

Luke 24:36-49

1 Corinthians 15:1-28

April 24, 2022

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

When we lived in Roanoke Rapids, NC, I used to swim at the town's indoor Olympic sized pool three mornings a week at 6:00 a.m. Sometimes I would be the only swimmer for the lifeguard to guard. Sometimes a woman who was the preschool teacher at First Presbyterian Church would swim in the adjoining lane. The pool was never crowded that early in the morning. For that reason, it was surprising one morning to meet somebody in the locker room after I had finished my laps. As I was drying off and getting dressed, he looked at me and said, "You're a Presbyterian minister, right?" I wondered how he knew! When I said, "Yes," he asked, "So, do you believe in reincarnation?" I told him, "No," and he replied, "You're a Presbyterian minister and you don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead?" "Of course I believe Jesus rose from the dead," I said. "Well," he continued, "that's reincarnation, isn't it?" I said, "No, that's resurrection." I have no memory of any further conversation on the topic. So much for Locker Room Theology 101!

The voice on the intercom echoes through the hospital hallways — "Code Blue, 2nd floor. Code Blue, 2nd floor." Doctors and nurses rush to the patient's room. The crash cart is wheeled in. The attending physician grabs the patient's chart and sees a DNR order and the activity quickly subsides. D-N-R — "Do not resuscitate" — a medical order written by a doctor that instructs health care providers not to do CPR if a patient's breathing stops or if the patient's heart stops beating.

Last Sunday's Easter celebration was glorious and inspiring. We began worship singing, "Christ is risen, alleluia! Jesus Christ, the King of glory, now is risen from the dead" and we ended worship singing "Jesus Christ is risen today, Alleluia!" We didn't sing, "Christ is resuscitated, alleluia!" or "Jesus Christ is reincarnated today, Alleluia!"

Do you remember the comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes"? Calvin, the six year old protagonist, was named after the 16th century theologian John Calvin. His pet tiger, Hobbes, was named after the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes. Calvin and Hobbes often got into difficult situations, usually because of Calvin's enthusiastic imagination. Many times they would have theological discussions while hurtling down a hill in a wagon or on a sled. Here's a good example:



I think Hobbes is more interested in staying in this life than finding out whether or not reincarnation is real!

Reincarnation — Resuscitation — Resurrection. They sound similar and we might think, “What’s the difference? They all have to do with coming back to life. What’s the big deal?”

Resuscitation is defined as “the action or process of reviving someone from unconsciousness or apparent death; making something active or vigorous again.”¹

Reincarnation is defined as “the rebirth of the aspect of an individual that persists after bodily death — whether it be consciousness, mind, the soul, or some other entity — in one or more successive existences. Depending upon the tradition, these existences may be human, animal, spiritual, or, in some instances, vegetable.”²

Resurrection, on the other hand, is defined as “a rising to life from death.” While that might sound similar to Resuscitation and Reincarnation, there are two important differences. First, Resurrection is the overcoming of death or, as the apostle Paul says, “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.” (1 Corinthians 15:54b-57) While someone who is resuscitated is “brought back to life,” eventually that person will die again. But, as Paul also tells us, “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.” (Romans 6:9-10)

Second, Resurrection has to do with the body, not just some immortal soul or divine spark that resides within us and is freed upon death. In the Apostles’ Creed we affirm our belief in “the resurrection of the body.” When we think about our “body,” we think about the flesh and blood and bones and muscles and cartilage and everything else that makes up our physical body. But the New Testament, especially Paul, uses the term “body” to mean everything about you — yes, your physical make-up, but also your goals, your hopes, your dreams, your attitudes, your life orientation, your personality — everything that make you who you are. The “resurrection of the body” is God’s “Yes!” to who you are. You matter! You aren’t destined to come back again and again and again in the form of another person or animal or even vegetable in a cycle to achieve perfection. Resurrection means you are transformed — just as Jesus was transformed [think

about how the people who met him after death didn't recognize him, but, then again, there was something very familiar about him; then they knew him when he spoke their names or broke bread and ate fish and interpreted the scriptures and showed them his hands, side, and feet].

The apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers about the resurrection of Christ for at least two reasons, maybe three. First, it seems that some of the believers said, "Sure, Christ was raised from the dead, but what's that got to do with us?" Also, apparently there were some Corinthians Christians who, for whatever reason, thought the resurrection of believers had already happened — they had already been perfected — and this incorrect belief led to all sorts of moral and ethical and community problems in the church.

Then there were those who, for whatever reason [and it's almost as if you can see Paul shaking and scratching his head about this one], claimed "there is no resurrection of the dead." Paul emphatically tells them, "For I handed on to you as of first importance . . . that Christ died . . . he was buried . . . he was raised on the third day" and lists the many people who met the risen Lord in person, including himself. Imagine Paul's tone of voice and attitude when he asks the Corinthians, "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?" (1 Corinthians 15:12) What Paul told the Corinthians 2,000 years ago is just as true for all of us today. If there is no resurrection from the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then:

- * my preaching and our proclamation of the Easter message is in vain
- * our faith is empty and void
- * we are liars about God
- * our faith is futile, useless
- * we are still in our sins
- * our loved ones who died believing in Christ are lost
- * and our hope in Christ, then, is limited to just this life, and that makes us the most to be pitied of all people.

That's a rather hopeless, helpless, lonely, forbidding message, isn't it?

But, BUT, **BUT** . . . Paul says, "But *in fact* Christ has been raised from the dead." In that one statement, all of the previous statements and consequences are reversed and erased. "*In fact*" — "used to emphasize the truth of an assertion, especially one contrary to what might be expected or what has been asserted." *In fact*, Christ has been raised from the dead. Good for Christ! But, BUT, **BUT** . . . it doesn't end with Christ — He is "the first fruits of those who have died." Or, as Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, "Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:4-5, 11)

It is said that the core confession of faith is that Jesus died and was raised again. As they say, it's a matter of life and death . . . or, more accurately, it's a matter of life and death and life. CollinsDictionary.com defines that phrase this way: "You are emphasizing that it is extremely important, often because someone may die or suffer great harm if people do not act immediately." That accurately describes the consequences of saying "there is no resurrection of the dead."

We rejoiced and celebrated and sang and were inspired last Sunday in our Easter worship. It helped that we could gather together. It helped that we had all of our music together for Easter for the first time since 2019 — organ, piano, handbells, trumpets, kettle drums, choir. It helped that it was a beautiful, sunny spring day. But here are two important reminders:

* The meaning of Easter is not just for one day in the year. The message of Easter — "Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed!" — is the foundation of our faith, the framework for our present lives, and the promise for our future.

* The promise of the resurrection of the dead is not just our personal, private ticket to heaven. Christ's resurrection, which assures our resurrection some day and offers us God's power for the living of these days, is a cosmic event. The resurrection life is more than handbells and organ and piano and trumpets and kettle drums and choirs and blue skies and flowers on the cross and wonderful worship. Resurrection has to do with God's amazing power at work in the world to defeat sin and death and to usher in God's kingdom.

Almost twenty years ago, British New Testament scholar and Anglican bishop N.T. Wright published his monumental 738 page book called *The Resurrection of the Son of God*. It is an exhaustive review of the concepts of life after death, the meaning of resurrection, the gospel accounts, Paul's letters, and other ancient and Christian writings. His concluding section is entitled "Belief, Event and Meaning." His next to last paragraph in the book reveals exactly why Christ's resurrection from the dead is, indeed, a matter of life and death.

He writes, "No wonder the Herods, the Caesars and the Sadducees of this world, ancient and modern, were and are eager to rule out all possibility of actual resurrection. They are, after all, staking a counter-claim on the real world. It is the real world that the tyrants and bullies (including intellectual and cultural tyrants and bullies) try to rule by force, only to discover that in order to do so they have to quash all rumours of resurrection, rumours that would imply that their greatest weapons, death and deconstruction, are not after all omnipotent. But it is the real world, in Jewish thinking, that the real God made, and still grieves over. It is the real world that, in the earliest stories of Jesus' resurrection, was decisively and for ever reclaimed by that event, an event which demanded to be understood, not as a bizarre miracle, but as the beginning of the new creation. . . However dangerous this may turn out to be, it is the real world in and for which Christians are committed to living and, where necessary, dying. Nothing less is demanded by the God of creation, the God of justice, the God revealed in and as the crucified and risen Jesus of Nazareth."³

It's a matter of life and death.

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.” (1 Corinthians 15:20)

Great is the mystery of our faith: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Alleluia! Amen.

Let us pray: Eternal and all powerful God, Jesus died. He was buried. On the third day he was raised from the dead. Thank you, God, for hope when hope was lost and for life when death had won. Healer of our every ill, we need you now. With Christians around the world and the angels in heaven we proclaim the mystery of our faith; Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. Amen.

NOTES

¹Google Dictionary.

²The Editors of Encyclopaedia Briannica, “reincarnation, religious belief,” at www.britannica.com.

³N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), p. 737.