

RISEN INDEED!

1 Corinthians 15:12-19

We have all heard stories about how to comfort people knowing that their loved ones who have died are in heaven. One I know as a true story is of the girl who had yelled at her dad when she last saw him right before an accident killed him. She was consoled by someone whose mother was dying. He called the mother and had her talk to the girl. The mother assured the girl that when she got to heaven at her death, she would tell her father how sorry the girl was for yelling at him.

When my mother-in-law died a few years ago in Phoenix the pastor told me at the committal that this was the first one he had done there. It was much more common where he had been in Michigan, but in Arizona most people go with cremation. And there are many others who just totally skip the funeral. For most people in our culture, the body does not matter. The idea is that what lives on is our souls—that though the body ends, the real you, your soul, is eternal.

So why were the followers of Jesus so sad when He died? Didn't they know that His soul lived on? Later one who became a follower of Jesus—St. Paul—was in Athens preaching to the scholars at what in that day was the height of intellectual knowledge. He went to the place called Mars Hill where the philosophers debated all day. He talked about a statue they had in Athens to “The Unknown God.” Paul told them that this God was the God of Scriptures, who created all things. Then Paul talked about God sending His Son Jesus into the world. They listened to him until he said that Jesus was raised from the dead. Then most of them dismissed him. We might think, like scientists in our day, that they stopped listening because who could believe that the dead could come back to life. But for them the question was, “Why would anyone want to rise from the dead?”

Greek philosophy centered on the thoughts of Socrates and his disciple Plato who stated that reality is beyond what we experience in front of us. Plato told the story of a cave where people lived. They were fascinated by the figures they saw on the wall of the cave. But one day, one of them ventured out of the cave and discovered that those figures were actually shadows of what was outside where the light came from. This story was to highlight that the true reality was beyond our normal observations. The physical, like our bodies, is just a shadow of a higher reality. The body dies, but the higher reality, our souls, lives on. So why would someone want to return to a body? Why would anyone want to rise from the dead?

The idea of getting away from the physical has been getting a stronger pull with our modern technology. Wars used to be fought by people facing each other and physically lunging a spear or sword at each other. Firearms allowed us to do that from a distance, but still at an enemy you see. Now war is fought by drones. Our military work not as riflemen who shoot at a physical target nearby, but in trailers in the southwest where they control drones halfway across the world with their computers. Soon, they say, we will not need to drive our cars—they will drive themselves. There is so much talk about how “AI” (artificial intelligence) can take

our place. It can seem to be going in the direction that so much is required just to maintain our physical bodies, that we would be better without them. All you need is thought—“information.”

That was the issue when Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:

But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise Him if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

It may be a comfort to us that when loved ones die, they seem to suffer no more. But how do we know that? We do not know what they are thinking. We have no way of communicating with them. We are cut off from them. Why? Because their body is dead. Without a body, how can we talk, listen, see, feel, smell, experience? Souls don't do that.

In the famous “Matrix” movies what we see as the physical world is just an illusion created by computers. The hero of the story is shown the actual reality. Peoples' bodies are stored and kept alive in a special building where their metabolism is harnessed to produce the electricity that runs the virtual world. The real physical world is a disaster. That is what we face, an illusion, if we do not have the resurrection from the dead.

That is why the clear message of Easter is that Jesus rose from the dead. It wasn't that He then appeared in some mystical form. His body was raised so He could be heard, seen, touched, and truly experienced. And His resurrection means that we too will rise physically from the dead. If we do not have a body, then perhaps we have a soul that can think, but there is no way we can relate and communicate to others. We need a body, our physical selves to reach out to others, to love. Love is not a feeling, but as some have stated, it is a verb. It is action. It is doing things for others. And we will be joyfully able to do that forever in heaven when Jesus, on that last day, raises us from the dead.

Without the resurrection, you and I could not be you and I in the future. God created us and the world; He created, and it was good! What is bad about the world is not that it is physical, but what our sin did in polluting it. If good is just some force, then it is something we can control, something we can tap into, something that we make up. But then, it fails because it is the result of sinful humans. But the resurrection means that it is something God, who alone can create, creates as part of the new uncorrupted world we will experience when Jesus comes again.

Paul tells us that Jesus' resurrection is what makes Jesus real in our lives. The disciples did not just see a vision of Jesus. They got to touch Him. Thomas saw the real wound marks on his hands and side. He ate food in their presence. There was no body discovered to prove that He was still dead. The priests both bribed and threatened the guards at the tomb to perjure and say Jesus' body was stolen. The witnesses to the resurrected Jesus were willing to die rather than deny Easter. Why would they die for something if they knew it was a lie?

And that real resurrection is what we can witness today. Baptism is not just a ceremony. We hear God's actual Word to us in the Scriptures. God puts new life into the whole person—body and soul. In Holy Communion we receive the true body and blood of Jesus, not just something symbolic. We experience God physically, not just in our thoughts. God communicates to us, not just puts Himself into our dreams. He does because that is how we experience love—as God became a human to physically give Himself to us physical humans.

Paul tells us in 1 Thessalonians that “We do not grieve as those who have no hope.” Others can say about their loved ones who have died, “We can still think about them. We can see pictures and videos from them. Their memory lives in our hearts.” But Scripture tells us about death. Ecclesiastes 9:5 says, “The living know that they shall die, but the dead do not know anything, neither have they any more a reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.” We read in Psalm 115, “The dead do not praise the LORD, nor any that go into silence. But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.” If we think of heaven as a place where our souls go and worship God until the end of the world, then the resurrection means nothing. Then we have no need for Jesus because we can believe that since the soul is immortal, then all will live forever. But when Scriptures speak of eternal life, the idea is not so much that it doesn't end, but that it is with God. We can exist forever, but apart from God that is hell. But Jesus died and rose so that we can be brought back to God and in our resurrections experience Him fully—what we call heaven. Because Jesus is risen! Risen indeed!