

Christian Hope: Life Now and Forever

From the Eastertide series on the Apostles' Creed: *Credo*

Text: Romans 8:34, 35, 39; John 14:18-19

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"... Christ Jesus...at the right hand of God who indeed intercedes for us." Romans 8:34

"What will separate us from the love of Christ?" Romans 8:35

"[Nothing] will be able to separate us from the love of God." Romans 8:39

"I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you... because I live, you too shall live." John 14:18-19

Well, this is the last Sunday of Eastertide. Eastertide, beginning with the celebration of Easter itself and extending really to the fiftieth day, which is Pentecost, which is next Sunday.

Our focus this morning is on the consequence of the resurrection and the development of a faith and the hope with which we live that, because he lives, we too shall live. We see Jesus' resurrection as a model. We believe that this is not all there is, that the best is yet to be, on the basis of our faith that Jesus who died was raised by the power of God. So today at the conclusion of the Eastertide series, which has gone under the Latin word, *Credo*, the verb that takes its own subject and is translated "I believe," we consider the final section of the Apostles' Creed: "I believe the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting".

I always find that one of the great times to affirm that line from the Apostles' Creed is at the edge of an open grave. It gives me goose bumps when I stand at the cemetery with those loved and lost a while. Together we unite our voices in that strong affirmation which concludes with those words: "I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." Before the yawning, grasping jaws of death, symbolized by that open grave, it is the right time for a Christian, and a Christian community to make the grand affirmation - "nevertheless." We bury our dead because our loved ones and we ourselves will die, really die. But to

die in the wake of Easter is to be able to affirm over the grave, "I believe." "Credo, I believe."

The Apostles' Creed concludes there because when you have said that, you have said it all. *That* is the conviction with which we live. That is Christian hope, that we have life now and forever.

What kind of word can we use? How can we describe this reality that is beyond our grasp, this final great mystery? We simply stammer and we say resurrection of the body, life everlasting, eternal life, life here and now and forever, that is the bottom line of our faith. It is the hope that inspires us, enabling us to live with some measure of equanimity and serenity and to die with some measure of peace.

In the Apostles' Creed that's where it concludes. But it concludes that way because of what we had confessed earlier in that middle section of the creed dealing with Jesus Christ, where we confessed that he was crucified, dead, buried, descended into hell or into the realm of the dead, and on the third day, rose again, ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the power of God, from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead. We confessed that about Jesus Christ. And what we confess about our own destiny is posited on our conviction of the experience of Jesus.

Now it may seem that the creed is almost trite in its statement when it says crucified, dead, buried. It's like hammer blows. It's like, you know, saying it over and over again. And I think in the Heidelberg Catechism, there is a question about this statement. It asks, "Why does it say that he was buried?" And the answer is that it might be demonstrated thereby that he was really dead. The fact is that they found it necessary to confess that Jesus died.

There were those at the time the creed was formulated, and even before, who were denying that very fact. There were those who didn't believe that Jesus came into the full reality of our humanity, that Jesus was genuinely bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, that somehow or another, at some moment, the spirit must have left, or the divine nature evacuated the body, or whatever. There were all kinds of theories and speculation. But in the final statement of the Christian creed, the most familiar affirmation of our creedal tradition, the Apostles' Creed, that just gets hammer blows.

Crucified, dead, buried, descended into the realm of the dead was the original significance of that phrase. And then on the third day he arose so that the resurrection of the dead is not somehow or another a soft peddling of death or it is not some kind of an accommodation of death. It is a transformation beyond death.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ did not happen in our space and time world. And the creed was trying to say this life came to an end. This was really death. Jesus died. Jesus was buried. The body of Jesus was placed in a tomb. Period.

And Easter is a celebration. On the other side it is the affirmation of faith that that which had ended in a very human way, the cessation of life had been overcome by the power of God. To believe in the resurrection of Jesus is in no way to short circuit the reality of the death of Jesus. That, I think, was what was behind that creedal formulation that seems to bring the emphasis so strongly on the death of Jesus. In our experience we too believe we live with hope on the basis of our conviction about the destiny of Jesus Christ: that Jesus who really died is alive.

Wasn't it about a year ago when I sent some of you out of here in fear and trembling because I said that Jesus' bones, that were interred didn't all come together like the bones in Ezekiel's vision, with the flesh and blood Jesus walking out of the tomb. I wrongly assumed that we understood that the resurrection of Jesus was not the resuscitation of a corpse. Remember that? I wrongly assumed that we commonly understood that. Let me go back to that once again.

The flesh and blood of Jesus was as real as yours and mine, and that flesh and blood that died, was buried. And it was not that flesh and blood that was called forth by the power of God. The resurrection of Jesus was not like the raising of Lazarus. The raising of Lazarus, in John's story of Jesus, is the supreme miracle, the supreme sign. The raising of Lazarus is the sign that Jesus, present in the midst of that community, was the Lord and giver of life. But when Lazarus was called forth wrapped in his bandages, Lazarus had to die again. That was the resuscitation of a corpse. Not so Jesus.

When Jesus was raised by the power of God, Jesus encountered people and they were sure he was alive. But as the apostle Paul said, writing the earliest on this of anyone, flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Paul thought it was all going to end very soon and so he also wrote, "We shall not all die but we shall all be changed in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye." When we talk about the resurrection of the body we are talking about a transformation of this physical reality that we know as body. When the creed said of us "I believe in the resurrection of the body" it was trying to say something about a reality. It's not a fantasy. It's not an illusion. The authentic person is called to life.

Now how do you say that? Well, the body seems so important to the definition of our person, yet we know that we are more than the body. One of the beautiful old men of this congregation— many years ago I went to see him and asked, "Fred, how are you?" He said, "Well I'm fine, but this old house I'm living in isn't so good any more." We can make that distinction and yet in the Christian and the Hebrew tradition there was never a denigration of the body. The body was good. It was part of the creation of God. The God who created all things had looked and said it is "very good." So when the Christian community wanted to affirm the reality of that which lies beyond death, it said resurrection of the body. We know that the body we plant is not the body that will be that resurrection reality, whatever that is.

Paul says it will be a spiritual body. What in the world is that? Paul didn't know, and we don't know. But we believe it will be a reality that reflects the authentic personality that is now living. At the end it is not death, in darkness, in nothingness, but it is life and light in the presence of God. That's what the creed means to say – resurrection of the body and life everlasting or life in the world to come without end, however you want to say it. The bottom line of Christian hope is that what is now, will be transcended by what will follow, that there is more, that this is not all there is, and, what is more, it is the best that is yet to be. That is the Christian conviction on the basis of the experience of Jesus. Easter faith was the confirmation of the followers of Jesus that the end is not the grave. Dead, buried, to be sure, but then, then, resurrection, life eternal, the Mystery of God, whatever that is. We hadn't ought to try to be too clear in our definition of that.

I went back to check on what I had mentioned to you on Easter. I looked at last Sunday's *New York Times Book Review*, the best seller list. *Embraced By The Light* was the title of the Easter message, the story of Betty Eadie and her near death experience. And I am not surprised to find that six weeks later *Embraced By The Light* is still number one on the nonfiction list. It would be number one if only this congregation was responsible for going out and buying that book. I see it popping up all over. *Embraced By The Light* is a good title, but for my taste Betty Eadie learns too much. She knows too much. She becomes too defining and too definite about these things. So be it. It doesn't matter. That mystery is full of light and life and that is the point.

It is that existential need of us all, I believe, that cries out for some basis in which to place our feet and to set our hope. We long deep down to know that this is not all there is. Oh, I've read some sophisticated statements and philosophical treatises and some artful, creative treatments in novels and literature. There are those in the modern age who speak about this as an illusion. Hans Küng in his lectures, "Eternal Life," admits that there are those who say it is wishful thinking. And we have really no defense against that charge. That's why it is "Credo," resurrection, everlasting life, "I believe." It is an affirmation of faith. We are dealing with that which is beyond our ken and our knowledge. It is that which we cling to, that which we affirm, that in which we set our hope because of our conviction that Jesus who died and was buried was raised by the power of God, and that beyond that impenetrable veil, which becomes but a moment of transition and transformation, there is light and life in the presence of God.

That deep existential need in the human heart is witnessed to by the fact that in our contemporary society these books are being bought up by the hundreds of thousands. The question is there. Medical technology has put it in the news, Jack Kevorkian and the whole euthanasia business, the possibilities presented by medical technology. But beyond that, deep down in the human heart there is that question. It faces me when I face that reality personally, or when I face it with one whom I love. Then all the cool, sophisticated argumentation evaporates in a moment. We are created for life and we need to know our labor is not in vain.

And we need to know our love is not finally empty in the end. The Christian community is a community that stands to say, I believe the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting.

Two marvelous experiences have been in mind recently. Leon, if I had seen you ahead of time I would have warned you. Lee Stille's mother died the week after Easter. I was able to hold her hand, to see her smile, to give her the benediction, and to promise her the best was yet to be in the week following Easter. Unbeknownst to me it was within a day of her death, but that's not the point.

The point is that when we finally got out to the cemetery, I thought that the cemetery crew had gotten it wrong. I thought we caught them with their equipment down. There was the front end loader with a scoop of sand. Across the street was that little putt putt machine that carries the top of the vault. There wasn't any of that nice green carpet, you know, that's supposed to be grass that masks the cold outlines of the grave. There was the cemetery assistant in his blue jeans, his work clothes, and it looked as though the funeral procession had come upon them before they were ready. But I proceeded with the committal service, only to find out that this was all planned. Three shovels were nearby. Lee, his sisters Sharon, and Donna took the shovels, bit into the sand in the front end loader, and began to throw it on the vault after the casket had been lowered and the vault sealed, all of that happening as we stood there. I can still see the vault being covered with sand. I can still hear the earth falling on the vault. And then the children were invited, the grandchildren were invited, the little great grandchildren, Zinni's beautiful old parents taking not the shovel but just their hands with the earthy handful of dirt and throwing it on the grave. As Christian people there is no need to cover the grave with some kind of masking, some green carpet that cuts away the cruel emptiness of the earth. There is no need to turn from that to mask it, to make it cosmetically acceptable, aesthetically pleasing. We can look into the grave. We can throw the dirt down there. It's over. It's death. It's painful. It's loss.

Oh, it is so healing, so liberating to be able to stare death in the eye and not flinch because all of that has been overcome and transformed by the power of God as witnessed to in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. We can deal honestly, authentically with the reality of death and loss and pain in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Dying is transformed in the face of this kind of faith.

And now I come to bear witness to my dear Menno Klouw, who died a couple weeks ago. Menno, who is so well loved in this community of faith, who cared with such tenderness, gentleness for this facility for so many years. On the night of his death I was privileged to be in his home. Menno had come home to die without tubes and wires, in his own home, surrounded by his own loved ones. Coming home to die, day by day, the end in sight. Friday night, his own dear grandchildren were gathered round. Dear God, how better can you die than with

your grandchildren there? The family gathered, death imminent. I took his hand. I began to speak to him. He turned his head. I said, "Menno, squeeze my hand if you hear me." And he squeezed my hand. I said, "Menno, it's all right. You're just fine. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." And I kissed him and I left so deeply moved that there is beauty even in the face of death, even in the midst of loss when it is surrounded by love, saturated with compassion and experienced in the sure and certain hope of the light that will dawn. Dear God.

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. God knows I believe.