

The Promise Of Glory
1 Corinthians 15:12-58 (*passim*)
February 20, 2011

I.

One of our favorite hymns at St. Thomas is *I am the Bread of Life* (H335). And during the inspiring refrain we sing, "I will raise them up on the last day." We almost can hear it in our minds now, can't we. "I will raise them up." There is a lot of theology in that hymn, and today's reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians tells us how it will work.

It describes a little about what happens when we die. And it reviews again what will transpire when Jesus comes again bringing the end of the world as we know it. He will raise us up. It is the clearest description in the Bible of how these mortal bodies with which we sometimes struggle will be transformed into glorified bodies more magnificent than we ever have known.

So these words of Paul touch our minds with wonderful possibilities that as Christians we inwardly sense in our souls. And through faith we can anticipate greater times ahead.

This reading previews the inevitable reality to come. Even though it has been embellished in books and movies, its truth remains the central part of our faith. The meaning of the resurrection and Christ's coming kingdom are at the core of all we do in church, and hopefully in our lives.

And I'm going to talk about this prophetic message with one hand tied behind my back, so to speak. I will not quote or mention anything from the biblical Book of Revelation; not because it is unimportant but because it is not necessary. We will see that our Christian hope and our lives in eternity are amply described elsewhere in Scripture.

Lives in eternity reminds me of the story about a fellow visiting a dying friend in a hospital. Both had been avid golfers, and this fellow told his sick friend that if there was any way he could communicate with him after he died, to please let him know if there were golf courses in heaven.

The dying man passed on, and (please indulge me here) was given a one-time opportunity to speak to his buddy on earth. He said to him, "I have two things to tell you. The first is there indeed are golf courses in heaven. The second is that you have a tee time next Tuesday."

The point here is that while there are things about the next world that are mysteries, we do know that Scripture has revealed to us a glimpse of the wondrous life that is ahead.

II.

But before we get into these promises Paul has imparted to us, let's first clarify some concepts and distinctions. The first is a distinction between our spirit and our soul. They are not the same.

Our spirits are the spirit of God within us that animates us and gives us life. We do not have life apart from God's spirit. Your spirit is the same as my spirit. All our spirits are the same because they are God's spirit residing within us. And when we die our spirits leave us and return to God.

Our souls, however, are not the same. Each is uniquely ours and separate from others. My soul is not like your soul. Our souls are the eternal part of our temporal being. And when we die our souls continue on and go to God's presence. I will say more about this in a few minutes.

A second set of distinctions should be made among the ideas used to describe life beyond the here and now. Common ones are reincarnation, immortality, resuscitation, and resurrection.

Reincarnation is the fanciful notion that after we die we come back to earth and live another life until we die again, after which we come back again to a new life on earth, and so on. Reincarnation has no theological foundation. It is not in the Bible and doesn't work that way. We did not have prior lives here, and will not have future lives here. Forget about that myth.

Immortality is the idea that our bodies die but our souls do not, and live forever in some sort of out-of-body state, here on earth or in some other imagined dimension. Ancient Greeks believed that, and some new age and eastern religions have this view today. But again, while our souls are eternal, Christians do not believe in the permanent separation of our souls from our bodies.

Resuscitation in the Bible is described in the context of Jesus' miracles in bringing Lazarus and others back to life. Sometimes it is called revivification, and it conveys no sense of eternity. All those people eventually died later. And in modern medical settings it refers to emergencies with people who have stopped breathing or whose hearts have stopped beating.

Christian faith, however, looks forward to a resurrection that restores us to life and transforms us eternally, based on Jesus' resurrection. It will be a one time event in which the world also will be changed.

In this sense the Bible does not say that our souls "sleep" when we die and are "awakened" at the resurrection. When Christians die our souls immediately go to God's presence even although the resurrection is yet to come (Lk. 23:43, 2 Cor. 5:8). Biblical references to "sleep" in this context are metaphors that mean death, like sleep, is temporary, and refer to the body; not the soul.

And we simply don't know what our souls will look like in heaven. Certainly each soul will be distinctive, and we would like to believe God will enable us to recognize each other and communicate as we experience joy in his presence.

So when will the resurrection occur? The Bible is clear it will happen when Christ comes again (15:52, 1 Thess. 4:16, 1 Jn. 3:2). At that time, our souls, which already are with God, will be reunited with our transformed bodies as they are raised on the last day (1 Thess. 4:14). And today's reading says those who are alive at that time also will be transformed (15:51).

This leads to a somewhat obvious question, doesn't it? What will happen in the resurrection? Will there be world-wide disturbances in cemeteries as buried caskets burst open and bodies emerge from the ground? Will ashes supernaturally be changed into bodies at columbaria? What about people vaporized in explosions? And many corpses no longer exist in any form.

We don't know what that spectacular time will be like, but the Bible does not say anything about being resurrected from graves, or tombs, or final resting places. It doesn't even go into that. Don't even think about Hollywood images or special effects.

Instead, the Bible only describes what we will be raised to; not where we were raised from. That's because God knows his children, our souls already will be with him, and he will be able to raise us irrespective of our earthly fates.

One final comment fits here. Several theories go beyond what I have said today, and include whether there will be a rapture, the nature of a tribulation, if there will be multiple judgments, and the meaning of the millennium. These ideas are firmly held by some of their adherents, and none of them contradict Scripture. We might cover them later in a Christian Education class.

III.

This leads to the essence of today's reading, which is the nature of our resurrected bodies. What will they be like? Paul makes clear that the weakness and infirmities of our earthly bodies

no longer will exist. We can throw away our glasses and medicines. We won't need them. No more trips to the doctor. We will be marvelous and glorious, like angels in heaven (Mt. 22:30).

And our reading describes it. It says we will go from being perishable to imperishable; from dishonor to glory; from weakness to power; from having a physical body to living in a spiritual body; and from mortality to immortality.

And the sense of the reading is that our resurrected bodies will have a physical aspect to them. They won't be vaporous or ghostly, but rather more like Jesus' body as he appeared to the disciples after his resurrection. In Luke's Gospel they touched him, and watched as he ate a piece of fish (24:39-43).

The big difference appears to be, as Paul said today, we will not be flesh and blood in the kingdom of heaven. We will be imperishable and eternal. Nothing will malfunction or grow old or wear out. The dishonor of our sinful nature will be left behind, and we will be able to stand with angels. We will be immune to the vagaries of the natural elements of the created world.

That all sounds pretty good, doesn't it? And we might be asking ourselves, "How can I be sure that I get one of those bodies?" We know the answer, don't we? Our assurance comes from the strength of our faith, which overcomes the weakness of our humanity.

IV.

So here we are. Resurrection and eternal life. Monumental promises from our Lord. If we did not have this sure and certain hope of living forever in God's presence, we might be doing something else this morning.

But we do believe and have faith even if we don't have all the answers. We look at creation all around us and know there is a creator. We experience the Holy Spirit in our lives, sometimes without even realizing it and sometimes calling it coincidence. We know, deep in our souls, that there is something special about humanity; that there is meaning for us beyond mortality.

And we also know and sense and experience these things before we even open the Bible. What happens after we do that? Then we have an even better understanding of the mystery of God. As we read Scripture our faith in God and eternal life with him is strengthened, even though we also know we cannot rely on science or logic or our limited knowledge to explain it.

So I urge you to ask Jesus Christ to be in your life. Even though you have done it before, do it again. Although we already know him, he calls us to deepen that relationship. It is not a one time thing but a way of life. I have never heard anyone on their deathbed complain about having prayed too much. We can never talk to Jesus too much.

And if we do, he will be with us; sometimes not in the way we expect or ask, but he will come and we will know that he is there.

We know that God has greater things in store for us than we ever will experience on this earth. It will be far better than we can ever imagine. As Scripture tells us, the eye has not seen, the ear has not heard, and the human heart has not conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor. 2:9). *Amen.*