

What Does Hope Look Like?
1 Corinthians 15:35-44
May 14, 2023
West Valley Presbyterian Church

SLIDE 1

1. Easter is wonderful! Last week we studied 1 Corinthians 15:1-20, and talked about how our hope for the future is based on the foundation of Jesus' resurrection. Paul says that if Jesus was resurrected (which he was), and if we belong to him, then we also will be resurrected. Which is about the most hopeful thing I can think of to say.

2. But how exactly does that work? How is someone resurrected? We've never personally seen that happen, right? So if we saw a resurrected person, how would we even know it was them? Well, Paul doesn't know all the details either; so he uses metaphors to give us some idea of how resurrection happens for us.

3. Continuing on in his discussion of resurrection, in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, vv 35-44:

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³⁵But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" ³⁶How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. ³⁷When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. ³⁸But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. ³⁹Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. ⁴⁰There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another. ⁴¹The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

⁴²So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; ⁴⁴it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

Here ends the reading of God's holy word. Thanks be to God!

4. Well, we all know that our bodies are perishable. Unless our bodies are embalmed, as they did in ancient Egypt, then eventually animals and worms and microbes will recycle our bodies. Without preservatives, even our bones will eventually decay and the inorganic materials will be returned to the earth. And in California, this process usually gets speeded along. The majority of people in our state, whether Christian or not, want their bodies to be cremated. Including me. It's a lot cheaper, and ashes don't take up as much space in the cemetery. So how can we be resurrected if our bodies have been returned to their elements?

5. Good question! That's what Paul is wrestling with here in this passage for today. He uses the metaphor of a seed breaking apart to release the seedling – the embryonic plant. This little seedling grows to become something that it sure didn't look like when it was inside the seed.

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6. And Paul makes the point that the seed – the acorn in this case – can be said to die in the process of germination. It breaks apart, and eventually crumbles away and its nutrients are recycled. He says, v. 37 - 38, "When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body."

7. In the same way, our physical bodies die, and eventually crumble away, and its nutrients get recycled. But it doesn't end there. God gives us also a spiritual body as he has determined.

8. A spiritual body – what is that? We don't know. Paul points out that there are all kinds of "bodies" that we aren't as familiar with. Yes, people have bodies; land animals have bodies which are different; airborne animals, different yet; water-dwelling animals, different yet. And then there are other physical objects in the universe – planets, the moon, the sun, the stars, which all have bodies in the sense of them being physical objects that we can see and study. They are real. But they are very different from our own bodies. So, if even other physical bodies are different from our own, then how much more different is a spiritual body!

9. So that's one clue. A spiritual body is something that's real, from God's POV; but isn't familiar to us at all, from our POV. Paul says, "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power, it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

10. Here's another clue: we know what a spiritual body is NOT. A spiritual body is not a ghost. Ghosts are described as less than a natural body. And we are told that a spiritual body is MORE than a natural body. Also, a spiritual body is not a zombie, because again, zombies are described as less than a natural body. And we are told that a spiritual body is MORE than a natural body. Resurrection is not about Halloween! Resurrection is about Easter! We are told that a spiritual body is when we are transformed, sort of in the same way that a seed is transformed.

11. That's what the people who saw the resurrected Jesus in person said. Their stories are different, but here's where they are all the same: 1) Jesus was real. He was not a delusion. 2) Jesus was still Jesus – he didn't stop being who he had been. It was more like he had gone beyond who he had been. The core of who he had been was still there. He was still Jesus the human being, but now, he was also a lot more than that. The resurrected Jesus was and is the Lord of all things, much much more than a carpenter in a village. Jesus is no longer bound by space or time. He intersects with our four dimensions, but he is way beyond them as well. He's still Jesus. And he's also transformed. Just as we ourselves will be.

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12. Let's go back to the acorn and the oak tree. The acorn and the oak are similar in some ways and different in others. Genetically speaking, the oak tree is the same as the acorn, since it shares the same genes. Chronologically speaking, the oak tree is connected to the acorn, since someone first planted the acorn in this spot and then the tree grew from the acorn. And yet they are also very different. The acorn doesn't look remotely like the oak tree, does it? And yet the oak tree contains within it all that the acorn was. In the same way, a spiritual body contains within it all that it was before – but now it's much more.

13. Or, here's another way to think about what a spiritual body might be like. Think about someone you've known who was especially saintly. I like to think of the pastor who supervised me while I was doing my church internship- Bill Boyce. He just radiated holiness without even trying. Even when he was so tired it was an effort to pick up a pencil. I felt like I could see a little bit of Jesus in Bill.

14. OK, do you have a saintly person in mind? Someone who just radiated Jesus, right here in America, and who has now passed on? What do you think that person might be like now? I have no idea what Bill Boyce is like now. But I am sure that Bill is now much more like Jesus, than he was when I knew him. In his spiritual body, he's still Bill, but he's also a lot more Jesus. And whoever you are thinking of, in their spiritual body they are still themselves, and yet, they are also a lot more Jesus. All who belong to Jesus in this life will most certainly belong even more fully to Jesus after death. A spiritual body is a way to think about that.

15. Jesus is what hope looks like. Everyone who belongs to him now in this life, also belongs to him after death. We believe that Jesus is alive, as we talked about last week. That means hope is alive too. All who have died in him are alive in him. As a pastor, I've done hundreds of memorials and graveside services; and what keeps that from being really depressing, is knowing that I'm not saying goodbye to them forever. I'm only saying goodbye to them for now. That's my hope, and it looks like Jesus.

16. Liturgically speaking, too, Jesus is what hope looks like. One of the churches I served started a tradition of reclaiming Halloween for Christ- by celebrating All Saints' Day. Every first Sunday in November, we would put lots of candles on the communion table. During worship, people would come up and light a candle and say the name of someone who had passed on. When all the candles were lit, we would all celebrate communion together, knowing that we who are in Jesus on earth, are connected through Jesus with those who are in heaven.

17. Jesus is beyond time. He is not restricted by time any more. So all in him who have gone before us, and all in him who will come after us, are connected together with us, through him. In Jesus we are still connected to them beyond time. Jesus is what hope looks like; and that hope comforts us in our grief. We don't know what a spiritual body might be, for sure. But we do know that through Jesus, the people we loved in him now have spiritual bodies. And so will we, when it's our turn to depart from this earth.

18. So here's a question: do you think that hope also looks like Jesus when we're talking about churches? After all, 4500 churches closed in 2019, the most recent year we have accurate figures for.

And many more have closed since then because of the pandemic. And not only that, but for the first time in American history, less than half of our population would say they are Christian. What's happening is that older people, such as ourselves, are likely to be Christian; but our numbers are shrinking.

19. This church is a bit of an outlier. Yes, we have fewer members now than we did five years ago. But we didn't permanently close our doors because of the pandemic. When we opened our doors again, people came back, and now we're doing all kinds of things. In fact next week we will have a special worship service to celebrate what God is doing in our midst. We are worshipping together; we are socializing together; we are studying the Bible together; we are dancing together; we are reaching out to our neighbors together. I'm told that when Nate Dreesman and Luke Parker were here with us three weeks ago, that they were amazed at all the things we are doing in this church. We are alive. We have hope. And that hope looks like Jesus! For us as a church, as well as for us as individuals!

20. But, the people we are able to make friends with, are mostly older. Certainly we should be reaching out to them; everybody needs Jesus. The sad thing is that younger people, such as our grandchildren, are not likely to be Christian. There's a lot of work to do to reach the younger people who aren't interested in church at all, and don't know much about Jesus. And we are not going to be as effective as we would like in reaching out to them. We've tried. But the problem is that, socially speaking, younger people usually feel more comfortable with other younger people.

21. And that's why we've decided to do a church plant. With younger planters. To reach younger people. So we can start reversing the decline in the number of younger people who believe in Jesus. At least here in Cupertino! That's why Nate and Luke, and Scott Palmbush from the Presbytery were here. That's why the Session has set up a New Church Plant fund, so we can support it while at the same time still supporting our existing church. That's why the Session and the Transition Team and the denomination, and the potential planters, are all trying to figure out a way to make this work. Because we want hope to look like Jesus for younger people, as well as for ourselves. And what we need to do about that is to keep praying. Every day at 5:17. And also here, right now. Let's pray.