

Matters of Life and Death

1 Cor 15:1-26, 51-57

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I

I am afraid of dying. I'm a big guy, but my wife Amy is way tougher than I am, and I'm a bit of a wuss when it comes to a lot of pain, and I'm afraid dying might hurt. I'm afraid that dying might be scary, and I'm afraid that when my time comes, I might go through the ordeal of dying all alone.

I know that someday, hopefully a very long time from now, I will go through the process of dying, but I'm doing what I can to put it off as long as I can. I'm trying to eat right, although this pandemic has not been helpful in that regard. I try to exercise at least five or six days a week. I always wear my seatbelt. I get regular checkups with my doctor. But I know that those are just preventative measures. Someday, I will go through the ordeal of dying, and to be honest, I'm afraid of it.

II

And I imagine you feel the same way. For to be human is to be somehow conscious that someday we and everyone we know and love will die. I think that's one of the major things that separates us from the other created beings with whom we share this planet. For example, our family dog Yogi is a sweet dog, but as he lays in the sunbeam on the kitchen rug, I don't think he's aware of or contemplating his own ultimate mortality. To be human is to be aware that life as we know it is finite, limited, temporary.

And my goodness, are we not being reminded of that every waking hour during this pandemic? Every day the news recites more grim statistical milestones. The front page of this morning's *New York Times* is simply a list of names of 1,000 of our fellow citizens who have died from the virus.

But even closer to home here in Georgia, things that were once part of daily life in our community— going to the grocery store, shaking hands with a neighbor, assembling for worship, for heaven's sake – are now matters that are weighed in terms of grave risk to our personal health and safety and the health and safety of everyone whom we love.

And so no wonder are we all so very frightened. Oh, I know some are saying that they're not frightened at all, and that all of this is just a hoax or some sort of plot, and there's risk to everything, so let's play ball – but I think deep down, the events that have transpired around the globe in recent months have left all of us so very, very

frightened. Every human with whom we share this planet has been reminded in stark terms that life is fragile, uncertain, and finite.

III

And that brings us to our text for this morning. For the past few weeks, we've been reading through portions of the book of First Corinthians, which, as you know by now, isn't a book at all, but rather a long letter sent by a man named Paul to the Christians living in the city of Corinth about 20 years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

What we have before us as the letter of First Corinthians is actually Paul's response to a letter that has been lost to history. Paul was the founder of the church in Corinth, and after living and working in the city for some time, Paul moved on to plant churches in other places. But after Paul's departure, a number of controversies and conundrums had emerged within the Corinthian church, and someone from that community wrote to Paul and asked him to weigh in on some of these conflicts.

Apparently, one of the conflicts within the Corinthian church had to do with the concept of resurrection. Remember, it had only been about 20 years or so since Jesus was crucified, buried, and raised again. There were still a fair number of people alive in the world who had been eyewitnesses and held living memories of these events. And yet even then, within the Corinthian church, there were apparently a fair number of skeptics and doubters when it came to the notion of the resurrection of the dead.

And so in the passage we have before us today, Paul writes at length about matters of life and death. So with that background in mind, I invite you to listen for a Word from God from 1 Corinthians 15:1-26 and 51-58.

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any

of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; 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. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?”

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

IV

I am afraid of dying for all the reasons I already shared. But I am not afraid of death in the least, and you need not be either. As Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians, and as he reminds us, in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.

And that means that suffering and pain and sorrow and death are not the final things. Not for me. Not for you. Not for anyone who is in Christ, for in Christ we are a new creation.

But I'll let you in on a secret, my friend. From time to time it crosses my mind that all of this might in fact be bogus. All of this, this whole story, this whole business of faith and church and all of it, might be something that we humans invented to comfort ourselves, because the thought of death and then nothingness is just too sad to contemplate. From time to time, Marx's idea that religion is simply the "opiate of the people" crosses my mind. It's possible that all of this is just a bunch of made-up gobbeldy-gook.

And I'm mindful that I'm a pastor, and I'm not supposed to say such things out loud. But I'm human, and I have my doubts. Doubts, I think, are not the opposite of faith. In fact, doubt is a required part of a vital, life-giving faith. People who say they have no doubts about their faith make me nervous.

But here is what I have decided. I have decided that I am going to do my best to model this life given to me for as long as I have it after the pattern of Jesus Christ. I am going to do my best to be generous. I am going to do my best to do unto others as I would have them do unto me. I am going to do my best to keep the commandments, the first of which is to love the Lord with heart, soul, and mind, and the second that is like it, to love my neighbor as myself.

Because someday I will die. And someday people will gather to say grace over my body, and to talk about my life, and if I do my best to pattern my life after Jesus of Nazareth, at least they will be able to say here lies a man who lived generously, a man who tried to do justice and to love kindness, a man who did his best not to repay anyone evil for evil, a man who tried his best to honor all people. He didn't do it perfectly, but at least he tried.

And if that's all that happens after I've breathed my last and died, I'm OK with that legacy. If it all turns out to be a hoax after all, at least no one will have to lie about me at my funeral.

But I've thought long and hard about this. I've thought about all the generations of people around the world who for over 2,000 years who have lived their lives in light of this story. I've thought about the testimony I've seen and heard, not only from the biblical text, but from women and men whom I have known and loved who have

testified to me that Christ indeed has been raised, and that his resurrection makes all difference, both in the world and in the world to come.

I'm afraid of dying, so I'm still going to wear my seatbelt. I'm still going to try my best to eat right and to exercise this body that has been entrusted to me. I'm still going to follow my doctor's orders to the best of my ability.

I am afraid of dying, but I am not afraid of death. Not even in the least, because the last enemy to be destroyed is death, and that means that death is not the last thing they'll say about me. Or you. Or anyone who is in Christ.

V

We need not be afraid of death, because when death requires us to say goodbye to those whom we have loved, we who trust and believe that Christ has been raised, know that death means that it's goodbye, but only goodbye for now.

We need not be afraid of death, because when we expose the powers and principalities who rule this present darkness with the light of the gospel, and those powers and principalities respond by threatening us with death, we who trust and believe that Christ has been raised know that even death itself has been swallowed up in his victory.

We need not be afraid of death. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, we keep on doing gospel work. There is no need to have a conversation about "reopening the church," because the church never closed. We need to think about how and when we resume use our building as an asset for the work of the church, but the work of the church has never skipped a beat, steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, and we who trust and believe that Christ has been raised know that in the Lord, our labor is never in vain.

Thanks be to God. Amen.