

WGUMC October 9, 2016 "Becoming Christ"
I Corinthians 15:12-22

The statistics are a bit surprising. While about 70% of Americans are Christian, only 26% say that they believe in bodily resurrection. Perhaps even more surprising, in the Church of England, one third of clergy have their doubts about this core conviction!

There's a simple explanation for those statistics. The truth is that ancient Greek philosophy is still more convincing than Christian theology. Christians today do tend to believe that there is life after death for our spirits, but we aren't so sure about the body. And in that sense, we are not very different from the Christians in the ancient city of Corinth.

Corinth was a city in Greece, and the Christians there were no doubt influenced by what their philosophers were saying about the body. Greeks believed that the body was corrupt, the body was polluted, and so it made no sense to them that God would want to save it. For them, death meant

that the spirit was finally released from the prison of the body, so why would they want God to resurrect it?

Here comes Paul, who was not a Greek, but a good Jew whose religion affirmed the goodness of creation, including the human body. God made it. God blessed it. God wants it back again. And so when he hears of the body-bashing that was going on in Corinth, Paul picks up his pen and writes to them, carefully spelling out the implications of their prejudices for them.

If they don't believe that their bodies will be raised from the dead, he asks them, then how can they believe that Christ has been raised from the dead? And if Christ has not been raised from the dead, if death has the final word in the Jesus story, then sin will win. We will be right where we have always been: still separated from God, still estranged from ourselves, with no way to bridge the gap between life as we now live it and life as God wants to give it. As Paul puts it, "If for this life

only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." [I Cor 15:19]

Pollsters will keep asking us, "Do you believe in the resurrection?" But even a "yes" answer doesn't begin to do justice to the question. We have to consider instead, "what does it really mean to say that we believe in the resurrection?" If all we mean is that we believe that a miracle happened to some guy named Jesus 2,000 years ago, then we are missing the point that resurrection happened for us and can happen in us.

For those of you who can't abide a literal interpretation of the Easter story, for those unwilling to check your scientific brains at the door, I'm not going to ask that you think of the resurrection as a miracle, but I will encourage you to think of it a mystery. The resurrection as a mystery can hold more meaning than a miracle, at least for me. The mystery of the

resurrection reveals something true about God, true about the universe, true about you and me.

It would be far easier to deny the resurrection. By refusing to believe in it, I could refuse to take part in it and that would save me a lot of trouble. So I'm not surprised that many Christians don't believe in the resurrection these days, because if they believed in it, they'd have to live it.

You see, we can't really believe in the resurrection unless we participate in the resurrection. We have to become a part of it and it has to become a part of us. But an essential part of the resurrection is the crucifixion. We can't have the life of Christ without the suffering and death of Christ. It's all connected. Christ had to suffer and die before he could be resurrected.

So ever since Adam, we have been reluctant to participate in the resurrection. We have been so afraid of death that we have chosen separation. We live lives that are separate

from God and that is the very definition of sin. It is a false life lived by a false self and this is what it looks like: Instead of God, we serve Ego. Instead of love, we fill ourselves up with fear. Instead of passing the peace, we project our anger. Instead of joy, we are consumed by jealousy. Instead of counting our blessings, we focus on who's to blame. Instead of mercy, we hand out judgment. Instead of hope, we peddle cynicism and despair. And we don't have to be running for president for people to be able to see how goes it with our soul. We don't have to brag about our sins on videotape for people to know when we are disconnected to God and acting in ways that are destructive of our deepest, truest self.

As we all know, this life apart from God is no life at all. So before it kills us, let's die to it. Let's die to our false self so we can meet our true self. Or, in Paul's terms, let us all die in Adam, so we can all be made alive in Christ. [I Cor 15:22]

This transformation—from false self to true self—is made possible by the mystery of faith that we proclaim in the sacrament of communion: Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. This is the mystery we have to participate in if we want to be made alive in Christ, the mystery that says that something in us has to die before we can really live, something in us has to break down before we can be raised up. That's why Paul is always boasting about his weakness, why he always seems to be savoring his suffering. It's not because he's a masochist, but because he's participating in the mystery, he is imitating the Messiah.

To the Philippians Paul writes, "For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead." [Philippians 3:8-11]

Does that mean that we should all go off looking for ways to suffer? I'm afraid that we don't have to. If you love like Jesus, you can be sure that suffering will find you. The power of the resurrection is that there is no death that God can't bring life out of, no natural disaster or personal tragedy that God can't bring good out of, no burden that God can't turn into some kind of blessing, and no deep, dark pit that God can't fill with promise.

That was the theme of the conference I attended in Chicago last week. The name of the conference was "Why Christian?" and it brought together young and popular Christian preachers and authors and bloggers from around the country to respond to the question: after everything you have been through, after all the questioning you have done, after all the trouble you have seen, some of it coming from churches, why are you still a Christian? Several of the speakers told stories of

trauma that all but destroyed their faith. But in every case, into their crisis came Christ.

Richard Rohr says that Christians have to suffer on their way to resurrection because suffering is the only thing strong enough to destabilize our ego, to shake us out of our false self, so that we can meet our true self. Only when we get into a situation and realize that we can't control it and we can't fix it and we can't escape it, only when we recognize that we have no one to turn to but God, are we in a position to get out of our small self and participate in the Big Self, in Christ. That's Paul's favorite phrase: "in Christ." It appears in his letters 164 times, so we can assume that this is important. We die in Adam, but we are made alive *in Christ*.

This is what happens when we suffer. Oh, it hurts like hell at the time, but later we look back and give God thanks for it. Would Paul have become an apostle if he hadn't been blinded on the road to Damascus? Would I have become a pastor if I

hadn't had spinal meningitis and seizures? We become who we are not apart from but through the suffering we have done. It is the hard things in life that strip us down, empty us out and make us real.

And so, like Paul, we can boast in our sufferings, because we can see how they have been life-giving, because we have learned that "suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us." [Romans 5:3-5]

If I haven't scared you off and you still want to participate in the resurrection, then I invite you to the table of transformation. At the start of the service, we said a prayer of confession. Even if we are not in crisis mode right now, we still have to confess our sins together, praying that the old Adam will die in us, so that Christ, the New Adam, can live in us. Just

as we have all participated in the sin of separation, we can all participate in the grace of communion. And this is where the miracle happens. This is where the mystery of grace unfolds. As we symbolically eat the body of Christ, by God's grace we become the body of Christ. Indeed, we become the resurrection! But I'm not sure that we believe it. Richard Rohr likes to joke that it's easier to convince bread that it is the body of Christ than it is to convince most of us. Paul says to the Corinthians, "Do you not realize that Jesus Christ is in you?" [2 Cor 13:5] I say to you: proclaim it until you believe it: Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again...in you.