

The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany, February 20, 2022

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Planted for the Resurrection

1 Corinthians 15:21–26, 30–42

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

St. Paul continues to proclaim the resurrection of the dead, saying, “**The last enemy to be destroyed is death. . . . But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come? . . . What you sow doesn’t come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel”** (vv 26, 35, 36b–37a).

Last week St. Paul started to teach us about the resurrection of the dead. It begins with this: **Christ has indeed been raised from the dead** (1 Cor 15:20). Easter isn’t a fact to be denied. It’s the reality on which rests our sure and certain hope. And Jesus is only the first—or the firstfruits, as St. Paul says—of many more to come.

Still, talking about the resurrection may raise as many questions as answers. In this chapter, St. Paul focuses on the body. But what about the soul, we wonder? He doesn’t take up that question here. But in Philippians he speaks of his desire to **depart and be with Christ** (Phil 1:23). So at death the soul of the believer is taken to be with Christ.

Now two other questions are addressed by St. Paul here. They are:

- How should we view death?
- And with what kind of body will the dead be raised?

He teaches that

DEATH, THE LAST ENEMY, WILL BE FULLY DESTROYED
WHEN CHRIST RAISES OUR BODIES IN THEIR NEW CREATION GLORY.

I.

First, how should we rightly view death? St. Paul makes clear that death isn’t a friend or an ally. It shouldn’t be viewed merely as a door into another life or as a continuation of the adventure. Death, he says, in no uncertain terms, is an enemy. Let’s not forget this or pretend otherwise.

St. Paul takes us back to death's source: **By a man came death** (v 21), and again, **In Adam all die** (v 22). Death entered the world through Adam, our first father. Adam ate the fruit, and the curse took effect. We have inherited his corruption and guilt and so also the curse of physical and spiritual death. We are dust, and to dust we shall return, as we'll hear again soon on Ash Wednesday. Apart from Jesus, bodily life on earth ends in death. That process begins long before we actually die. Physical death hangs like a shadow, like a cloud over the whole life on earth.

But St. Paul doesn't want us to view death apart from Jesus. He wants us to view death with Jesus: **By a man has come also the resurrection of the dead** (v 21), and again, **So also in Christ shall all be made alive** (v 22). United with Christ, the final outcome isn't death but life. From faith's point of view — and this is true even when we stand by a casket or visit a cemetery — faith looks beyond death. The course of life in the body ends not in death but in life. The death of the body is a semicolon, not a period.

This is so because Jesus, true man and our brother, broke the power of death when He rose from the dead. By His perfect life and perfect death, His atonement for sin, He reversed everything Adam brought into the world by His sin. On Easter, He stood on His feet as the first of a new humanity. Death had no more power over Him, and its grip is loosening on those who are united with Christ through faith.

He rose first, **then at His coming those who belong to Christ** (v 23). The nature of the resurrection is the same for those who belong to Him as it was for Him. We will be raised like Jesus. But there is a proper order. He's first — first to enter the fullness of life, first to assume immortality, first to wear an incorruptible body. And those belong to Christ by faith will enter that same glorious state when He returns on the last great day.

He must reign, we are told, **until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death** (vv 25–26). There's no sugar coating it. Death is still bitter and painful and tragic, even for us as Christians. Death is a horrible enemy — the last, worst enemy. But death's kingdom will be fully destroyed, his power will be taken, and he will meet his doom when the end comes.

II.

It's hard to imagine what that will be like. Unlike Enoch and Elijah, our bodies don't go straight to heaven. When death is destroyed, with what kind of body will the dead be raised? It still seems absurd. It defies the grasp of our earthbound, human minds. It's beyond anything we experience. It sounds, sometimes, like wishful thinking. How can one conceive of a new body rising out of a worm-eaten corpse or from a body decayed into dust?

A.

To help us understand, St. Paul turns to a beautiful image, the image of planting and gardening. He says: **What you sow doesn't come to life unless it dies. And what you sow isn't the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as He has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body** (vv 36b–38). The mystery of the resurrection is contained in every sprouting seed. The hull will rot away and die, while the contents of the kernel, under the proper condition for germination, will rise up into new life.

Unless Christ comes first, our bodies must die before God makes them alive again. Putting a body in the ground, burying a dead loved one, is akin to planting a seed. Just like a farmer! Just like a gardener! Someone who has never seen plants grow would think that what a farmer or a gardener does is absurd. Won't the seed rot and die? How could anything come from that? And, honestly, at this time of year it's hard to believe that anything can possibly grow from the earth. And yet we plant bulbs in the fall. We expect them to grow, and we expect them to grow into flowers and plants. The farmer isn't deterred by the objection that someone has never seen things sprout, and we Christians aren't deterred by the fact that no one living right now has seen a resurrection. Spring will come. God who gives to each seed its own body is able to raise our bodies splendid and glorious at the resurrection.

We see a little image of this in our Old Testament reading. In Genesis, Joseph's brothers thought he was dead. When they saw him again, they couldn't recognize him because of the glory he had as ruler in Egypt. Ours will be a resurrection even greater than that. We will be fully at home with ourselves in our bodies and with others in their bodies.

We don't know what age we will be in the resurrection, but we do know this—whatever the age, whether children who died in infancy are raised as infants and those who die at a hundred are raised with hundred year old bodies, we will all be whole and perfect. There will be no physical handicaps, no mental problems, and, thank God, no sin.

God will give each one of us the new body that He has chosen for us. It will be the same as our body now, yet different, like the difference between a seed and the plant that grows from it. The same genetic material and code, yet our bodies then will be like oaks in comparison to acorns. The "body" of the plant is quite different from the "body" of its seed. Same person, different bodies.

Since we haven't experienced bodily resurrection, it can be kind of hard to believe. Imagine how hard it was for the disciples of Jesus to understand what His resurrection

meant. Yes, it had only been a couple of days, but remember the state His body was in when they laid Him in the tomb. He was planted in the ground after a brutal and ugly death. Three days later it was raised to new life. The women went to the tomb prepared to find a body that would decay and decompose. They expected to find a corpse. When they did see Jesus risen from the dead, they didn't recognize Him right away. They were surprised by the flower. It had the fragrance of life. Jesus is still Jesus, yet He's not the same. Or it's the same Jesus, but He's different. It's not that Jesus was put into the ground as a bulb and came out as a bulb. He was planted a bulb and raised a new-grown, blooming plant. The new creation had begun.

So it will be for us. We will be the same but different; still us, but not the same. Our new creation bodies will be the same, but different; just like seeds are different from full-grown plants. When you die, they will plant your body in the ground. And when Jesus calls you forth to new creation life, your new creation body will still be you, but more fully alive and more complete. You will be as different from what you are now as a full-grown lily is from the bulb you planted.

As I look out, I imagine what that Jennie plant or Ed or Helene or Marilyn will look like, or all those loved ones whose bodies have already been planted in the ground.

B.

We will all be different from each other, just as different plants grow from different seeds. The new creation will be vibrant and full of variety. All flesh isn't the same flesh. The flesh of human beings is different from that of animals and birds and fish. There is variety. God will surely be able to provide a body for each and every one of us in the resurrection, a body suited to each one of us. The flesh of resurrected bodies will be different from the flesh of our natural bodies. It will be a different life, a different mode of being.

St. Paul also uses the contrast between heavenly bodies and earthly bodies. He looks at the sun, moon, and stars. They have their own bodies, and those bodies differ from each other. So it will be for us in the resurrection. Our bodies will have a greater glory than they have now, and they will each have their own unique glory. And there will be no envy or jealousy!

The same God that produced all these miracles is able to produce bodies for His saints at the time of the resurrection fully suited for that life. It's as marvelous and amazing as a seed growing from the ground in the spring. From God's perspective, it doesn't matter what happens to the body—whether it was lost at sea or cremated. He made Adam from the dust. He causes the seed to sprout. He gave the heavenly bodies their

glory. So He is able to raise us, and He is able to raise us entirely incorruptible and imperishable.

We live our lives under this sure and certain promise. Not the promise that we will die and go through a door, but the promise that when we die and are buried, our souls are with Christ and our bodies will be raised to a new and greater glory.

On the Last Day when Jesus returns in glory, the most amazing place will be a cemetery. Can you imagine it? It'll be like going out to a garden in spring where suddenly all these flowers will be popping up seemingly out of nowhere. On that day, our enemy, the last enemy death will be fully and completely destroyed, and we will be raised to the glory of a new creation.

The body that is sown is perishable. It is raised imperishable. It is buried in a fallen, sinful world. It is raised in the new creation. It is planted a bulb. It is raised a full-grown flower.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7
