

“The Christian Hope”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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**Text: “For this perishable body puts on imperishability,
and this mortal body puts on immortality.”
(I Corinthians 15:54)**

There are many tasks that are central for a Christian minister but certainly one of the most important responsibilities that each of us face is conducting funeral services for members of our congregation, or, in some cases even for those who are not members of our congregation. In the four decades that I have served as an ordained minister, I have done my share of funeral services.

Now, every death and every funeral presents us with the profound reality of death, and whether a person has lived for nine months or ninety years, the occasion of a death always presents a sense of sorrow. Some people are blessed to live very full lives for many years. Yet, even in those cases there is an element of sadness for those who are living must now gone on without the presence of one we loved.

But there are some situations where the death of a person is excruciatingly painful. There are two of these deaths that stand out particularly in my mind that occurred within the last year and a half. The first one was the death of a seventeen year old young man, who had graduated from high school, was an outstanding student, and who faced a very promising future which was taken from him when he died this past summer in a golf cart accident.

A second situation that stands out in my mind was the death of an outstanding lawyer in our community who died by a self-inflicted gunshot wound after suffering for a period of time with a very serious illness called “melancholic depression,” which creates a terrible sense of hopelessness and suffering.

In his letter to the church at Corinth Paul speaks of death as “the last enemy” and there is no doubt that this is true.

And that is one the things that makes Easter unique. Now, of course, every Sunday is a celebration of Easter. The early church changed the Jewish Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday as a way of establishing the fact that every Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection of Christ.

But, having said that, there is something about Easter that cannot be avoided. On this Sunday the stakes are higher than on any other Sunday, for if what we say is not true on this Sunday, and then what we say on every other Sunday will ultimately not make any real difference.

So let us make no mistake about this. The Christian faith has been faithfully proclaimed throughout the New Testament and in every age since, over the fact of death.

There are many people today and certainly many theologians who do not believe in the resurrection or eternal life. But it is hard to view Christianity apart from a conviction that the life we live in the here and now is not the only life that exists. Walter Lowrie once observed that the doctrine of Eternal Life is the core doctrine that brings all Christian doctrines into systematic coherence. Austen Farrer, another theologian, astutely commented that that apart from the doctrine of eternal life Christian faith does not make much sense.

So, this morning I want to share with you three core convictions about the Christian hope.

I.

The first conviction is the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In I Corinthians 15 the Apostle Paul makes the strongest case for the resurrection that one finds in the New Testament. In the passage from which I have read the Apostle Paul strikes a triumphant note about the resurrection as the power of God over death. Listen to his words:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

“O death, where is your victory?”

“O death, where is your sting?” (I Corinthians 15: 54)

Paul is quite aware that there are those in Corinth who do not believe that God raised Jesus from the dead. But Paul understands also that without a belief in the resurrection the Christian faith is empty and futile. And in this same letter Paul states the issue as clearly as possible when he writes, “If Christ is not raised from the dead, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain.” (I Corinthians 15:17) Moreover, Paul also argues that “If Christ has not been raised, then our faith is futile and we are still in our sins.” And then, as if this were not enough, he states that “If for his life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.”

N. T. Wright, whose is a Bishop in the Church of England, understands what is at stake in our belief in the resurrection when he says, “The bodily resurrection of Jesus is not a take-it-or-leave-it thing, as though some Christians are welcome to believe it and others are welcome not to believe it. Take it away,” reasons Wright, “and the whole picture is totally different. Take it away, and Karl Marx was probably right to accuse Christianity of ignoring the problems of the material world. Take it away, and Sigmund Freud was probably right to say that Christianity is a wish-fulfillment religion. Take it away and Friedrich Nietzsche was probably right to say that Christianity is a religion for the weak.”

“Put it back,” Wright continues, “and suddenly you have a faith that can take on the postmodern world that looks to Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche as prophets, and you can beat them at their own game with the Easter news that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.”

Now, let us be honest. Eternal life is never described in detail in the New Testament. Paul says, “Lo, I speak to you a mystery.” Here, as Christians, we have to speak with hope and faith and not by sight.

II.

The second conviction I would share with you is that our belief in eternal life is central to everything we believe. In the Book of Job we find one of the most profound questions of the Old Testament: “If a person dies, shall he live again?”

But, unless I am wrong, I sense today that there are many people who have little interest in eternal life. Some simply have no desire for a future life. The idea of eternity strikes many people as endless time, which equates to meaninglessness. For many people life in this world has been so difficult that more than anything they long for release. The prospect of another world does not interest them.

Others see self-centeredness in the idea of a future world that rewards us for good. Many people think of the notion of earning heaven by living a good life and yet the gift of eternal life is not something we earn.

Still others find that faith in immortality encourages otherworldliness, when our attention really needs to be focused on this world. How easy it would be for any of us to face the inequalities of this world and simply dismiss them by saying that in a future world all wrongs will be made right.

But at the end of the day the hope in immortality is indispensable to the Christian faith. All of the great Creeds of the church are in agreement on this matter. “I believe in God; I believe in Jesus Christ; I believe in the Holy Spirit; I believe in the communion of saints; and then finally, I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

So let us make no mistake. Our belief in Eternal Life is the bedrock of our faith. If this life is all that we have, then there is so much that will never be fulfilled. Unless immortality is true, however, nothing can be eternally gained but everything will be eternally lost.

Dr. Karl Menninger, a prominent psychiatrist and Presbyterian elder, was once asked if he thought that the belief in eternal life was real or whether he thought it was just “pie in the sky.” Dr. Menninger, who had dealt with severely mentally ill people all his life, replied by saying, “if there is no pie in the sky, if there is nothing beyond this world and this life, there are a lot of people who are never going to get any pie.”

There are a lot of things in this life that end up badly and there are a lot of dead-end streets. Our belief in eternal life points us to a remarkable dimension of God’s sovereignty and justice. To

believe in eternal life is the supreme act of believing in the reasonableness of Gods' work. It is also the belief that ultimately all wrongs will be righted, all evil punished, and all of those lives that were never fulfilled will one day find fulfillment.

III.

A third conviction I would share with you this Easter Sunday is our belief that eternal life ultimately affirms that human life is not an accident but that every human life is rooted in the purposes of God.

Now, none of us can describe the details of life after death. The imagery that one finds in the New Testament of mansions in the sky and streets of gold are at best symbols that can only point to a reality beyond anything that any of us could imagine. Reinhold Niebuhr once observed that it was unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge about the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell. Of course it is! The Apostle Paul, for one, never engaged in such folly, but when he summed up his thoughts of the world to come, he cried, "Eyes have not seen, nor ears have heard, the things that God has prepared for those who love him."

Some years ago when a group of archaeologists first began their investigations of ancient Roman cemeteries, they found everywhere tombstones with seven letters on them: NFFNSNC. These letters represented an old inscription, so familiar that the Romans put only the initials down, and these are the Latin words for which the initials stood: Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo. And this is translation: I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care. So sons buried fathers, and fathers buried sons; wives interred husbands, and husbands in interred wives; and over their graves, this cynical, hopeless summary of life was put: I was not, I was, I am not, I do not care.

Do you call that an expression of strength? Is it not the quintessence of surrender? Over against that spirit of hopelessness I remember seeing the grave of a great Christian, Dean Alford, who lies buried in Canterbury, England. And on his tombstone is written: "The inn of a traveler on his road to Jerusalem."

Once, when the great Reformer Martin Luther was very troubled about some of the events in his life, his friends saw him writing with his fingers on the dust of a table top: "Vivit, Vivit" – "he lives, he lives."

That is the Easter hope we celebrate this Sunday. So let us make no mistake about what we are saying. If Easter isn't good news, then there is no good news. But if it is – if it is true that Jesus Christ is risen indeed – then Easter Day, and its Easter message, is the true sun which, when it rises, puts all other suns to shame.

Amen.