

“Embodied Stores: Resurrection”
First Baptist Church of Worcester
Sunday, February 17, 2019
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What does our faith have to do with our bodies? For the Apostle Paul, the answer is: *everything*. In our reading from First Corinthians, we caught Paul mid-argument, fiercely defending what he sees as the core - the non-negotiable part - of the story of Jesus: that he died, that he was buried, and that he was raised from the dead – a physical, bodily, visible phenomenon that he lists the witnesses to as if he’s in a court proceeding just before the text we read – *and* that because of this, we too will someday be raised from the dead.

I know, it’s tempting to intellectualize or dismiss the resurrection as a relic of primitive religion, an archaic and antiquated belief that those gullible ancients latched onto. But you should know that no one in the ancient world believed in what Paul is describing (or almost no one). These were people who believed that the entrails of birds could predict who would win a war, people who believed that portraits and charms of Medusa’s head could ward away evil, who thought that healing was secured through ritual baths and snake handling at the temple of Asclepius. But resurrection? Now that’s just too far. The story of Jesus’ resurrection was as hard to believe then as it is now. Maybe even harder.

The new believers in Corinth were mostly Greek pagans, living in the Roman empire. Their cultural and religious traditions were certainly concerned about the afterlife, but for them, any life after death wasn’t much of a life at all. They imagined disembodied shade-like beings journeying through an underworld, or perhaps roaming around earth as ghosts if they were not at peace. The relationship between the living and the dead was one primarily about appeasement & remembrance (honoring your ancestors so they might not call curses down upon your household, providing them what they need for their underworldly journey, and using the deceased as a kind of good luck charm).

There were dining rooms and annual feasts held in graveyards, where people would celebrate with the spirits of the dead, leave food and gifts for them. Some tombs even had little pipes going down into them where you could pour wine directly into the grave to nourish the deceased in the underworld. (Sorry if this is getting a little nerdy – this is the stuff I’m researching for my doctoral work). Anyway, death and the dead were incredibly important parts of life in first century Greece. The location of the dead, their bodies and likenesses, provided a kind of connecting point between the two realms (If you’ve seen the Disney movie, *Coco*, you have a good picture to draw on here). But resurrection – the renewal and new life of the dead – would have been nonsensical. It’s just not on the table for your average Corinthian. There’s no heavenly bliss to work your way toward, certainly no renewal of life. The best most

people could hope for was some kind of disembodied peace, a release from the troubles and pain of life on earth.

Those in power and the official religious and political structures of the Greco-Roman world promoted a belief in realized eschatology: that you get what you deserve now, in this life. If you are wealthy and powerful, it's because the gods have blessed you. If you're poor, or a slave, or a woman, well – you're somehow getting what you deserve, too. This system works really well for the rich. It props up their status as God-ordained, and it's a great way to keep everyone else in their place. Roman religion proclaimed, "Blessed are the rich, the full, the laughing, the well-liked; and woe to the poor, the hungry, the grieving, the reviled – you must have done something to anger the gods." Of course, this way of thinking is the exact opposite of what we heard Jesus say in the first text that we read today.

So this is what Paul is up against, and this is, I think, why he gets so riled up in our text today. He's talking to people who are immersed in and depend on a belief system that de-values bodies, that separates body from soul – the body doesn't really matter ("eat drink and be merry, bc tomorrow we die"), the soul is what continues on to the afterlife. The body gets what it deserves (whether blessings or curses) in this life, and the soul is just waiting to be released to a disembodied realm. Apparently, some of Paul's Corinthian converts could take or leave a hope of bodily resurrection, which was unnecessary, irrelevant, impossible, according to their philosophical worldview.

Paul is horrified by this and in 1 Corinthians chapter 15, he makes his most full and fierce argument for bodily resurrection, the earliest such argument we have access to in Christian history. For Paul, resurrection is *the* central claim of his gospel. Of course, as new as this idea is to the pagan Corinthians, Paul doesn't come up with the idea of resurrection on his own. He's a good Jew, for whom body and soul are inseparable, and like many Jews of his day, he hoped for a final resurrection, where the dead would be raised, all creation would be renewed, and God would reign and set all things right. For Paul's strand of Judaism, resurrection was less about eternal heavenly bliss, and more about *justice*. Many Jews looked around at an unjust world where people were oppressed and enslaved, nations were at war, innocent people were killed on the street – crucified – and proclaimed that this cannot be the way the world ends.

Paul goes even further than Pharisaic Judaism by saying that not only will there be a future resurrection of the dead by which God will renew all creation and set all things right, but that this has already started to happen. That the bodily resurrection of Jesus has set this renewal in motion and guaranteed the truth of resurrection for us all.

Paul is arguing in circles in our text today not because he wants us to be right about a doctrinal proposition. He's not trying to get us to understand perfectly the who/what/when/where or how of the resurrection so that we'll be prepared for some theological test or be able to solve some theological riddle. Paul insists on the bodily resurrection as a moral imperative that *our bodies matter*.

This spits in the face of Roman religion and culture (and of ours). A culture fueled by the disposability of bodies – slaves' bodies, prisoners' bodies, women's bodies, the bodies of the poor and of the foreigner and anyone the powerful deem an enemy of the state. In a culture like this, a belief in bodily resurrection is a political threat. It means that death doesn't let the powerful off the hook. They'll be responsible to and for the oppression and injustice they've created, and all of those who've been abused and enslaved and imprisoned will be made new and will be looking to God for justice.

By insisting on the reality of resurrection, Paul is making the same claim that Jesus makes in the beatitudes. That the poor, hungry, looked-down on people in our world are really the ones who are blessed, because God's kingdom belongs to them, justice will be theirs; and those who are powerful, comfortable, well-fed and happy had better be careful, because justice is coming for them, too.

I know, these are not easy texts to hear (try preaching them!). For people in power, in both the first and the twenty-first centuries, resurrection is a threat. This is why the Corinthians would have liked to make that part of the story optional. This is why we spend so much time and effort intellectualizing and theologizing and philosophizing and symbologizing the resurrection today – if we can just think our way out of this primitive belief, the rest of Christianity sounds pretty good – the stuff about love, the stuff about community...

But Paul says, NO. That's not good enough. If that's all there is to it, then he's a liar and a fake, and we are all wasting our time here. If that's all there is to it, then our faith does nothing but prop up the status quo.

Now, what is resurrection and how does it work? I have no idea, and neither does Paul. He paints a poetic analogy about seeds blooming and the corruptible becoming incorruptible. He's clearly searching here, feeling around in the dark, doing his best to make sense of it. Who knows? But whatever we think of resurrection (and try not to strain your brain too hard here), Paul insists that our faith makes no sense at all unless our hope is embodied. Our future after death is more bodily, not less, and this gives a dignity to bodily life that puts pressure on all the systems that de-value bodies (whether they be systems in our culture that de-value black and brown bodies, whether they be systems in our churches that foster an environment where pastors and priests can devalue and abuse and assault hundreds of children, whether they be systems in our own families that devalue our spouses, keeping them in abusive marriages for years).

The resurrection is counter-cultural, it's a threat to power systems, because it proclaims the goodness and sacredness of bodies. *Every* body - black bodies, trans bodies, disabled bodies, female bodies, intersex bodies, abused and assaulted bodies. Our bodies matter, and the bodies of all those around us matter. Resurrection means that we don't get to be done with each other. We don't get to escape into a disembodied bliss. We are responsible for and accountable to each other now and in the life to come. AMEN.