

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

More Powerful Than You Could Possibly Imagine

Epistle Lesson

1 Corinthians 15:50-58 (NRSVUE)

⁵⁰What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. ⁵¹Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, ⁵²in 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. ⁵³For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

"Death has been swallowed up in victory."

⁵⁵"Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?"

⁵⁶The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

Bible/Sermon Focus

The funeral service in the United Methodist Book of Worship is titled, "The Service of Death and Resurrection." The name of this liturgy expresses the bold claim that we know our eternal life, our resurrection, is promised through the resurrection of Jesus. In that service the gathered community hears:

Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Questions of life and death are foundational for us. The resurrection is the promise on which we can face death. That's a huge claim. Theologian James Cone tells us that the resurrection means hope. Even though we know our lives can be taken, resurrection means our lives (and our deaths) cannot be deprived of ultimate meaning. He wrote, "*As in the resurrection of the Crucified One, God could transmute defeat into triumph, ugliness into beauty, despair into hope, the cross into the resurrection.*"

Though the cross symbolizes death, it is not only death that the cross symbolizes. Anywhere that there is unjust suffering, or abuse of a person or of creation, that is where Jesus is. The cross is the hope in the very space, energy, and matter that suffering, sin, and evil try to claim. Again, this is a bold assertion. God is intimately tied to us no matter where or what the circumstances. Where there is corruption in the systems, where people are being harmed, or starved, where soil is being poisoned, where emissions are filling the air, there is the cross. And the resurrection claims that God's promise is also there, the promise that these evils do not get the final say.

In the middle of his confrontation with Darth Vader, Obi Wan Kenobi says, *"You can't win. If you strike me down I will become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."* Obi Wan is aware that there is no act of hate or violence, not even death, that can keep him separated from the Force. His death is not removed, nor meaningless, nor unreal. The violence of the cross and the suffering that it gives is in fact, very real. But it is not final.

Some people have had the honor of being in a hospital room when an aging loved one passes. Pastors, chaplains, nurses, and other healthcare workers are also privy to the mystery and wonder that is death. Like the story Pastor Andy shared about his dog, there is this *thing* - this holy, set apart, mystery - that takes place. There is an overwhelming feeling that the person who was just there, isn't anymore. The honest frailty of our flesh reveals itself and we are struck with awe that this flesh was even ever able to carry such a deep and meaningful existence within it. And we know in our own flesh, we can feel, that our loved one is not actually gone, but they are certainly not there, in that body, anymore.

After his death Obi Wan goes on to speak into Luke's life, guiding him and showing up when he is most needed. Luke carries this teaching with him, and shares it with Rey. Luke tells her, *"We'll always be with you. No one's ever really gone. A thousand generations live in you now."*

Our ancestors in life and our ancestors in faith will continue to speak to us and through us. That is one of the oldest beliefs of the Abrahamic religions. In ancient Israel, before we could imagine heaven, before God taught us of resurrection, we believed that we lived on through our ancestors. No one is ever really gone. *"Where, O death, is your victory Where, O death, is your sting?"*

Discussion Questions

1. How have you come to terms with significant deaths in your life?
2. How can we *"live as those who are prepared to die?"*
3. What does the cross mean to you? Where do you see the pain of the cross and the promise of the resurrection?
4. James Cone said, *"As in the resurrection of the Crucified One, God could **transmute** defeat into triumph, ugliness into beauty, despair into hope, the cross into the resurrection."* Reflect on his word choice of *"transmute."*

Prayer

*O God, who gave us birth, you are ever more ready to hear than we are to pray. You know our needs before we ask, and our ignorance in asking. Give to us now your grace, that as we shrink before the mystery of death, we may see the light of eternity. Speak to us once more your solemn message of life and of death. Help us to live as those who are prepared to die. And when our days here are accomplished, enable us to die as those who go forth to live, so that living or dying, our life may be in you, and that nothing in life or in death will be able to separate us from your great love in Christ Jesus our Lord. **Amen.***

"The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A [person] who lives fully is prepared to die at any time." - Mark Twain