

Is This All There Is? (Part 5 of 6 in series, *Fearless*)

1 Corinthians 15:12-20, John 14:1-14

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Maybe you have to be a religion nerd to be aware of it, or to think it's a big deal, but I fall into that category, as do most of my friends, so it's been a *really* big deal for the last month or so. It's Rob Bell's new book called *Love Wins*. Bell is the evangelical non-denominational pastor of a very large church in Michigan. He started the church in 1999 at the age of 28, with just a dream and a few friends, and 12 years later, now gathers more than 10,000 people every Sunday in a building that used to be a shopping mall.

Bell has written several best-selling books, and is also the director and star of a series of short videos that I've used in many small group gatherings, especially for youth. He's brilliant and quick, and has a way of connecting the history behind Scripture to the text itself and helping the Scripture ask us big questions about how we are living our lives. He's engaging and interesting, always thought-provoking. The last time he spoke in Seattle, the Moore Theatre was sold out in minutes, and young adults lined up around the block trying to scalp tickets. In Seattle. To hear a preacher.

Bell's latest book is about heaven and hell, and suggests that perhaps – just maybe – Bell never comes out and says it exactly – everyone goes to heaven in the end. After all, love wins. So this book has been *incredibly* controversial in religious life. Evangelicals are upset. Biblical literalists are outraged. One United Methodist pastor in North Carolina was asked to leave his small church after he publicly proclaimed that he agreed with Bell. So I was actually really excited to read the book, to ask myself those same questions about what happens after this life, and to think about our topic for today: the fear of death – or more pointedly, the fear that this is it – this is all there is.

Now we already know, from our prior engagement with the topic of fear, that the fear of death is not the biggest fear on our minds or hearts these days. Surveys tell us that it is far surpassed by the fear of public speaking. But the way our culture approaches death – or fails to approach it – shows that we're at the very least uncomfortable with the idea, and perhaps even terrified. When I arrived at Duke for seminary I was introduced to an organization there called the Institute on Care at the End of Life. "How morbid," I thought. "Who would want to work there?" But I quickly learned that the way our society approaches death is not necessarily the Christian way: we see it as a medical event – and in that realm, death is failure: failure to heal, failure to restore, failure to keep alive. I learned at the Institute that death isn't failure, nor is it simply a medical event – it's part of life, and a spiritual transition, as well. Death is not part of God's original plan, mind you – it's a result of the brokenness of the world. But we Christians can recover the practice of dying well, attending to the dying with compassion and care without the frenzy to stop the process at whatever cost. And we can recognize, as Paul does, the gift that comes in death: namely, resurrection.

I know that we're stepping a little out of the liturgical calendar here – in fact, I feel a little rebellious talking about resurrection when the winding down of Lent is leading us closer and closer to the cross. But we can't very well spend six weeks talking about fear without addressing what happens after this life – and why we work so hard to avoid it. So we'll take a little break from Lent this morning to look at Paul's understanding of resurrection in his first letter to the church at Corinth.

Now Paul makes it clear in this letter that he counts the resurrection to be a central tenet of the Christian faith. He has taught this young church that Christ died on a Friday afternoon – and was *really dead*, dead as a doornail, buried in a tomb – and on Sunday morning he rose again. But he wasn't a ghost or an apparition – he was alive. Not resuscitated, but resurrected. He appeared to the disciples, and even ate some of their fish before he ascended into heaven.

But it's clear that some of the Corinthian Christians are questioning the resurrection, and Paul's a little frustrated. The problem is, he can't *prove* it. Wouldn't that be nice? Wouldn't it be awesome if there was some sign in the sky, or if something like the Shroud of Turin really turned up to *prove* that Jesus was dead and then alive again? But Paul doesn't have proof: no eye-witness video, no up-to-the-minute reporting, so he gives this logic: "Maybe you're right," he says. "Maybe you Corinthians are right and all this resurrection talk is a bunch of baloney. Maybe when I preach that Christ was raised from the dead and you will be, too, it's all made-up stories. But if that's the case, your faith is in vain." If there's no resurrection – what are we doing here? If Christ wasn't resurrected, we're centering our lives on a guy who failed all of our expectations – he didn't wipe out the Romans or put the Jews back in power; he wasn't the mighty warrior or the political genius we were looking for; he died a criminal's death on a cross when in his early 30's. If he didn't rise from the dead to defeat death itself, what's the point?

But if Christ *was* raised from the dead – if the stories *are* true – then listen to this: we'll be resurrected, too. If we keep going past the part that Mary read this morning, Paul says, "For as all die in Adam, so *all* will be made alive in Christ." Jesus is the first fruits of those who have died. He's saying that Jesus reverses all that happened with Adam, so death, which is a result of sin and brokenness, is no more. Since Jesus was resurrected, we will be, too.

Resurrection here isn't spiritual talk about disembodied souls: that was what the Greeks and Romans believed, that souls and bodies spent life fighting against each other, as the body imprisoned the soul – and on death, it could be set free. We're not talking about spirits drifting up to heaven when bodies die. We're talking about *resurrection* like Christ's: with bodies. God came to earth in a body like ours, showing the sacredness of incarnation – of taking on flesh. And the scope of Christ's redemption is all-encompassing, flesh included. In the coming kingdom, we can expect that all of creation will be redeemed, reconciled, and restored, with the realization of our full image of God. Resurrected. With bodies.

Now I can't tell you what that looks like – and nobody else can, either, though there's a multi-million dollar book and movie industry that paints pictures of bright lights and golden streets and gates staffed by St. Peter himself. I don't think we'll spend eternity floating on clouds playing harps or organs or even guitars, for that matter – though the Scripture does tell us that Christ will be there, wherever 'there' is, and there will be no more death or crying or pain, because all will have been redeemed. Scripture even points at heaven being here on earth – that Jesus will come back here and the kingdom will be realized in its fullness here. But I don't know if you and I will have bodies like the ones we have now or younger or fitter or prettier bodies. None of really matters, anyway, if we don't get the main point: and that main point is resurrection.

In John's gospel, the disciples were nervous about the impending end of Jesus' life, though they didn't know how awful it would be – they didn't have the details that we have. And they were asking him questions, trying to figure out where he was going so they could come along. He gave this witness: "In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you... I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. Do not let your hearts be troubled – don't be afraid." It's like he was saying, "I

can't explain it, guys, and you probably wouldn't believe it even if I could. But I need you to trust me: there'll be room for you where I'm going. And we'll be together. So don't be afraid."

If we go through life fearing death, then we're liable to live in a way that perpetuates that fear: we will put our trust in the things of this world, of this life, hoarding money, overreacting against threats, stepping on others on our way to the top, letting our imaginations make us think we're even less "safe" than we really are, for whatever that's worth. We'll put our lives and our personal well-being over anyone else's, letting "take care of yourself" ahead of the command to "love your neighbor." And then death seems like something to fear, indeed – because if it's all about safety and accumulation and "success," then death indeed seems like failure – and frankly, life sounds an awful lot like hell.

But there's another way: it's a relationship of trust with this One who is said to be risen, who is evident and present in our lives in miraculous ways: he pushes us outside the boundaries of our comfort zones; he gives us courage to stand up and speak for those with no voice; he comforts us when all else seems lost; he gives us light in the midst of darkness. If we live *that* life of faith, then hoarding gives way to generosity, self-preservation gives way to love, and anxiety gives way to joy in abundant living. If we live in that relationship of trust, then death gives way to resurrection.

When we embrace God's love and grace, when we let the light of God's love pour over us day after day, the kingdom is present among us and heaven doesn't seem so far away. There's no proof of resurrection – no photos, no videos, no logical theorem that points us toward life beyond death. But open your eyes, and you will see that the world is full of resurrection light. Open your eyes, and you will see signs everywhere of Christ's victory over death.

"Do not let your hearts be troubled," Jesus said. Believe in God. Believe in me. Don't be afraid. **There is more.**

May we live our lives believing that death has been defeated – it is nothing to fear. Resurrection abounds. Thanks be to God. Amen.