

“The Central Mystery, Part 3: The Engine of Transformation”:
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)
for April 15th 2018 (Third Sunday of Easter)
by Foster Freed

1st Corinthians 15: 35-49

*So is it with the resurrection of the dead.
What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.
It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory.
It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.*
from 1st Corinthians 15: 42-44

I want to begin, this morning: I want to begin by pointing to this table, where—at the climax of this morning’s worship—we will gather...

...as Christians for nearly 2000 years have been gathering...

...to bless and break bread, to lift and bless a filled cup, and in the process to see God at work through the gifts of bread broken and cup shared: God’s transforming power at work in our midst. And yes: I am not unaware of the profound theological divisions that have grown up around this table, both in terms of who ought to preside at the table, who is permitted to receive from the table, above all what precisely God is up to at this table. But whether we believe that God transubstantiates or consubstantiates bread and wine, thereby transforming them into the body and blood of Jesus Christ...

...or whether we experience the real or symbolic presence of Jesus Christ at this table...

...what virtually every Christian will accept, pretty much at face-value, is the affirmation that God is in the business of transforming human beings, furthermore that it is through Word and Sacrament that we Christians most fully experience God’s transformative power and love. In short: I point to this table as a potent reminder of the extent to which the Gospel of Jesus Christ seeks to introduce us to the living God, the God whose power, first and foremost, is the power to transform lives. And yes: whatever else Paul is up to in this section of 1st Corinthians 15, what he most certainly is about, is a proclamation of the God who seeks to transform us in the most radical of ways.

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In truth...in truth: this is the portion of 1st Corinthians 15 that I, for one, value above all others. Intriguingly, it begins with a simple question: a question that must have been brought to Paul on behalf of the Corinthian Church by those who came to Paul as go-betweens. And surely to God it’s a question, the weightiness of which, we will all be able to appreciate: a question that might well have come from a place of

skepticism, but which also might simply have been asked out of curiosity. *But someone will ask: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"* With that, Paul is away to the races, providing an answer to which greater attention ought to have been paid over the centuries, because it is an answer that dispels so many misunderstandings. Above all, by stressing the fact that the "resurrection" body is not identical to the "natural" body, Paul makes it clear that the great "test" question some Christians like to ask of other questions...

...do you believe in the bodily resurrection?...

...Paul makes it abundantly clear that this is a far more complex question than is sometimes acknowledged. And the bottom line, of course, is that Paul's answer to the "how" of bodily resurrection, ought to put to rest—forever and a day—the notion that Christianity is a ghoulish religion, in which animated corpses march "zombie-like" over the face of the earth. God forbid!

Nor should we ignore the extent to which Paul's interpretation of bodily resurrection, can help us to get a better handle on the Gospel accounts of the resurrection, as well as a handful of stories that foreshadow the resurrection. An obvious, and important example, is the raising of Lazarus: a story, found exclusively in John's Gospel, that most certainly is intended to foreshadow Christ's rising from the grave. What is absent from the story of Lazarus, however, is the element of transformation. When Lazarus comes back to life, what he actually receives is a temporary respite; he is still in what Paul would describe as his "natural, earthly" body. In effect, Lazarus has been handed an extended warranty, but remains mortal: as mortal as you or I. Yes: death is behind him...but, ironically, death is also before him: just as death awaits each and every one of us. Say that he has been revived. Say that he is the beneficiary of a miraculous healing. Perhaps, most accurately, describe what happens to Lazarus as a resuscitation. But whatever you call it, please do not call it resurrection: because while Lazarus points toward the risen Christ, he is not the risen Christ. But there's more.

Just as Paul—in his careful distinction between the natural and the spiritual body—sheds light on the true significance of the raising of Lazarus, Paul also helps to bring out the strange and wonderful mix of "old and new", "continuity and discontinuity" in the resurrection stories we read in the four Gospels. Consider, for example, the road to Emmaus story in Luke's Gospel: in which Jesus' disciples encounter the risen Christ as they travel away from Jerusalem but fail to recognize him. But then, when they gather for dinner and he blesses and breaks the bread: then and only then do they know him as their beloved teacher. Were the resurrection body identical to the natural body with which they once knew him, surely their recognition of the risen Christ would have been instantaneous. But only in the breaking of bread did they know him...surely pointing to the transformative nature of resurrection.

Much the same can be said of the poignant encounter we read about in John's Gospel: the encounter between the risen Christ and Mary Magdalene. Mary, like the

disciples heading to Emmaus, has enjoyed a close relationship with Jesus. And yet she does not recognize him, mistaking him for someone whom she assumes is the gardener. Only when he speaks her name does she instantly know who it is that has addressed her. Once again...once again we see clearly that the risen Christ—although the same human being, the same person who was laid in the ground—manifests with a profoundly transformed body: what Paul calls a spiritual body, not the natural, earthly body of the teacher Mary had long known in Jesus.ⁱ

A final example...a final example also comes from John's Gospel: a little further on, namely the famous encounter between Jesus and Thomas. On the one hand, we are told that the disciples are hiding behind locked doors...but the risen Christ suddenly appears to them despite the fact that there is no natural way in or out of the room in which they have gathered. On the other hand, in the next instant, Christ invites Thomas to touch his wounds: wounds that continue to be somehow present even in the resurrection body. Do you see...do you see how the stories told by the four evangelists embody features, features best understood along the lines developed by Paul in 1st Corinthians 15: not merely the continuity of person...

...this is still Jesus who stands before them: the Jesus who taught them, travelled with them, laughed with them, told stories to them, broke bread with them...one and the same Jesus filled with marvelous hints of continuity...

...but at one and the same time, a transformed Jesus, a transfigured Jesus: still their beloved teacher, but in a new and wondrous key. The same...but radically different. That's the heart of Paul's understanding of resurrection, and it is an understanding of resurrection that we ought eagerly to embrace. Consider!

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Many many years ago. I forget whether it was in the Vancouver Sun or Vancouver Province...or whether it was in a small independent paper such as the Georgia Straight, but many years ago I read a book-review I have never forgotten. It was a review of a book about near-death experiences, a book that sought (as so many other books over the past thirty years have sought) to explore—and frankly, to celebrate—the way in which near-death experiences can provide, if not proof of the life of the world to come, certainly a strong indication that there are solid grounds for assuming that there is more to us than meets the eye. Clearly this review was written by someone who was not impressed: not impressed by the evidence cited by the author (which is not out of the ordinary) but was also unimpressed by the prospect of a future life.

That's what made the review so remarkable. The reviewer wasn't saying (at any rate, wasn't merely saying) that he did not believe in a life beyond this one. The point he emphatically made with that review, is that he had no interest in a life beyond this one. To paraphrase his final paragraph, he concluded by stating: "This life is bad enough and the only comfort I derive from its idiocy is the knowledge that when it is

over, it will truly be over. Please do not speak to me of a life beyond this one!” How’s that for a cheerful Sunday morning meditation! But now here’s the thing.

If all that was at stake in the possibility of life-beyond-this life was the sort of “warranty extension” Lazarus was handed when the tomb opened for him...

...if eternal life, in other words, were nothing more than everlasting sameness ad infinitum and eventually ad nauseum...

...would we really be all that eager to sign up for that? If all that awaited us was more and more and more of the same...would we sign on the dotted line, or would we want to take our time before saying “yes”. But that’s not what the tradition wants to affirm when it affirms resurrection; that’s certainly not what the Apostle Paul wishes to affirm when he affirms resurrection. Continuity without transformation would hold no interest, whatsoever, for Paul...nor should it hold any interest for us. Like Paul...like Paul...we should be eager to shout our “Amen and Alleluia” not to the possibility of further heaping helpings of the same-old, same old: but rather the promise of the transformative love and power of the God who has made all things new...who promises to go right on making all things news. *What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.*

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A final thought.

If there was ever a morning that cried out for the preacher to mention—if only in passing—the classic Eastern Orthodox teaching of *theosis*, this is surely just such a morning. *Theosis*—t.h.e.o.s.i.s.—*theosis* is a word perhaps best translated with the English word “divinization” which means exactly what it sounds like it means, namely, the Orthodox belief that what God is up to in and through Christ and the Holy Spirit is nothing less than the transformation...

...there’s that beautiful word, again: transformation...

...the transformation of humanity not so that we become God or Christ or the Spirit, but that we be so filled with the Spirit of God, that we become god-like in our capacity to be bearers of light and life and love. And yes: that’s a belief that has tended to make Western Christianity—in contrast with Eastern Christianity—a wee bit nervous, perhaps for good reason! After all, knowing the reality of our sin-sick world and our sin-sick lives, tends to make many of us a bit reluctant fully to embrace such a lavish possibility even for the best among us. And yet Paul’s talk in this chapter, his promise that bodies sown perishable will be raised imperishable, his promise that bodies sown in dishonor will be raised in glory, his promise that bodies sown in weakness will be raised in power: surely those are promises that contain

undeniable hints of true glory, perhaps even hints of what our Eastern Orthodox sisters and brothers describe as *theosis*, divinization.

At any rate: let me leave you with a short text from the New Testament document known as 1st John. (Not John's Gospel, but John's first epistle). In the belief that scripture does provide the best interpretation of scripture, let me just leave you with words from John that very much echo and illuminate the point Paul is trying to make in this portion of his first letter to Corinth. Here's what John has to say.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

Let me repeat that.

Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

Or in the words of the Apostle: *So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.*

May it be so! In Jesus' name. Amen!

¹ I need to acknowledge a layer of complexity in this section of the 1st Corinthians 15, a layer of complexity that has led to unavoidable disagreements over Paul's meaning in this section. The complexity is centered in verse 44 which, in the NRSV includes a distinction between a "physical" body and a "spiritual" body, and in the ESV includes a distinction between a "natural" body and a "spiritual" body. The problem is that Paul, in the original Greek, doesn't really speak in terms of that first body being "natural" or "physical". What Paul actually contrasts with the "spiritual" body in verse 44 is a "psychical" or "soulish" body, which leads some interpreters to regard this whole section of 1st Corinthians 15 as having nothing to do with a contrast between an earthly and a heavenly realm. I disagree, and find myself in substantial agreement with David Bentley Hart who argues that verse 44 must be read in the context of the entire argument Paul is making in this section, an argument that includes a subsequent explicit contrast between Adam (described as a man of earth) and Christ (described as a man from heaven.) See Hart's translation of The New Testament (Yale University Press, New Haven, 2017), p. 349