As a result of the separation of sacred and secular, God was banished to the church, and the scope of the church was confined to the soul. You and I--the church--have been sold down the river. It is time to reaffirm the belief in the resurrection of the body.

In Hebrew thinking, there was no separation between body and soul. In fact, in Genesis 2:7, we read, "Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being (or soul, in the King James Version)." The man was not given a soul, but became a soul. Persons are souls. Barbara Metcalf, one of our Wednesday evening lecturers, said, "Your soul is not in your body; your body is in your soul." The biblical view of persons is wholistic. We are whole, not divisible. Therefore, the body is good. This life is good. The desires and needs of the flesh are good. There is no separation between sacred and secular because all of life is the concern of God; all of life is redeemable; salvation is for the world, even the physical, material world, as well as the individual person.

Therefore, immortality or life after death is not that of a soul, but the entire person. At death the soul is not released from its prison, the body; but, the body is resurrected. By this belief, we mean that our personality survives death--who we are, our personal history, our memories, our deeds, our commitments, all that we are survives death. The physical body, however, is not resurrected, but is changed into a spiritual body. Some people will not have their bodies cremated because they want their bodies to be resurrected. But, Paul did not believe in the resurrection of this physical body. He wrote, (I Corinthians 15:44) "It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body."

We are not talking about continuity of the physical body; we are talking about the transformation of the physical body into a spiritual body. This is symbolic language to say that our total being survives death. Therefore, because we believe in the totality of our life surviving death, I believe we will recognize one another in heaven. Whether we will have these physical characteristics is irrelevant, but I believe we will know one another and will continue our relationships in the communion of saints.

The belief in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is a magnificent, mind-blowing belief. Take a breath and consider what we are

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professing to believe. We believe there is more to life than what we experience on this earth. We believe that life does not stop when we die. We believe that through faith in Jesus Christ, we are given a new life. Does that belief stir the depths of your being? Can you believe that you will be resurrected, that you will enter into heaven as you are, that you will be an authentic person with all your memory, aspirations, emotions, relationships? Can you believe that it will be wonderful because Jesus himself has gone ahead to prepare a place for you in one of God's mansions?

Let me phrase this belief a different way. If you knew you were going to die this very day, how would you feel? What would you expect? Would you be afraid? When the time comes, will you fight death or welcome it? Will you be frightened? Will you fear the unknown? Let me read to you a poem about death that I first heard many years ago and which still speaks to me. From James Weldon Johnson's book, God's Trombones, "Go Down Death,"

Weep not, weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.
Heart-broken husband--weep no more;
Grief-stricken son--weep no more;
Left-lonesome daughter--weep no more;
She's only just gone home.

Day before yesterday morning,
God was looking down from his great, high heaven,
Looking down on all his children,
And his eye fell on Sister Caroline,
Tossing on her bed of pain.
And God's big heart was touched with pity,
With the everlasting pity.

And God sat back on his throne,
And he commanded that tall, bright angel
standing at his right hand:
Call me Death!
And that tall, bright angel cried in a voice
That broke like a clap of thunder:
Call Death!--Call Death!
And the echo sounded down the streets of heaven
Till it reached away back to that shadowy place,
Where Death waits with his pale, white horses.

And Death heard the summons,
And he leaped on his fastest horse,
Pale as a sheet in the moonlight.
Up the golden street Death galloped,
And the hoofs of his horse struck fire from the gold,
But they didn't make no sound.
Up Death rode to the Great White Throne,
And waited for God's command.

And God said: Go down, Death, go down,
Go down to Savannah, Georgia,

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Down in Yamacraw,
And find Sister Caroline.
She's borne the burden and heat of the day,
She's labored long in my vineyard,
And she's tired--
She's weary--
Go down, Death, and bring her to me.

And Death didn't say a word,
But he loosed the reins on his pale, white horse,
And he clamped the spurs to his bloodless sides,
And out and down he rode,
Through heaven's pearly gates,
Past suns and moons and stars;
On death rode,
And the foam from his horse was like a comet in the sky;
On Death rode,
Leaving the lightning's flash behind;
Straight on down he came.

While we were watching round her bed,
She turned her eyes and looked away,
She saw what we couldn't see;
She saw Old Death. She saw Old Death
Coming like a falling star.
But Death didn't frighten Sister Caroline;
He looked to her like a welcome friend.
And she whispered to us: I'm going home,
And she smiled and closed her eyes.

And Death took her up like a baby,
And she lay in his icy arms,
But she didn't feel no chill.
And Death began to ride again--
Up beyond the evening star,
Out beyond the morning star,
Into the glittering light of glory,
On to the Great White Throne.
And there he laid Sister Caroline
On the loving breast of Jesus.

And Jesus took his own hand and wiped away her tears,
And he smoothed the furrows from her face,
And the angels sang a little song,
And Jesus rocked her in his arms,
And kept a-saying: Take your rest,
Take your rest, take your rest.

Weep not--weep not,
She is not dead;
She's resting in the bosom of Jesus.

Sisters and brothers, relax. Don't be afraid of death. Rejoice. Give thanks. We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.