

1 Corinthians 15:51-58
The Source of Hope
WRCoB 5.24.20

Woody Allen once said
I'm not afraid to die
I just don't want to be there when it happens.

That may be the sentiment of most!

For many, death is the worst fear and greatest enemy
Something avoided at all costs.

Unfortunately, we all face it.

Benjamin Franklin said there were 2 certainties in life
Death and taxes.

One could argue taxes
But not so much death.

As the United States faces close to 100,000 corona deaths
Statistics on death has been front-page news.

It's a bit unsettling and prompts me to reflect a little.

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According to the Apostle Paul
In this letter to the Corinthians
Christians who face death

Trust that as Christ had been raised from the dead
We, who live and die in Him, will also rise!

It's quite the proclamation, isn't it?

And yet, it is central to our faith in Jesus
An undying source of hope in life, and in death.

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Now as to immortality
Many religions and many non-religious people
Believe that!

Many believe in the soul's immortality
Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, animism
And even the New Age folk.

The Egyptians planned for it
And the Greeks and Romans believed it.

Some of them believe in heaven and hell
Others believe in reincarnation and karma
And some believe in the land of ancestral spirits

Some believe the soul remains in spiritual form
Others believe the soul will be in bodily form.

Some believe it happens immediately upon death
Others believe it will happen at some future date.

Some believe there can be communication
Between this life and life beyond death

Others believe the two worlds
Are on completely different planes.

Some believe the soul remains in an unconscious state
Void of personality and absent of thought.

While others believe that the soul has a personality
That they will know as they are known.

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In Jewish understanding when you die
You move on to a dark, spooky place called Sheol.

All people, good and bad, end up there.

However, drawing from the event of Jesus' resurrection
The Apostle Paul is fleshing out a new understanding.

When those who believe and live Christ-like lives die
They shed earthly bodies
And take on heavenly bodies.

The earthly body is perishable
The heavenly body is imperishable
The first mortal the second immortal.

All this will happen, Paul says, in a twinkling of an eye
At the last trumpet.

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The Apostle Paul claims that when the end comes
Death, our worst fear, our greatest enemy
Is fully defeated.

1

1 Corinthians 15:55

Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?

Will Durant, the author of the huge work entitled
The Story of Civilization once wrote

The hope of another life gives us courage to meet our own death, and to bear with the death of our loved ones; we are twice armed if we fight with faith.”

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I'm reminded of a story told by a friend, an ICU nurse.

She spoke of caring for two patients in ICU
Who were actively dying.

This occurred before our current pandemic situation.

Both families were present in the two rooms.

Room 18 was full of pure chaos and despair.

The family constantly called for the doctors and nurses
To try and do something anything
To prolong their loved one's inevitable death.

They harassed the nurses
Complained to the doctors
They were rude and they were ugly.

Room 19 was a scene of peace and tranquility
The family spoke softly and sung quietly
Surrounding their family member
In an air of appreciation and love.

They were kind and considerate to the ICU staff.

The difference?

Room 18 were nonbelievers. Room 19 were people of faith.

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What peace! What assurance!

To know that death is not the end but the beginning.

Rather than despairing for a life ending

Faith celebrates a new life everlasting!

What hope is that?

It is the hope above all hope!

The Apostle Paul says the same.

2

1 Thessalonians 4:13-14 (NRSV)

We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

If death is our greatest fear and our worst enemy

Than faith in Jesus Christ is our greatest hope!

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As I reflect on our current situation

One of the great tragedies of this period

Is the inability to be close to one another.

We have been fortunate here in West Richmond

Not to have lost anyone

During the enforced six-foot-distancing rule.

I have heard from others
And have read many accounts
Of the extreme grief people feel

As they released their loved one
Into the care of the hospital
Only to never see or touch them again.

Of funerals where people are to keep safe distances
From each other
As they say their final good byes.

Unable to hold, comfort, or caress each other
During such a time
Seems cruel and unusually punishing.

We know the importance of touch.

And this pandemic has forced us to practice safe-distancing
Preventing us from fully grieving the loss we experience.

We do not want our loved ones to be alone as they die
Without a loving word or a hand to hold.

We want to cling to them as long as we are able.

Covid 19 deaths and funerals seem so cold and inhuman.

It is truly a loss never recovered.

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My only consolation in all this
Is the assurance, in faith
Of what Paul describes in chapter 15.

That life continues in a new and glorious form.

That death is only a transition from one life to the next.

I cannot imagine facing death, my own or a loved one's
Without the assurance and hope found in Jesus Christ.

From Frederick Buechner

For Christians, hope is ultimately hope in Christ. The hope that he really is what for centuries we have been claiming he is.

The hope that despite the fact that sin and death still rule the world, he somehow conquered them.

The hope that in him and through him all of us stand a chance of somehow conquering them too.

The hope that at some unforeseeable time and in some unimaginable way he will return with healing in his wings.

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In the Opening Words that Thoko read
And in the 1st Corinthians 15 passage

A trumpet summons us to rise
And gather and worship God on his holy mountain.

In the Book of Revelation
Seven trumpets bugled by seven angels
Herald in the kingdom of God.

The trumpet is the instrument of proclamation.

But this poem by Czech poet Vladimir Holan
Considers the possibility of something else.

3

Resurrection

Is it true that after this life of ours we shall one day be awakened
by a terrifying clamour of trumpets?

Forgive me God, but I console myself
that the beginning and resurrection of all of us dead
will simply be announced by the crowing of the cock.

After that we'll remain lying down a while...
The first to get up
will be Mother...We'll hear her
quietly laying the fire,
quietly putting the kettle on the stove
and cosily taking the teapot out of the cupboard.
We'll be home once more.

Vladimir Holan

translated from the Czech by George Theiner

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Woody Allen also said
*I don't believe in the afterlife
Although I am bringing a change of underwear.*

If death is our greatest fear and our worst enemy
Than faith in Jesus Christ is our greatest hope!

Jesus himself said

4

John 11:25-26 I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?

So how do we prepare for the afterlife?

Believe in Jesus as Lord and Savior

Live a Christ-like life

And bring a change of underwear.