

“But Today’s Not Easter”
1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

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Westminster, Greenville
Ben Dorr

Dr. Diane Komp is a retired oncologist who taught at Yale Medical School.

Early in her career, Dr. Komp considered herself to be someone who “vacillated between being an agnostic and an atheist.”

“Many times,” Komp writes, “I listened politely to parents who groped for God in their most painful hour...but I heard no convincing evidence...”

“If I were to believe...**it would require the testimony of reliable witnesses...**”

Then something happened with one of the children whom Diane Komp was treating.

Anna, a young girl, was dying.

Komp gathered at the bedside in the last minutes of Anna’s life with Anna’s parents and the hospital chaplain. Komp writes, “Before she died, [Anna] mustered the...energy to sit up in her hospital bed and say, ‘The angels—they’re so beautiful. Do you hear their singing? I’ve never heard such beautiful singing!’”

Then she laid back on her pillow and died.

“Her parents reacted as if they had been given the most precious gift in the world. The hospital chaplain [scared out of his mind]...beat a hasty retreat...”

This left Komp alone with the grieving family.

“Together we contemplated a spiritual mystery that transcended our understanding and experience. For weeks to follow, the thought that stuck in my head was: Have I found a reliable witness?”¹

¹ This story comes from Diane Komp’s book *A Window to Heaven: When Children See Life in Death*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992. I first heard it at a preaching conference in 1999, and it is retold by Dr. Tom Long in his book, *What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011.

Now I first heard of Komp's experience about 20 years ago.
And it has always stuck with me.

Not so much because of the part about the angels...
although that part of the story is certainly memorable.

No, the reason her story stuck was her question:
Have I found a reliable witness?

Let me fine-tune the question for today's purposes:
If we're talking resurrection, what makes for a reliable witness?

I ask because the subject before us this morning is resurrection.

Why resurrection?

We are continuing in our lectionary readings—the 12th and 13th chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, and now today, we're in chapter 15—when Paul writes to the church in Corinth about resurrection.

So what makes for a reliable witness, if we're talking resurrection?

It should come as no surprise that according to Paul, the resurrection is absolutely essential to the Christian faith. As he puts it in our text:

"...if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile...If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied."

And yet...if we're talking resurrection, I believe it's hard to talk about.
Why?

Because it is UNLIKE so many other parts of our faith that we profess.

For example...

If I said that forgiveness is essential to our faith, how many of you have ever forgiven someone, or have the experience of being forgiven?

Everybody here has had that experience, right?

If I said that gratitude is essential to our faith, how many of you have given thanks to God for the gifts in your life?

Sure.

If I say that the Resurrection is essential to our faith, how many of you can say that a couple years ago you died, and your family had your funeral, and you were resurrected by God, and you can tell me after worship today what Resurrection really looks like?

Exactly.

(It reminds me of Yogi Berra's great theological insight: "If you don't go to somebody's funeral, they won't come to yours.")²

Our subject this morning is resurrection.
 How do we talk about the Resurrection with one another?
 How do we become witnesses to something that we hope one day to know...but cannot say we've ever experienced?

Perhaps a helpful approach to the subject would be to sort out different views about the Resurrection.

Resurrection view NUMBER ONE:

The body dies but the soul is immortal. Have you heard of this before?

Kind of like the Energizer Bunny.

The body dies, but the soul just keeps going and going and going...

² As quoted in Robert Putnam's book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.

I suspect this view is found in churches today, but it's not a new idea.
It's a very old idea.

Back in the second-century, the Christian apologist Justin Martyr said:

There are "some who are called Christians...
who say that there is no resurrection of the dead,
and that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven."

"Do not imagine," Justin Martyr said, "that they are Christians."³

In other words, back when Christianity was still in its infancy, there was debate going on about the Resurrection. One view held that the body died, and the soul just naturally keeps going.

There are, I believe, DESCENDANTS of this view in the 21st century.
We'll call it theory **number two**: Resurrection as reward!

This is the view that says life is one big test.
And if you pass the test, you get to go to—
as one popular tv show describes it these days,
you get to go to "the Good Place".

Of course, there are many problems with Resurrection theory number two, Resurrection as reward. The first is that it puts Resurrection under our control...like it's a contract, and if we hold up our end, God will hold up God's end.

It says that what happens to us after we die...is up to us.
But even worse is the idea in this view that Resurrection is all about US.

As the poet Thomas Lynch puts it, too many people today describe heaven as "a kind of nineteenth hole where, if you've kept an honest score [and] not taken too many mulligans...the bar is open, all of your friends gather, and your trophies are at long last presented to you."⁴

³ Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, in the Interpretation Bible Commentary, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997.

⁴ Quoted in Thomas G. Long and Thomas Lynch's book, *The Good Funeral: Death, Grief, and the Community of Care*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013.

Over and against these two views comes the Apostle Paul.
Paul believed that when we die, both body AND soul are dead.
And in the Resurrection, God gives us “a spiritual body.”

Now...I don't know how to explain what Paul is talking about with this “spiritual body” business.

He's describing the indescribable.
But the point for Paul is this:

If we're talking Resurrection, we don't begin with ourselves.
We must begin...with God.

That's what's missing from so many “life-after-death” theories these days.
God is on the periphery, or maybe not even there at all.

To put it another way, if it's perfectly natural for the soul to keep on living on its own, then we are all trapped inside our bodies, and once the body dies, the soul is FREE!

From the “immortal soul” point of view, Death is no enemy—it's simply the unlocking of a prison door.

To which Paul would say, HOGWASH!
Death IS the enemy, according to Paul.

I see that our Theology Reading Group is going to discuss Kate Bowler's recent book: *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved*.⁵

Good book, worth the read.

Dr. Bowler is a professor at Duke and a young mother who was diagnosed with colon cancer a few years ago. Which means that for the past few years, Kate Bowler has been dealing with the possibility of her own far-too-early death, AND living with the knowledge that she may not live to see her young child grow up.

⁵ Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved*, New York: Random House, 2018.

Who wants to tell Kate Bowler that Death is no enemy?

One of the things that I really appreciate about Paul is that he does not try to diminish the upheaval that Death can cause in our lives. Paul's point is not that Death isn't so bad...

Paul's point is that God is unimaginably good!

In the Resurrection of Christ, according to Paul, the power of Death has been defeated.

Not by us. Not by our own good choices.

Death has been defeated by the overwhelming, utterly inexplicable grace of the living God.

To talk BIBLICALLY about Resurrection is to talk about something that is...

- a) NOT natural...
- b) comes ENTIRELY from God's grace...
- c) remains very much a MYSTERY.

So perhaps the first thing we need to do is ADMIT the mysterious nature of the Resurrection, and not try to say too much...

The former president of Princeton Seminary, Dr. Tom Gillespie, tells of a time back when he was a pastor in California.

He was sitting in his office when the secretary buzzed him.

"Someone's here to see you," she said, and she said it in a way that told Gillespie he might enjoy this unexpected visitor.

So there was a knock on his door, and the secretary walked in with a five-year-old girl, wearing her best dress, looking very formal and proper.

“This young lady has a question for you,” the secretary reported.

Now Dr. Gillespie felt that he had a way with young children, so he squatted down, put his hand on her shoulders, and said, “Amanda, what’s your question?”

“I want to know what we’re going to eat in heaven.”

Dr. Gillespie wasn’t expecting THAT, but he thought quickly and said, “Well, here on earth we have physical bodies and that means we eat physical food. But in heaven, the Apostle Paul says we’ll have spiritual bodies, and that means we’ll eat spiritual food.”

Amanda said thank you, she walked out, and Dr. Gillespie was satisfied with a job well done...until he overheard his secretary ask the girl, “What did Dr. Gillespie say?”

“He said he doesn’t know the answer either...”⁶

So perhaps the first thing we admit is what we don’t know.
But that does NOT mean that we should keep quiet about it.
The Resurreciton may be a mysterious hope, but it is our FAITH
COMMUNITY’S hope.

We depend on one another to keep our hope in the Resurrection going,
even when we have our own doubts along the way.

For example, there was a time a number of years ago when I was very
saddened by a death that occurred in our extended family.

During that time, I preached a sermon in which I quoted C.S. Lewis.
Lewis wrote a book after the death of his wife called *A Grief Observed*.
In one passage, Lewis says:

⁶ I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Tom Long for this story.

“...all that stuff about family reunions ‘on the further shore,’There’s not a word of it in the Bible. And it rings false...The exact same thing is never taken away and given back.”⁷

Well, my point in quoting Lewis was to say that Resurrection is NEW—not a repeat performance of the life we used to know.

But I missed something in that sermon, and I’ll never forget the gift one of my church members gave me by coming to me in my office after worship to tell me what I missed.

“Ben,” she said, “I think there’s more hope than what you preached today.” I asked her what she meant.

She replied, “There’s plenty in the Bible about a heavenly banquet, about how we will be in community with each other after we die—we call it the communion of the saints,” she said.

“The communion of the saints means we will be reunited with those we love, but in a way that’s different from the union and love we have right now.”

“We will all be together,” this wise parishioner said to me, “but I believe the Bible tells us it will be in a NEW way. The love will be there. The depth of the love we have for each other and for God—it will be even greater than it is right now.”

Then she made her point.

“The love will be real...but the POSSESSIVENESS will be gone.”

I think she had it exactly right.

In the Resurrection made known in Christ, even our love will be transformed and become something NEW.

If that’s too abstract, let me try to put this as plainly as I can.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, New York: Bantam Books, 1976.

Show of hands...how many of you love somebody?
Good, good.

In that love that you have for someone else...how many of you never make mistakes?

How many of you never, in your love for someone, act out of fear?
How many of you, when you are trying to love that person, never get impatient, or never makes a mess when you're trying to help?

Right. No hands in the air.
This side of Paradise, none of us love with perfect love.
But what the Resurrection says is that in Christ's victory over Death, even our love will be redeemed.

In one of his sermons, Ted Wardlaw describes a visit that he took to a cathedral in England years ago. It's a modern cathedral, a church that was constructed during the 20th century. One of the outstanding features of this cathedral is that it has one wall made entirely of glass!

On that wall, etched into the glass are huge figures—four feet wide and ten feet tall—figures of saints and angels.

What are the giant angels and saints doing?
They're having a party!
Blowing trumpets and making merry and swinging from the chandeliers and dancing across that massive wall of glass.

The more one looks at it, however, it's a bit disconcerting.

As Ted puts it, "if that were that the only thing you saw when looking at that glass wall, you might justifiably conclude that there's something taunting and irrelevant and downright immoral about such fun going on in the heights of heaven while there are a host of us suffering here [in God's world]."

"You might look at that glass wall," Ted says, "and wonder what sort of God would have the nerve to throw a party like that in times like these..."

How could they build a cathedral in the 20th century, the bloodiest century humanity has ever known...with THAT kind of glass wall?

But then Ted goes on to point out where the cathedral stands. The cathedral is located in Coventry, which makes all the difference in the world.

“For, in November of 1940, Coventry suffered the longest air raid endured in any one night by any city in England during World War II. It was an air raid which killed and destroyed and reduced the whole city to ruins, including its cathedral.

“When they built the new cathedral, they chose, as the purpose of its ministry, **the theme of ‘resurrection through sacrifice.’**”

So to look through that modern glass wall, beyond all the saints dancing in heaven, is...

to see the painful ruins—
of the old bombed-out church.”

And the beauty of standing in the new cathedral and peering through the glass wall is that those ruins “cannot be seen...except in light of...the promise from beyond time...”

The promise of the Resurrection.

“The promise that God gathers up all of our flawed history,
gathers it up into God's holy and redemptive purposes.”

As Ted puts it:

“Such a visual encounter with God's promise for the future permeates that pile of rubble with meaning that is not otherwise there.”⁸

May I put it like this?

⁸ As told by the Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw in his sermon “Living in the Middle of Time,” September 21, 1997, on www.day1.org.

Whatever rubble or fear or grief might exist in your life right now,
God promises to gather it up one day, to redeem it one day!

God promises to give our love and our lives a meaning that—
without the Resurrection of Christ—
would not otherwise be there.

It's not a reward.
It is God's immeasurable grace.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.