

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

May 12, 2013

Seventh Sunday of Easter
(Mother's Day)

I Corinthians 15

Creed 13

The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting

They say that at least once a year on a Sunday morning, pastors ought to preach a funeral sermon. The thinking is that throughout any given year, you all will know someone who's died who may not have had a funeral or memorial service, or maybe you weren't able to make it to a service you wish you could have attended, or maybe you have passed the one year anniversary of someone's death, or the 5th or the 7th...

And while it might seem odd for me to do that THIS Sunday - Mother's Day.... Three separate families here have experienced the losses of a mother, a grandmother, and a sister and aunt, this week. And yesterday I helped a family bury their mother/grandmother - Corinne Moyle.

And every week from my spot in the room here, I see the four mothers in our congregation who have lost their adult children. And I wonder if the beauty and the joy of motherhood might come from its fragility and vulnerability rather than some unrealized ideal that seems to exist more in Hallmark than real life.

And then the text for today is **the Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting**. So if you've been to a funeral I've conducted lately this will sound familiar.

Death forces us to trust in Almighty God's boundless love. At death we come to the end of human knowledge, human power and human comfort. And what we are left with is the grace of God. How comforting it is, to have God to trust in, one who has perfect love, absolute knowledge, boundless forgiveness and infinite patience.

For if there were no God, we might despair when someone we love dies. If there were no Jesus, there would be no one to give us consolation or strength or hope for in the midst of our grief.

While we are naturally saddened by death because of our fears, our uncertainty, the personal loneliness that it brings, even by our lack of faith; remember, God knows your heart. And His ways are higher and nobler than our loftiest thoughts.

Christians know into whose hands we die. And so we don't need to be afraid; rather, we need to trust in God.

And the God in whom we trust is not some distant, out there, abstract idea – No, our God came to earth, lived and died a real human life; experiencing pain, sadness and suffering as well. And then...!

Resurrection! We live on the other side of Easter. If Jesus had not been raised, there would be no hope. The resurrection did happen. It is real. And God promises that all will be raised. God promises a new life - one beyond the grave. And this promise is for us and for all who believe.

The resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is not so much something we understand, but rather something we believe. Those who lived in Jesus' day also wrestled with these ideas. Every time I stand at a grave with a family I talk about this.

How the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Corinth in response to their questions about the resurrection as they wondered how it could be and what it meant for them.

He uses the metaphor of a seed to try to explain it. The seed when it is planted, dies as it becomes the stalk of the plant. And then the stalk brings forth a flower or fruit.

It's the best way he can describe the resurrection and still it's a mystery. I don't know HOW it happens that when we place a seed in the ground, it grows into a flower. And I don't have to know. And certainly the flower doesn't need me to know. If the plants depended on my UNDER-
STANDING how they grew in order to grow, well...

It's the same with the resurrection of the body. My understanding it doesn't make it happen; it happens anyway. Just because I don't understand something doesn't mean it's not real. If I didn't believe in things just because I didn't understand them, I wouldn't believe in much.

Without the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, there's not much to hope in.

The resurrection of the body has become important to me personally through the years. Back in the late 80's my aunt was murdered – in a brutal way. A few years later, I asked my uncle, her widower, what fears remained for him out of that horrible event. (He was a faithful Christian.) And what he wondered about was her body – whether she was still in pain and whether her body was still broken.

The resurrection of the body says NO – she is healed and whole and healthy.
She is restored and renewed.
She is strong and she is beautiful.
She is now in her spiritual body – and enjoying life everlasting.

Another notion which is hard to imagine. But unlike the resurrection of the body, which speaks to us as individuals, eternal life is not an individualistic state. Eternal life is life with Christ and in Christ and by extension a life in community, in the church, which is his body.

Many contemporary speculations about life after death are very individualistic, but the Christian hope is a corporate and communal hope, the hope to join the communion of saints.

There is a wonderful sermon by Jonathan Edwards, on 1 Corinthians 13: 8-10, called *Heaven is a World of Love* in which Edwards explores the metaphor of the communion of saints as a heavenly choir. (Unfortunately Edwards is known for the terrifying sermon, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, instead of this one!)

In *Heaven is a World of Love* Edwards begins by beautifully describing heaven and all its social arrangements, and in so doing protests against the social arrangements that we know so well on earth; for in Edward's heaven there is no pride or jealousy, there is decency and wisdom, and an equal prosperity among all.

He says, "Love (poured out from God) resides and reigns in every heart there." And then he says: "Every saint there is as a note in a concert of music which sweetly harmonizes with every other note, and all together employed wholly in praising God."

What a beautiful image - life after death as life in community praising God.

In 2001, my father was diagnosed with ALS. I watched him go from being a healthy, athletic and joyful man, to despairing and suicidal in two short months. But then someone explained the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting to him. And this was his only source of comfort and hope in his last weeks before his death. And it changed him. This side of the grave.

Believing in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting is no small claim. It can make all the difference – NOW. We believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, not because of its future implications for us, but because it has everything to do with our lives today.

When I think about the different doctrines of the church, I've always said the Incarnation was my favorite, because it's fun to think of – God coming to earth as a human baby in the person of Jesus.

But I cling to the resurrection in my heart – I cannot NOT believe in it. For in these last lines of the creed we find our only hope and joy.

And I pray that you are strengthened in your faith as we proclaim that which cannot be understood, but which can certainly be believed.

Amen.