

Sermon: But wait there's more: the resurrection of the dead

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1 Corinthians 15: 12-22

Mark 12: 18-27

I am embarked on a series of tough questions of theology, questions which lead us through to Advent, those hardest of questions, the ones we normally keep safely tucked away in the too-hard-basket – questions of eternity, destiny, the ending of things and the remaking of things. Questions about where is the universe going? How does our story end? What's the punch line of it all?

A couple of weeks ago I kicked this off with an odd question – where is God? which got me into a claim that God lives in heaven, with Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father, and that heaven is God's dimension, which can flow into our world dimension in everyplace and every time, in our hearts and lives through the Holy Spirit.

So that's the first big claim of the Christian faith – that there is a spiritual dimension to life, the universe and everything, and that we call this heaven and we have particular ideas about the values and even personality of this spiritual dimension, that we sum up in the complicated idea that it is Father, Son and Spirit in one God.

The second big claim of the Christian faith is that this other-space we call heaven is the reality that we enter when we die. My sermon today is a small attempt to say something about Christian theology about the here-after, the after-life.

The obvious point to begin is that we can't know what is beyond this life. In a few minutes I can hardly explore the vast body of thinking about what happens to us after we die. All I can hope to do is to ask: what does the Bible say about it?

And I must leave space before I sit down to ask the 'so what' question – what does it matter? If we are willing to entertain an orthodox Christian theology of eternal life, if there even is one to be found, how might that affect you and I in our daily lives, this side of eternity?

Wow. Far, far too much for one sermon. So hold onto your hats. Here we go. Here is what I believe to be true about what the Bible has to say about all this. Three claims and three questions.

First, then. Firstly, Christian convictions were built on the Jewish faith. Jesus was a Jew. All his immediate followers were Jewish. In their day, most Jews believed in the resurrection of the dead. Not all. In our gospel reading today, the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead were trying to trap Jesus by making the whole idea of the resurrection of the dead sound ridiculous. They did not, but most people, including Jesus, did believe in the resurrection of the dead. By which they understood that at some point in the future God would intervene in human history with great power and that his people would be given new bodies and that Israel would be restored to her true glory. Remember when Lazarus died and Martha and Mary were most unhappy about it and Jesus told her that her brother would rise from the dead and Martha replied, 'Yes Jesus, I know he will rise in the resurrection on the last day' ... when obviously she was far more keen on having him stick around with his family a few more years!

The Jewish belief in Jesus' day was that when you died you fell into a deep sleep, in a place called Sheol, a shadowing place commonly referred to as the pit. Then, at the end of time, on the Last Day, with a great sound, shout, trumpet, God would call forth all his people from Sheol and all of Israel through all of time would be remade reborn, risen. Please remember that Judaism is still and always has been a religion of the body, of community, of tangible things. There is no word in Hebrew for a dis-embodied soul. People are one, body and spirit, just as God is one, and community is one. This idea that we have of our souls going to heaven when we die, it is not a Jewish idea.

Number two. Jesus. We can't get very far without talking about Jesus. When Jewish people said "Jesus has been risen" they meant that what they expected to happen to everyone on the last day had already happened to Jesus of Nazaras. That's what was so amazing and incredible. He was resurrected from the dead now, right in front of their eyes. It's happening already, the Last Day has already begun. God has broken through already, into life as it is, with the glorious future at the end of everything, by raising Jesus from the dead.

Paul describes this as Jesus being the 'first fruits' to rise, or a down-payment on a purchase. Peter describes him as the pioneer leading the way. The New Testament uses lots of different word pictures to describe what happened to Jesus and what it means for us, but the key idea is that the resurrection body of Jesus is just like our resurrection bodies when the resurrection comes. He has shown us what it will be like to be resurrected.

How are you doing? I've made two pretty big claims so far. First, that our faith began in the Jewish faith, which at the time of Jesus believed in a resurrection of all of Israel at a great glorious day at the end of time, and that this resurrection would include the whole nation and whole people, bodies included.

Second, that when his followers met Jesus after Easter morning they knew absolutely, without a shadow of a doubt, that he was alive, different but recognisable (mostly), physical but not bound by the laws of normal physical bodies. And they understood to be the what would happen to all Israel on the day of resurrection.

Ready for number three: The risen Jesus, through the power and work of his spirit, bust open their definitions of who would be raised from the dead, who would be saved. Remember what Paul preached, loud and proud, all are saved by faith in Jesus. All. In Christ there is no male or female, no Gentile and Jew. Wow. Their categories got busted open. Eternal life was offered to anyone who called on the name of Jesus. Anyone. Wow. Over and over again the New Testament this claim is made. Which gets us to Christchurch New Zealand, to all of us here in this room, none of who as far as I am aware are Jewish by birth. We are here, we have hope for everlasting life, not because we are part of Israel, but because we are part of Jesus Christ.

That's all a lot of take in. A lot of high biblical theology.

I think you should talk about it.

What do you think of my three big claims

1: that our faith has its foundations of the Jewish belief in the resurrection of the dead and the restoration of Israel at the end of time.

2: that this actually happened to Jesus; when he was raised from the dead he showed what resurrection looks like

3: that Jesus includes us in the promise of resurrection at the end of time

I hope this raises more questions than it answers.
What questions are buzzing around in your head? I have 3

First question: So what happens to us when we die? I believe that the Bible teaches that those who have faith in Christ continue in his presence after our human bodies die. I believe that we go to heaven when we die. The Bible uses the word 'paradise' to describe this.

It's less clear what the Bible teaches about what happens to people who do not believe in Christ. My reading of the texts is that they simply die, extinguished like sticks burned in a furnace. I do not believe in hell, not as in ongoing torment and punishment. I simply do not believe that that is what Jesus taught.

Second question: So what will it be like when we are resurrected?

The Nicene creed has us affirming our belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.

I called this sermon: 'but wait there's more' ... because I for one, and I suspect our church generally, doesn't much think about this 'more'. We know we will die. We hope we will see our loved ones who have gone before. We believe that we are loved and we long to meet the great one who loves us face to face. At least, I do.

But beyond that ... I struggle to think beyond that.

But I get to preach from the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, that's my job you know, and I have to tell you that this book describes an ultimate future, beyond this life, beyond dead, even beyond life-after-death, which is utterly beyond what we can ask or imagine or even long for ... a remaking of everything, even you. A remaking of the universe so that heaven and earth are no longer separate categories of reality but joined.

But I am getting ahead of myself, for that is the topic for my next sermon, in 2 weeks. So tune in next time ...

For now, I promised an answer to the so what question.

So that's our third question. What difference does it make to us in the here and now? To believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come is an invitation to not be afraid. Do not be afraid of taking your last breath. Do not be afraid of death. Don't be afraid to talk about it, to plan for it, for yourself or for others. Death is a terrible parting, but it is not the end. Death has no victory. Trust in the Lord. Call on the name of Jesus, this is the only way. And this way leads us out of pain, out of fear, out of separation. This way there is no shame, no regrets. This way when this body of yours reaches its use-by-date and ceases to be any use to you, you will rest in peace, in the presence of almighty love, until that great day when you will receive your very own resurrected body, in a heaven and earth utterly unimaginably made new. This is the teaching and the hope of the Christian faith.