Immortality or Resurrection?

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1 Corinthians 15:51-58

Sermon Series: iBelieve – A Study of the Apostles’ Creed

I spend lots of time in cemeteries. You might say it comes with the territory, since funerals and burials are integral to pastoral ministry.

I’ve taken special interest in reading tombstones. Here are some of the more unusual epitaphs I’ve come across. This tombstone in Boot Hill Graveyard in Arizona of Lester Moore reads, “Four slugs from a 44. No Les, no Moore.” A tombstone in Richmond bears this sober epitaph, “I told you I was sick.” Another grave marker in Oklahoma has a parking meter next to it. I was confused until I saw the words “Expired” in the window of the meter. I came across this Pennsylvania grave marker depicting a foot pressed to a gas pedal with the words, “Here lies the body of Jonathan Blake: Stepped on the gas instead of the brake.” Some of you will remember Mel Blanc as the voice of cartoon characters like Porky Pig. On his Hollywood tombstone are the words, “That’s All Folks.” Here’s an actual tombstone from Thurmont, MD, “Here lies an Atheist. All dressed up and no place to go.” My favorite is an epitaph from a tombstone in Nantucket, Mass. “Under the sod and the trees, lies the body of Jonathan Pease. He is not here, there’s only the pod: Pease shelled out and has gone home to God.”

Funerals have changed in the 30+ years I have served this church. Funerals have become elaborate celebrations of the deceased. Long-winded eulogies and video tributes are now standard fare. Maybe some of this has to do with the loss of transcendent meaning in today’s secular culture.

We have changed our notion of the afterlife also. We have come to view eternity as the congenial extension of this present life; minus the aggravations, of course. Eternity is now regarded as something of an unalienable right; a variation on the Platonic idea of the immortal soul.

Plato was a prized pupil of the philosopher Socrates. In 399 BC, Socrates was arrested for promoting anti-government propaganda and cultivating a disrespectful attitude among the young. A jury of 500 found Socrates guilty and sentenced him to death. On the day before his execution, Socrates gathered his students to wax philosophical about death. Socrates reiterated his two core beliefs: namely that the soul is immortal and death is our
Only God is inherently immortal.

friend. Socrates believed the soul had immunity from death. He imagined the soul as imprisoned in the body. Since death liberates our soul from the body, it acts as our friend.

Jesus had an altogether different take on things. He taught that God is immortal and death is our enemy. Only God is inherently immortal (1 Timothy 6:16). Immortality isn’t an innate human right. We possess immortality only when it is conferred on us by an act of a grace-filled God.

Oscar Cullman, in his book, Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Body, contrasts the deaths of Socrates and Jesus. Socrates is remarkably composed at his death; almost cheerful. When he gathers his disciples together, he speaks serenely about his impending death. He drinks the hemlock resolutely, convinced his soul is immortal.

Jesus is distressed at the prospect of his impending death. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus tells his disciples that his soul is deeply troubled and begs them not to leave his side (Mark 14:34). He pleads, “Father, take this cup from me” (14:36). He cries out on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me” (15:34). I find it curious there is no attempt by the gospel writers to soften the terribleness of Jesus’ death.

How is it that Jesus, the venerated Son of God, is distressed at the prospect of his death while the human philosopher remains calm and resolute? Doesn’t this strike you as incongruous?

Death is regarded as an enemy in Scripture. God created us for life, not death. Death is the result of sin and separates us from God’s life-giving purposes. Paul speaks about death in 1 Corinthians 15 as the last enemy to be destroyed (15:26). Death in the Book of Revelation is the last enemy to be thrown into the lake of fire (20:14).

If an army seeks to defeat its foe, it must infiltrate enemy territory to take it out. If death is our enemy, the only way to defeat this ancient foe is to invade its territory and conquer it on its own terms.

We’re focusing this spring on a second century baptismal creed called the Apostles’ Creed. We declare in this creed that Christ “was crucified, dead and buried.” Jesus enters the realm of death to defeat our arch enemy. The devil must have thought he had won a decisive victory on Good Friday only to have God pull the rug out from under him on Easter. The devil doesn’t see this one coming when God raises Jesus from the dead.

Death, then, is a defeated power. Easter is to Christianity what D-Day is to the Allied forces in WWII. D-Day becomes the turning point of the Second World War. When
Christ has taken the stinger out of death.

the Allies win D-Day, the war takes a decisive turn. Although the war is not yet over, its outcome is now clear.

So what difference does it make in my life that Christ is risen? Jesus’ resurrection serves as the prototype and pattern of our resurrection. You won’t find in the Apostles’ Creed a single reference to the immortality of the soul. As we declare in the last line of the creed, we believe “in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” Paul writes in Corinthians, “Listen, I tell you a mystery. We will not all die, but we will be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality” (15:51-53). Notice the soul isn’t imperishable and immortal; rather, the dead in Christ are raised imperishable and clothed with immortality.

What Paul is talking about here isn’t the mere resuscitation of dead bodies to their original atomic structure. He’s talking about a whole new body/soul transformation; a total make-over. We will be raised from death to life. We will be given spiritual bodies in the resurrection. These new glorified bodies will be vastly superior to mortal bodies since they will be impervious to decay and death.

Paul has the audacity to mock death at the end of this 15th chapter of Corinthians. “Death has been swallowed up in victory,” he writes. “Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (15:54-55).

A father and his young son were driving on a country road on a beautiful spring afternoon. Suddenly, a bee flew into the open car window. The boy panicked, since he was deathly allergic to bee stings. His father stopped the car, grabbed the bee, squeezed it in his hand and released it. As soon as he let the bee go, his son became frantic again as it buzzed around his head. His father opened his hand, showing him the stinger where the bee stuck it in his skin. “Son, you don’t need to be afraid anymore. I’ve taken the stinger for you.”

Christ has taken the stinger out of death. Jesus Christ has disabled death.

The church in the Middle Ages practiced a tradition called Risus Pascalis or Easter Laughter. In the Middle Ages, it was customary for pastors in Southern Germany to lead the congregation in telling funny stories in the week following Easter. During the Baroque Period, an Easter homily had to include a story or joke to make people laugh. Easter Laughter is based on the premise that the demonic forces which conspired to bring Jesus to his death have now been made a
laughing stock. Saint Augustine said that God played the ultimate joke on the devil when he raised Jesus from the dead. This is divine comedy at its best.

If there is no resurrection of the body and souls are indeed immortal, we can go on living as before if immortality is our birthright. But if Christ is raised from the dead and he raises his followers from death to life again, then Easter changes everything.

Easter is what gives Christmas its significance. If there is no Easter, then it really doesn’t matter whether Jesus is born in a stable or a 7-11. Easter changes everything. No Easter; no Christmas.

Paul writes in Corinthians, “If Christ has not been raised, then everything I’ve told you is essentially smoke and mirrors” (15:14). “If Christ has not been raised, then living by faith is like whistling in the dark” (15:17). “If Christ has not been raised, then you could say we’re a pretty sorry lot” (15:19). But if Christ is raised, then Easter changes everything.

What if Easter really does change everything? If Easter is just another religious holiday, you can check the box and get on with life. Some of you are only one major life event away from wishing you had given Easter more serious attention. If Jesus’ resurrection is at the epicenter of salvation history, we can no longer afford to live as though Easter doesn’t matter.

In Lloyd Douglas’s classic novel, The Robe, Marcellus becomes enamored with the person of Jesus. He writes to his fiancée, Diana, living in Rome, telling her about Jesus’ miracles and teaching, crucifixion and resurrection. Finally, he informs her that he has decided to become a disciple of Jesus. Diana writes back: “What I feared is that this might affect you. It is a beautiful story. Let it remain so. We don’t have to do anything about it, do we?”

Yes, as a matter of fact, we do. We need to open our minds and hearts to Christ’s resurrection power. If Christ is alive, he has the capacity to positively impact your life in wonderfully redemptive ways. I stand before you as Christ’s representative to urge you to follow him with your life. Don’t put it off any longer. If what I am telling you is true, then Christ really does change everything.