

A Mystery Story
1 Corinthians 15:51-57
The Reverend Mary Kathleen Duncan
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Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, in 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. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When 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.’

‘Where, O death, is your victory?’

Where, O death, is your sting?’

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Something you may or may not know about me – I think I’ve mentioned it in a sermon before – is that I LOVE a good mystery series. And I really love a mystery series set outside the U.S., preferably in a colder climate – so Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, give me what you’ve got! I’ve already blazed through the Detective Gamache series set in Quebec and the Vera Stanhope series set in Northumberland. I’m now in the midst of the Maisie Dobbs series, mostly set in London. Here’s what I like about these mysteries – they intrigue my mind and give me closure by the end.

They help me imagine something I could not comprehend before. So, when Paul begins this passage from 1 Corinthians 15 with “Listen, I will tell you a mystery,” I am all in.

Another thing to know about me? I became obsessed with Handel’s Messiah in my twenties. Now, I had surely heard Messiah performed before. Remember, my mother is a church musician, and she’s directed it many times. But it never had meaning for me until I was an adult. After hearing it performed by a community choir one holiday season, I couldn’t get enough. I listened to it on repeat in my car and in my office and while I cooked dinner. Well, as

I was ruminating upon this text in preparation for today, I had this vague memory rise to the surface. Of my step-father singing these words from our text today. When I was a kid. And mom and Raymond confirmed for me that they had done Messiah pieces throughout the years and that he had sung this one Easter at my childhood church. And I've got to tell you. This text may not be most easily understood when read aloud. I mean, it tells us from the get-go that it is a "mystery", but hearing its words sung, in a rich bass voice, somehow clears the doubts and the cobwebs and helps you understand.

Now I've read (not sung) this particular text aloud many times, just never before during a Sunday morning worship service. It is a popular text for funeral and memorial services. So the cadence and the imagery are familiar to me. But it is a little different to be preaching this text on a Sunday morning. In fact, it only shows up in the lectionary once every three years on Easter Sunday. And most Easter Sundays, our scripture lessons come from the Gospels and not one of Paul's letters. So, this is just not a typical, preached upon text. But it does reveal a lot to us about Paul and his convictions about the resurrection. And honestly, we need this kind of hope all the time, not just when actively dealing with the aftermath of death.

Before we get too far into things, we need to understand Paul and where he was coming from in regard to this topic. First, when Paul talks about the resurrection, he is not referring to the Gospel stories of that first Easter Sunday and season that so many of us are familiar with. He is talking about his firsthand experience with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. While stories of the resurrection were surely shared via mouth, the written Gospels did not exist in Paul's day. Second, Paul lived in the Roman empire and had a Jewish worldview. So, he had some ideas about what resurrection might mean in the context of faith and he used Old Testament imagery and Roman cultural images to interpret the concept. Third, he knew that the Corinthians were solidly Roman citizens. Faith in the God made known in Jesus Christ was a relatively new concept for them and they would have found the idea of a corpse literally being made alive again quite weird. Finally, Paul believed that Jesus was returning. Soon. To redeem both heaven and earth. To make them one.

Now what is Paul up to in chapter 15? It is the book end of his theological lesson to the Corinthians. There is a chapter 16, but it deals with more practical matters and a final greeting. The bookends of the first chapter and the fifteenth help us understand not only everything that comes in between, but what Paul thinks is most important for those who proclaim faith in Jesus Christ – The Cross and Resurrection. After introductory material, chapter one immediately dives into teaching on the cross. And after Paul deals with the how-

to's of being a Christian community, he concludes his letter with an important teaching about resurrection. I really toyed with another potential sermon title for this week, but it was just too long to fit in that tiny space in the Harbinger. My alternate title? –

“How dog training is similar to Paul’s teaching on resurrection.”

We’ve heard a lot about the Dorr family dog, Pepper, over the years. And we finally got a redeeming story about her last week. Well, you’ve yet to hear about the second Duncan family dog – Sassafras, aka, Sassy. Sassy is 7 months old of pure spunk. She often finds turtles in our yard. And mice. And as of yesterday, she’s already been to the emergency vet...twice. She’s almost eaten a hearing aid. She’s taken the couch cushions off the couch, unzipped them, and pulled the foam out. Multiple times. She’s chewed every corner in our house, ruined a pair of Birkenstocks, destroyed a chair that Dale Gosnell is bringing back to life, and scratched up both sides of our bed. I think I’ve covered most of it. She is also lovable and adorable and now in dog training every Thursday afternoon.

Here’s what I’ve learned in dog training. The power of affirmation. The power of patience. And the power of consistency. You have to communicate to a dog in the way a dog will understand. And those three “powers” – affirmation, patience, consistency, are what get you there. Over the past month, with the help of a dog-trainer, we have managed to teach Sassy 10 or so commands. We’ve learned that when you issue a command, you model what you want the dog to do. So, if you say, “sit,” you show her with your hand what you want her to do. And then you wait. Until she does it. You don’t say “sit” again. And when she finally does it, you say “YES!” and give her a treat. And you practice this over and over again. You use the same commands again and again. You don’t change it up because the dog won’t understand. Eventually, the hope is that the dog will begin to obey you without the use of treats. But treats are necessary in the beginning. And positive affirmation in the form of “yes” is always necessary.

I believe that resurrection is God’s YES to humanity. And I think the fifteenth chapter of Paul’s letter to the Corinthians is Paul’s yes to them (as their pastor). Throughout the previous chapters he has consistently proclaimed “Christ crucified” and instructed them on how one’s life as a follower of Christ should be different because of that. He’s been patient with them, working through differences and disagreements, and tough 1st century theological questions. And he’s done his best to translate the good news of Jesus Christ in a way they can understand. He is literally speaking their language. And now comes the culmination. The other half of the coin. The part that makes the cross salvific and meaningful. Resurrection. Not only the resurrection of Jesus, but the promised resurrection of the body of Christ, the body of

believers. The Corinthians of the 1st century and you and me today. We don't know how. It's somewhat of a mystery, something we can't quite imagine. But we know we shall be raised. We know we shall have life. Even after death. Even when death is all around us.

Paul wants us to know that resurrection is real. That it is life-changing. That it has implications for the here and now AND in the future. And that's why preaching this text on a Sunday morning for worship is different than preaching it for a funeral. But, honestly, maybe it shouldn't be. We can never hear God's yes in too many ways or too many times. We can never hear it too soon or too late. Now there are countless scholarly texts written about the resurrection. Because it's that important. And so many of them are good.

But I chose two to focus on as I prepared for this sermon – A commentary on 1 Corinthians by Chuck Campbell and “The First Paul” by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan. Campbell says, “the resurrection throws everything off balance.” Borg and Crossan say that the resurrection begins “God's great cleanup.” I like these images because they convey how important, how radical the idea of resurrection really is. It isn't just some outdated story without meaning. It matters. It has implications. For Campbell, it isn't throwing everything off balance in a bad way, but a heavenly way. A way we cannot imagine. It means we can start again. It means we aren't bound to the ways of sin. It means death does not have the final word. God does. And God is a god of love and life.

For Borg and Crossan, “God's great clean-up” is an invitation for us to participate in bringing together heaven and earth. The promise of resurrection is not just something we passively receive. Paul himself is proof of that. Encountering the resurrected Christ changed his life in so many ways.

Paul was truly changed by his encounter with the resurrected Christ, and therefore, by resurrection itself. But this change didn't erase who Paul used to be. It didn't suddenly make him perfect or free from flaws. In fact, Paul's past as a devout and learned Jew and experience as a Roman citizen helped him translate Christianity for others. Paul's vulnerability is what makes his letters come alive for us 2000 years later as fallible, feeble, vulnerable human beings just like him.

This change further connected Paul to the love and will of God. Chuck Campbell writes, “Resurrection is not simply about hope for the future. Rather, resurrection empowers life now in the liminal space between ages.”¹

¹ 1 Corinthians by Chuck Campbell, p. 244

We, too, can share this good news with others. We, too, can live our lives differently. We, too, can truly be changed.

So, what does being changed really look like? What does participating in “God’s great clean-up” entail? I mean Paul tells us, it’s a mystery. And you know, there are many times I don’t know either. But I think it must begin with a yes. Yes, God, I receive your promise. And I am going to try with all I have to live into it. To live as if death doesn’t have the final word. To trust that the ways of sin, that are so prevalent in this world, do not have a stronger hold upon me than you do. For much of the summer, I lived in dread, waiting for the news of the deaths of two people whom I loved. One was my friend, Elizabeth, who worked on Montreat Summer Staff with me during college. The other was a former youth of mine from my church in North Carolina. His name was Logan. Both Logan and Elizabeth received terminal diagnoses toward the end of the spring. Elizabeth had a fierce and quick two-year journey with ovarian cancer. Logan had a prolonged fight against Ewing’s Sarcoma. I knew their deaths were coming. I thought about it every day. I prayed for them every day. I mourned for it every day. But when I hear these words from Paul about the resurrection, I find comfort. Because I hear God’s yes. I hear it for Elizabeth and Logan. I hear it for myself. And I’m not waiting until the end of my days to accept it and live like it’s true. I don’t always know what it looks like. But maybe it looks like gathering in worship on Sunday mornings. To proclaim God’s word and affirm what we believe and sing God’s praises and lift our concerns to God in prayer. Maybe it looks like chaperoning a youth retreat, at the last minute, and donning plastic lunch lady gloves and serving pizza at 9p. Maybe it looks like moving your body in God’s beautiful creation and giving thanks for life every step of the way. Maybe it looks like volunteering as a mentor at one of our local schools or participating in next year’s Westminster Day of Service. Maybe it looks like joining one of our upcoming pilgrimages and traveling and learning alongside others who are also trying to figure out how to participate in “God’s great clean-up”. Maybe it looks like listening to Handel’s Messiah, particularly Part III, where we hear the rich bass voice envelop us with these words. And somehow, it helps us believe the mystery.

We shall be changed...at the last trumpet...The dead shall be raised...Imperishable and immortal...Death has lost its sting...Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

