

The Story of God and Us: Resurrection

Westheimer Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/437626988>

Gethsemane Sermon: <https://vimeo.com/437625138>

Pastors' Discussion: <https://vimeo.com/437507167>

Sermon Workbook: <https://www.stlukesmethodist.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/GodandUs-workbook-web.pdf>

Just as there is no canonized theory of atonement in the ecumenical church, so also there is no consensus regarding what happens in the life after death or, to borrow a phrase from N.T. Wright, the “life after life after death.”¹ Though there is disagreement as to what the resurrection may look like or what the appointed hour may be,² all Christians have eternal hope that we will enjoy communion with God. This is not something we believe because of visible evidence. Visible evidence does not exist. Nor does the human language even have capacity to explain such a marvelous future. Rather, this belief stems from the promises of God and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Before the general resurrection that consummates the final restoration (“life after life after death”) is an in-between time, when we wait for the final resurrection and restoration of all things. When Jesus says, “I am going ahead to prepare a place for you; in my father’s house there are many rooms,” the word Jesus uses for house is *monai*, which means a temporary tent or dwelling structure. And when Jesus tells the thief on the cross, “today you will be with me in paradise,” the word he uses for paradise means “a temporary state of bliss.”

This temporary time is mysterious, but scriptural witness offers us some clues about it:

1. Jesus tells the thief hanging on the cross beside him, “Today, you will be with me in paradise.” The Greek word for *paradise* in this verse is a transliteration of a Persian word that was used in ancient times to refer to a king’s garden. In the ancient world, every king had a paradise in his palace. It was a great big garden, with exotic plants and animals. It was beautiful. It had no other point than to be beautiful. In Genesis, God plants Eden to be the paradise in God’s palace. And when someone was honored in ancient Persia, they were given the privilege of enjoying the king’s garden. So, when we die, we are given the privilege of enjoying somewhere that is so special, so beautiful.
2. Another way heaven is described is as a house. In his final discourse to the disciples, Jesus says he is going to prepare a place for each of us in his father’s house. There’s more than enough space for every single person. Like the song in Cheers, it will be a place where everyone knows your name. There is a special place just for you. This is good news for all of us, but especially for those of us

¹ N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 147.

² Matthew 24:36: “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”

who feel like we don't have a home where we belong here on earth. We know that God has prepared a place for us to belong in heaven.

3. Heaven is a banquet. In the ancient Near East, people struggled and had hard lives – many were laborers, fishermen and farmers. It was rare that they would go to a banquet – that may only happen a couple of times in their lives, and it was probably always on the occasion of a wedding. And these wedding banquets would be days long affairs in which people would have more to eat and drink than they'd normally have, and there would be laughter and celebration and joy

As wonderful as heaven is, it doesn't even compare to what will come next. Jesus' resurrection means that we will all experience a resurrection. At some point in the future when Christ returns, our bodies will be resurrected, and our spirits will be reunited, and we will live in a new heaven and a new earth. In John 5:25, Jesus says, "I assure you that the time is coming – and is here! – when the dead will hear the voice of God's Son, and those who hear it will live."

At that time, those who hear the voice of God will be resurrected into renewed bodies and will live in the renewed creation, in which there is no sin, death, corruption, or pain. 2 Peter 3:13 describes the renewed earth as a place "where righteousness is at home."

Christians look to Jesus as the prototype of what happens to them: just as Jesus' body was transformed so he was not recognizable to the men on the road to Emmaus, we will also receive new bodies. However, humans are inherently embodied, so any life after death has to involve a body. Bodies really matter, both on earth and in the resurrection of the body. The future hope includes restoration that is marked by bodily resurrection and a new creation.

So what does that future hope of resurrection and the new creation mean for us?

1. Our participation in God's renewed kingdom begins now, not later. As N.T. Wright writes in *Surprised by Hope*, the point of Easter faith is not about leaving the earth but, led by the Spirit of the risen Jesus, dedicating ourselves to rebuilding and renewing it.

Until the 1800s, most evangelical Christians were working to make the world the type of place where Christ would reign. Then in the 1890s, evangelicalism took a 180-degree turn – they came to believe that Jesus was coming soon and so discounted the need for working to make the world better. The only thing that mattered was saving souls so that people could be raptured up to heaven.

One can easily fall into this temptation, to look ahead to the promised hope that Christ will reign in glory, when considering such tragedies as the famine crisis in South Sudan, the oppression of young girls as sex slaves, the natural evils of the world that result in tsunamis, and the human evil that results in devastating acts of terrorism.

This Platonic temptation towards escapism negates the reality that Christ inaugurated his kingdom through the incarnation. We are living in a time in which the kingdom is already here, but is not yet fulfilled or consummated. This underscores our mission that is repeated in the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The purpose of resurrection is not to escape to heaven, but to transform the world so that heaven exists on earth. This determination is strengthened by the defiant hope that God is still working to achieve God's aim: the redemption of the world.

2. We experience the renewal of resurrection in our lives as soon as we surrender them to Jesus.

Alistair McGrath wrote, "The word hope is ambiguous. 'I hope it won't rain' means 'I have a sinking feeling it will.' That is hope in its weak sense.... But hope in its full-blooded sense means 'a sure and confident expectation.'"

Jesus' resurrection gives us hope for heaven, for our own resurrection, and for the new creation, and it also gives us hope for resurrection in our lives now. The power of Jesus overcoming sin and death means that we are able to overcome those things through Christ living in us.

Too often, we think of the "eternal life" as far off in the future, but in John 5:24, Jesus used the present tense when he said, "whoever hears my word and believes in the one who sent me has eternal life... and has passed from death into life." Through Jesus, we are able to slough off sin and death and live freely now. That means that everything in our life has the potential for resurrection – relationships we thought were dead, careers that seemed to be over, mental health after a breakdown. There is nothing that is past the ability for Jesus to resurrect it and bring it back to life.

We see an example of how we can participate in resurrection in John's gospel when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. After his resurrection, Lazarus is still wrapped in the burial cloths and Jesus instructs the people gathered to "take off the grave cloths and let him go." (John 11:44) Until the people gathered participated in helping Lazarus remove the cloths that bound him, he was not able to experience life again. Resurrection is often a communal effort that we undertake in order to help people experience life in the here and now. This has implications for how we act as a church.

Questions for discussion and reflection:

1. Losing someone we love to death is painful, but Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15:55, "Death, where is your victory? Where is your sting?" Why does Paul say that death does not have a sting?
2. If someone asked you, "what's Easter all about?" how would you explain its significance to them?

3. In 1 Corinthians 15:17, Paul writes that without the resurrection, we are still in bondage to sin and our faith is meaningless and hopeless. What does Paul mean by that? Why is it hopeless without the resurrection?
4. Read these scriptures: Romans 6:1-14; 8:11; 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 15:12-22; Ephesians 1:18-21; Philippians 3:10-11. What do they say that Jesus' resurrection means for us?
5. What would you say to someone that believes you can be a Christian without believing in the resurrection?
6. What do you hope for in the general resurrection and new creation?
7. Have you seen resurrections in your life or in the lives of folks around you?