AFTERMATH

1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-42, 50-58

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I was chatting with a minister friend earlier this week about the art of preaching, particularly the wide variety of books and ideas about how to do it better…or at least differently! And that led me to reminiscing about my preaching classes at college, and this bit of Paul's letter to Corinth reminded me of our very first preaching class assignment: a funeral homily. Yes, first year, only a couple of months in, and we were being tasked with crafting a short sermon for the funeral of an invented deceased person. It was a hard assignment; or at least, I found it hard.

Now I am always guided by the family's memories or by the deceased person's own wishes about what to say, but all of that had to come from my imagination, and I was left to my own devices about which passage of Scripture to use and what message to share.

And even though I was well aware of 1 Corinthians 15, and how it unpacked the resurrection and the hope we have in Christ's victory over death, I did not chose this passage for my funeral homily. And in a little over two years of ministry, I still haven't.

Paul's words are powerful and true, rightly victorious and full of hope. At the funeral of a faithful Christian who lived with that attitude, whose family is likewise conversant with the faith - entirely appropriate to say something more along the lines of"bon voyage"than goodbye.But most families don't seem to want that kind of funeral these days; they want a celebration of life for their loved one: a looking back over memories and a comforting idea of peace in the present and as an ending. Any talk of the future doesn't involve the person who has died.

The reality is that the people at a funeral will be a mixed crowd, with a whole variety of beliefs about life and death and what it all means, and very often quite an unformed and vague sense of after-death existence. To introduce something like this about resurrected bodies, at a moment of grief when there's no context or faith to make hope an easy conclusion - I don't know if it would be of help to a grieving family.

And to introduce the idea when grief is not clouding the mind to those with limited fluency with Christian beliefs, well, I expect that questions not unlike those posed by the Christians in Corinth would get asked: if God insists on raising the dead, then how does he intend to do it? And what will those no longer dead bodies be like?

The problem, of course, is that these are not the best questions to be asking. These questions reveal that the Corinthian Christians are missing something fundamental in their knowledge of who God is and what God plans for creation, humanity included. In proclaiming the resurrection of the body, Paul is not proposing some sort of first century version of the Walking Dead TV series or a live-action zombie film. But their questions are not unreasonable ones; and even though Paul rather dramatically calls them “fools,” he still took the time to answer.

In an age without access to healthcare, life in the body was not necessarily a healthy existence; so the Corinthians’ concerns were understandable. Life for the majority of the population in the Roman Empire was hard. Food was often scarce, and not readily available in the variety and quantity needed for good health. Poor nutrition often resulted in permanently affected health of a sort we no longer see so widely in Canada, like childhood anemia, rickets, poor eyesight, stunted growth, weak teeth and fragile bones, a poor immune system. Civic issues, like contaminated water sources, and unmanaged human and food waste all combined to make one more susceptible to viruses and infections and to increase exposure to bacteria. Life expectancy was low, even among the healthy. Less than 50% of children born lived past the age of ten.

Death was simply a part of life. Hoping to escape a physical body that was less than healthy is not an unreasonable hope.

It’s no wonder, really, that all the popular philosophies and beliefs of the day tended to be pretty down on flesh and blood. We can see Paul adapt that language in other letters to contrast sin-prone, dead life and new, free life in Christ. But he was really just re-defining words already in use in his world from a society-level belief system that placed no hope in the body.

As people who lived in that society, it appealed to the Corinthians to think that the essence of who one is need not be tied to the imperfect packaging it inhabited. But Paul is convinced that God made that packaging and longs to redeem it.

We have a new and perhaps unsettling understanding of how vulnerable our bodies still are, in the aftermath of the COVID pandemic. I wonder if part of the global north's shock and trauma from the pandemic doesn't come from a kind of amnesia we seem to have about the fragility of our bodies, a vulnerability that being young or healthy or strong or stubborn can't compensate for. Until two years ago, I expect that many of us assumed that deadly viruses and epidemics were largely the domain of other places, like central Africa or rural southeast Asia, places where healthcare is sometimes spotty, less up-to-date, and less accessible.

Many of us assume that if we do all the right things - like eat well, stay as active as we can, take our vitamins and follow the doctor's advice - if we take care of our bodies, we assume that our bodies will take care of us, less the wear-and-tear of aging.

But as COVID-19 settled into Europe and then North America, and then tore through the southern hemisphere, too, as the death toll mounted, even among the relatively young and healthy, we were all reminded of the perishability of human bodies. The pandemic took away any illusions of invulnerability we might have had, especially for people in the young adult and middle years of their lives, for whom death or illness with lasting consequences are often distant concerns.

Because the pandemic also denied us our blindness to death. It's fair to say that we hold death at arm's length these days. It doesn't intrude into our everyday lives in the way it did even a couple of generations ago, let alone as it did in centuries past. Barring a deadly accident, most of us will likely die in hospital or hospice or in a care facility; rarely, do we die at home anymore. Few of us will ever be faced with the challenge of coping alone with our dead; there are professionals at every stage, from emergency services to doctors and nurses, to funeral directors and cemetery workers to ministers, like me…who will deal with unpleasant physical details and accompany us through the process of grief and remembrance, emotionally and spiritually.

I fear we learn what death really means a month or so after the fact, once the professionals have done their jobs, friends and loved ones have gone home, the endless paperwork is finally done, and the bodily absence of our loved one hits us like a quiet avalanche.

We might indeed celebrate a life, but we bear the burden of death. Our society doesn't prepare us to carry that burden, not any more.

It's good to be supported in a time of grief, and it's good that our healthcare system usually does well at keeping us healthy or patching us up when we break, through childhood and into adulthood. But we are not invulnerable; death is a part of life we all face, for ourselves and for those we love and care about. So it's important to talk about it.

And while we, too, might well imagine an existence free of our own imperfect packaging, God's redeeming, renewing intention enfolds every part of creation and the entirety of a human being: heart, soul and body, as breakable and vulnerable as those parts may be.

Paul rather unexpectedly uses agricultural imagery to answer the Corinthian's questions; usually it's Jesus that speaks of seeds and growth. The extraordinary, supernatural point Paul is making is one that the natural world makes nearly everywhere we look, in ordinary, every day ways.

The seed that is buried does not closely resemble the plant that grows. And yet both seed and plant are the same thing; corn is our name for the little yellow kernel and the tall, leafy green stalk. Intimately connected and the same thing, yet disconnected in appearance and nature. The seed 'dies' or ceases to be as it was, but only in aid of the new plant it is destined to become.

We're surrounded by ice and snow right now, but in only a few months, it'll be spring again and then summer. The world will be filled with this ordinary, necessary, natural resurrection of seed to plant, an ordinary gift of new life that sustains all life on this planet, from oxygen-producing trees to food-producing garden plants to flowers that fill the heart instead of the stomach.

And that's what it'll be like for us, when the dead rise to new life in Christ when that last trumpet really does sound.

Over the course of this last part of 1 Corinthians 15, not all of which we read today, Paul uses a series of opposing descriptive words to draw out the disconnect between bodies now and resurrected ones: perishable versus imperishable, weakness versus power, dishonour versus glory.

To come even close to the awesomeness of these new, transformed bodies of ours, he draws on more natural-world images, like suns and stars and moons, each brilliant and shining, above the earthly life, each utterly unique and yet alike in glory.

Paul focuses on the difference between our bodies now and resurrected bodies in the future, because that's the bit the Christians at Corinth were struggling with. The connection between the two, the similarities, were well-known, since the gospel-writers - Jesus' own disciples - were able to attest to what Jesus was like when he rose from death. And Jesus is, of course, the first-fruit, the forerunner and example, of what will happen for us. Jesus' body was still a body: he ate and drank, spoke and listened, walked and was recognizable by those who had known him before…when he wanted to be.

Whether we prefer Paul's seed and plant image, or consider his contrasting descriptions of bodies now and bodies resurrected, he's still not really answering the questions the Corinthians asked; he's not saying how will God do it or what will these re-alived dead bodies be like. And that's because the how - the technical details - are not the point. Paul's not talking about reanimating the bodies we've already got; digging up the unsprouted seed that's been buried. The point is that our bodies will be saved, healed and made whole; still our bodies, just no longer suffering under the onslaught of the last enemy and its weapon of mass destruction; or, to put it another way, under the power of death and sin.

If death is indeed the last enemy, as Paul wrote elsewhere in this letter, then sin is the greatest and most damaging weapon in death's battle against life. Sin is not limited to our wrongdoings or unkindnesses; a lie told, a cruel word, a back to turned to another's pain. Sin is rather like a virus, a pandemic, that has touched every life and all creation as completely as our own pandemic has, corrupting and corroding human endeavours and intentions and even bodies, twisting them into things that hurt and harm, that cause pain and illness, that perpetuate injustice and violence. The whole created reality has suffered under sin, and all creation - human and nonhuman - longs for redemption.

None of what God has made remains untouched by sin's power, including our bodies, from our acceptance of systemic injustice to our sinful thoughts and words and actions to our creaky knees.

In the final triumphant lines of this chapter, Paul dares to envision life and our bodies and creation itself as they will be, remade and renewed and free from sin, untouched by any part of its corrosive effect: when this mortal body puts on immortality, Paul proclaims, then what has long been dreamed of, what was written down and hoped for, so long ago, will finally be true: Death has been swallowed up in victory; where, O death, is your victory, where, O death, is your sting?Thanks be to God, who gives us victory through Jesus Christ our Lord!

I hate to interrupt Paul's victory lap, but I find that there is still a little sting left in this last enemy of ours. We may not feel the sting when we think of our own deaths, although it's understandable if you do; but we certainly feel it for our loved ones and our friends. Even the most faithful Christian still hurts when someone dear dies. We still grieve profoundly - as we should. It would be a pretty poor kind of love that didn't cause us to mourn, no matter the circumstances of death.

But our grief is tempered by hope: nothing entrusted to the God of creation and resurrection is lost forever, even in death.

You may remember, a few weeks back, I explained that this rather epic letter of Paul's to the church in Corinth was bookended by the two great, uncompromising truths of our faith: the Cross and the resurrection.

In between there's been all kinds of conflict and disagreement, doubt and disbelief, anger and skepticism, blurred lines between the values of society and the life Christ wants us to live together…a whole mess of human stuff, some good and a lot bad. It struck me that this is a really superb image for what our lives are like, too, living between Easter and the final resurrection of us all. I don't know if Paul cleverly meant to do that; but you never know with him.

At the beginning, we see the suffering, crucified Christ, bearing in steadfast agony the sin of the world; in the end, we see the glorious risen Christ, unburdened, alive, transformed and victorious. We live now, in the place between, muddling along, somehow holding within our own beings both a portion of the suffering of this world and the gift of new, resurrection life.

It is, indeed, a mystery. And what are we meant to do with it?

Be steadfast, immovable, in our faith and in the work we do as Christ's own body, trusting in the hope we have through these glimpses of the whole of creation, and of you and me, saved, healed, and finally in Christ made new and free and whole. Thanks be to God. Amen.