

April 17, 2022. Easter

Transforming Life
1 Corinthians 15:20-28, 51-57

Our scripture today comes from two different passages in 1 Corinthians chapter 15. First, verses 20-28:

²⁰ But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. ²¹For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; ²²for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. ²³But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. ²⁴Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. ²⁵For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷For 'God has put all things in subjection under his feet.' But when it says, 'All things are put in subjection', it is plain that this does not include the one who put all things in subjection under him. ²⁸When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all.

And now we read verses 51-57:

⁵¹Listen, 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.

Christianity is different from most religions in that our faith is not founded on a law, or a code of morality, or a set of doctrines. Ours is founded on a story. It's a story that can be told in one sentence, as when Paul says, "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:17), or in book form, as it is in the gospels. A middle-length telling of that story might go something like this. Human beings, who had been created to have relationship with their Creator, had drifted away from that purpose. They had separated themselves from God. But God did not give up on them, sending poets and storytellers and prophets to call the people back. But they ignored the poets and storytellers and killed the prophets. Still God did not give up, but instead humbled himself and became part of his own creation, a human being named Jesus.

Jesus was born to a poor family in humble circumstances (to be precise, in a barn in the town of Bethlehem), grew up, going through all the grubby and awkward stages of human development, and when he reached adulthood he set out to bring God and humanity together

again, just as the two were together in his own being. He started by teaching people how to live, which was necessary because people weren't just doing it badly, they were doing it exactly wrong. They were living lives of selfishness and greed, avoiding love and genuine relationship in favor of manipulation and deception and violence. They were making idols of all the things that were least worthy of worship – political power, wealth, brief physical pleasure – and ignoring the only things that would bring genuine happiness: love of God and love of others. If their goal had been to live in the way most likely to alienate themselves from their own fulfillment, they could not have chosen a better method. So, yes, Jesus had a lot to teach. And his teaching wasn't just words, because good teaching never is. As he taught, he demonstrated a full, complete life in his own flesh by living with love and compassion: lifting up the weak, healing the sick, befriending the friendless. In this way, through his words and his life, he tried to restore holiness to all God's good creation.

But just teaching was not going to fix humanity. Others had taught similar things before him, and few had listened to them and little had changed. This God wrapped in man-flesh had to change more than people's priorities and ideas. He had to change reality itself. This process had begun at his birth in that barn, when immortal God wrapped himself in mortality and became human, but now he pursued mortality to its inevitable conclusion: death. God died. But that's not the end of the story. When God stripped off immortality and put on the cloak of flesh, he was nevertheless still God, and when he died in all the agony that human flesh can endure, he was nevertheless still the creator of Life. And somehow, by accepting our mortal limits, he exploded them. On the third day after his death, he rose from the dead. Death, once the terror of humanity, had become powerless. Jesus crashed out of the gates of death, and when he did, he left the locks broken.

This is our story. It is the story of a loving God who, fortunately for us, is a stubbornly loving God. It is a story of a love beyond reason, larger than imagination. It is also, you might have noticed, a story that's light on explanation. It skips rather blithely over questions like: "How did that work?" and "What does that mean for us now?" There are a lot of details left unexplained in our story, which to the human mind is generally an invitation to start looking for explanations. From the very beginning, Christians have done so. No sooner do we accept the story than we begin trying to beat it into shape. And there's nothing wrong with that, so long as we remember that the story is what matters, not our explanations of it. Most of the in-fighting within the Christian church comes from people who forget that distinction and begin believing that their particular explanation of the story is more important than the story itself. Enough said about such people. They are mistaken.

But so long as it is done with humility, trying to figure out the details of the story is an excellent way to engage it. It means we're taking it seriously. So, for the last few minutes of this sermon, I want to look at one of the first attempts to engage the story and ask, "What does that mean for us now?" So let's look again at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15. Verse 20: *Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.* When Christ rose from the dead, that opened the gates for all. He was first, but he will not be the last. Verses 21 and 22: *For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ.* Here Paul refers to the story of Adam and Eve's sin in the garden. As that opened up the floodgates of sin and death for all humanity, Christ's resurrection has opened the sluices of life – once again, for *all* humanity. Paul suggests this will take place in stages, though. Verses 23 through 26: *Each in his own order:*

Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. Again, Paul sees Christ's resurrection as ultimately effective for all humanity. Those who "belong to Christ" are beginning now and when Christ returns will have a head start, but God's stubborn love includes everyone, and whatever it takes, and as long as it takes, God will remove all those inadequate human authorities, all the idols of our delusions, and then, at last, death itself will be destroyed, and God will be all in all.

What does this mean for us? Verse 51: *We will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet.* Because Christ once shrugged off the mantle of immortality to put on the rags of our mortality, we will one day step forward to receive our new clothes. Verse 53: *For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.*

This Holy Week, we have thought together about the transformations that were brought by the Christ event, by our founding story. We have talked about the "renewing of our minds" (another phrase from Paul) through the upside down values expressed in Christ's life and teachings. We have talked about the transformation of our dull, superficial existence through the rediscovering of the Holy in the everyday. On Good Friday, we talked about how Christ transformed death itself, so that it became a vehicle of hope instead of a night terror. But all those transformations are made possible – no, made certain – by the final transformation of life itself. When Christ tore down the wall between humanity and God, God was changed by partaking in our mortality. But we were changed, too. Our lives now, no matter how long we live, are just a prelude. At the end of this life, we put on new clothes, and I have seen the eternal footman hold out my shining new coat and smile. *Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*