

## Sermon

April 3, 2022

*What Difference Does It Make?  
A Case for the Relevance of Resurrection*  
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Last week we explored the phenomenon of near-death experiences and how the temporary cessation of life has apparently given some people the chance to visit heaven. It has also given them deeper pockets.

Critics call it the “heaven boom,” a lucrative, for-profit industry that has produced millions of dollars in revenue through everything from book sales to television appearances to big-screen, box-office hits. Our question accordingly last week was simple: what does the Bible say about near-death experiences? Do we go to heaven after we die, and has anyone returned to tell us what it’s like?

The results were startling, at least to me! Not only does the Apostle Paul provide one of the only accounts of an out-of-body experience we have in Scripture. He also maintains that what he encountered should not be shared with others. Speaking of himself in the third person, he writes: “I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person – whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows – was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat” (2 Cor 12:2-4).

The mandate against speaking about the experience seems clear. Beyond that, moreover, Paul’s encounter occurred in audio only! He has nothing to say regarding what he saw; he simply heard things no human being should repeat.

Paul’s mystical experience aside, the Bible says almost nothing about near-death experiences. The Old Testament, you may recall, offers only hints about Sheol, the subterranean abode of the dead. When a medium calls the Prophet Samuel back from the dead, he greets her with a complaint. “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” he asks. Sheol, it would seem, is a place of rest.

Samuel's reaction reveals an understanding of life after death that permeates Scripture. Sleep is the cousin of death. That said, many people of faith (present company excluded) seem to forget the pairing of sleep and death.

Sleeping after we die seems a long way off from visiting heaven and meeting the angels, Jesus, or God. Yet for those who believe in the resurrection, one where the risen Christ constitutes the "first fruits" of God's new creation, it's still not the last word. "Listen," the Apostle Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, "I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die [Gk: fall asleep], but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed."

But it's not only us. God will transform the whole world. Violence will no longer occur. Death will have lost its sting. The lion and the lamb will lie together, and God will make God's home among mortals (Rev 21:3). Peace will prevail, and the kingdom – as we say in our liturgy – will have no end.

What, then, does the restoration of the cosmos at the end mean for us now? As I suggested last week, Christ's resurrection has already introduced a new state of things. Whenever we experience the power of renewal, the self-affirmation of life, the ability to go on rather than give up in the face of our infirmities, our despair, our loneliness, our grief, we glimpse the new creation that awaits its completion on the last day.

I like this view. Yet something still troubles me. I get nervous when speaking about "unknowables" like what happens to us after we die or what God has in store for the future of the cosmos. Perhaps you do too. These are big claims, big promises! As a theological acquaintance of mine once said, "That's beyond my paygrade."

The agnosticism of Ecclesiastes seems like a much safer place to reside intellectually: "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again. Who knows

whether the human spirit goes upward, and the spirit of animals goes downward to the earth?"

## **Another Option**

There is, however, another way to understand the resurrection of Christ and the relevance it has for us in this life. The theologian Dorothee Soelle captures it beautifully in her book, *Theology for Skeptics*. "Once in a theological-political discussion I referred to Jesus," she writes, "at which point an older man who had been silent up to this point entered in: 'What do you want with this Jesus? He didn't accomplish anything! I have nothing at all against him, but he didn't succeed. He was killed, like many others before and after him. I don't understand why you want to follow him. Do you want to be on the cross, too?' This man was a skeptical, non-believing Jew" (pp. 93-94).

You can see the problem.

Let me break with Soelle for a moment here. How would you reply to the man in her story? Would you talk about the cosmic implications of Christ's resurrection, how because of it he now "fills all things" (Eph 4:9-10), how he will complete the creative work of God by transforming everything on the last day?

If not, then what will you say? What difference (if any) does the resurrection make in your daily life? We say "Christ has died, he has risen, he will come again" in our Easter liturgy, but do these words have any impact on you once you leave the church on Sunday morning?

I find Soelle's response extremely compelling. "Naturally," she says, "my conversation partner was correct in his historically based skepticism. Not only was Jesus condemned and murdered at the time, but Christ still does over and over again before our eyes. He has been buried in our churches, corrupted to the point of being unrecognizable within the political parties that decorate themselves with his name, and distorted in the symbols, like the sign of the cross, that have been used to murder the innocent" (p. 94).

And yet, she writes, there is something about his resurrection that endures. Wishing she would have said this at the time, she adds: “The killing didn’t completely work, as you see. He still lives on here and now, too” (p. 94). How? He lives in me. I am the proof that his presence endures. I embody him whenever I live for others as he did! Suddenly this view of resurrection emerges with tremendous support throughout the New Testament. The Apostle Paul, for example, says that it is no longer he who lives, but Christ who lives in him (Gal 2:19-20). When Paul meets this risen Christ in a vision on the road to Damascus, moreover, the latter asks why Paul persecutes him, referring obviously to the church, to us, to his reconfigured body in the world (see Acts 9). We are proof he still lives!

In today’s reading, finally, Jesus charges Peter to embody his presence out in the world. “Feed my lambs,” he says. “Tend my sheep. . . . Feed my sheep” (John 21). “Whenever you do these things,” Jesus might add, “you not only follow me. You become me. You embody my transformed presence. As long as you live this way, I live this way.” 1 John 4:12 states it perfectly: “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God [or Christ] lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.”

## **Our Mission**

Dear friends in Christ, it’s one thing – as Soren Kierkegaard says – to worship Christ. It’s another thing to follow him, to embody him, both here in our fellowship as well as out in the world. Be Christ to one another, Martin Luther says, and in so doing his resurrection will continue to reverberate throughout the corridors of history as well as the entirety of creation.

This, I submit, is the case for the relevance of the resurrection. So long as we live for others, he lives in, with, and among us.

Amen.