

Thomas R. Cook  
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota  
9:00 and 11:15 a.m. Celebrations of Holy Eucharist  
The Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany; February 24, 2019

## “Grave to Grace”

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 15:35-28-42-50; Luke 6:27-38 (7 Epiphany C, RCL)

*“How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”* We’ve been working this one out for a long, long time. Perhaps as long as we have known time. Now some might think of those first century Christians of Corinth with whom Paul corresponded as somewhat primitive in relation to us sophisticated and modern believers, but I assure you that even they were savvy enough to know that the flesh in the grave was given to corruption; that the body, no matter how cleverly preserved by the ancient arts of the undertaker, did not hold together after death. The Church has long accepted this fact of our corporeal existence and has made it a tenet in our faith... the grave means at least to us... “earth to earth, ashes to ashes, and dust to dust.” Yet we have also long held to the remedy in our faith as Paul expresses it to the Church... If there is a physical body, there is a spiritual body, and it is by the latter that we rise again and forever. *“Just as we have borne the image of the [person] of dust [that is, like Adam], we will also bear the image of the [person] of heaven [that is, like Jesus].”*

It's a hopeful idea, and it's been around a long time. I've been reading a little family genealogy lately, and one of my ancestors on my mother's side, a Margaret Jones of Henrico County, Virginia attested in her will of August 1718 that her first bequest of record would be this: *"...I bequeath my soul to Almighty God who gave it, not in the least doubting in a joyful resurrection and pardon and remission of all my sins by the intercession and merits of my Blessed Saviour Jesus Christ, and my body I bequeath to the earth to be decently buried at the discretion of me Executors hereinafter named."* It is with such a firmness of faith in the Resurrection that I wish to live. But I have to tell you... I don't think it's easy. We are living, for now, in some pretty cynical times. To contemplate the meaning and reality of the Resurrection in a time like ours is a challenge—a time of skepticism and of solid science, a time of uncertainty and social unrest, a time when the credibility of religion and seemingly all our institutions appear strained to the breaking point. How can we, as the Creed says, *"...look for the Resurrection of the Dead and the life of the world to come?"*

Well, I don't think we can... as long as we've got the cart ahead of the horse, that is. See, I don't think faith in our resurrection begins by avoiding the reality of death or comforting ourselves with pious platitudes or wishful thinking. I think a firm faith in the Resurrection begins here and now... in the way we choose to act and dwell in this land of the living.

*"I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Do to others as you would have them do to you."*

Now, if that's not what we are about, we're not about the living faith of Jesus, and we're not sharing a love that comes of God. The goal for us as Christians cannot simply be to live forever. Jesus teaches us that the goal must be for us to love together, in order that life forever is possible and meaningful. What good is living forever if we don't love? What kind of existence would that be? So many walk this earth believing somehow that *death* steals our happiness, *death* robs us of our "right" to live, *death* takes away what we've worked so hard to possess, that *death* is our enemy, when human beings, acting brutally and selfishly without love or thoughtfulness toward one another, are plainly enough enemies to ourselves and each other. Life without love welcomes death, it seems to me, because life without love is interminable suffering. So Jesus teaches us how to overcome death by the way we live... through caring, understanding, love even for our enemies, through generosity, mercy, acceptance, sympathy, and decency toward others. And sacrifice. *"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you?" says Jesus. "For even sinners love those who love them."* These teachings of Jesus are the foundation for a belief in the Resurrection of the Dead. Love is the horse to pull the cart of resurrected life. And, to me, no amount of self-proclaimed righteousness, religious piety and purity, or professed "...assurance of pardon by the intercession and merits of our blessed Saviour Jesus Christ" means

much of anything if we don't live into a sacrificial, vulnerable, caring love for others like Jesus did. Without love, Paul reminds us, we are but "...noisy gongs or clanging symbols."

You know, it occurs to me that there is but one letter that differentiates the word "grave" from "grace." Just one letter. And if the grave is for the dead, then it's the grace that makes for the living. We aren't resurrected from the dead because we are good. We aren't resurrected from the dead because we earn it. I think we are resurrected from the dead because we are loved, graciously, sometimes in spite of ourselves. And when we let ourselves feel that love, when we have learned also to love, then we understand the language that makes for living, even when so much language around us day by day is about death... about hate and anger and distrust and fear and frankly, things that just cannot live forever. By love we can hear the voice of God calling us to new life, eternal life. I believe in the Resurrection, because I believe what Jesus teaches us of love. Love for the sake of others is what saves us from hate and sorrow and the despair of death.

Love is a profound, powerful, and faithful thing. It's the work of a lifetime, no matter how long or short we are given to live, so it's good to get on with it. And love offers hope. David Brooks of the New York Times quoted in a sermon he preached

with the congregation of the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C. on February 12, 2017, theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who famously gives Jesus' call to a life of love and faith some really helpful perspective, I think. Niebuhr writes in his work, The Irony of American History:

*“Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our standpoint. Therefore we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”<sup>1</sup>*

If there is indeed that life of the Spirit of which Paul speaks in his letter to the Corinthians, and I hold firmly to that reasonable and holy hope in Christ that there is such life indeed, it can only be born of the love Christ shows and shares, love that is of God... for us, and for us to share with one another. *That* love is how the dead are raised. *That* love turns the grave into grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr quoted in a sermon by David Brooks preached with the congregation of the Washington National Cathedral, February 12, 2017, found at <https://cathedral.org/sermons/sermon-david-brooks/>