

**What We Believe About the Resurrection and Why It Matters:  
Exploring the Apostles' Creed  
1 Corinthians 15:12-26 and John 11:17-27  
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Six weeks ago we started a sermon series on the Apostles' Creed. In that first sermon we talked about the nature of belief and why what we believe matters. I shared with you that day the struggles that my family has endured over the past three years since Dan's stroke and how my faith has both shaped my response to my circumstances and also how my faith has been shaped by my circumstances. I could not have known it at the time, of course, that we would come to the end of our look at the Apostles' Creed, with the final line about our belief in the resurrection and everlasting life, just as my dad's earthly life would end. But, as I began to think about returning to Northern Virginia, I couldn't help but notice the divine symmetry in the arc of this study that I never imagined when I felt led to preach it. I am trusting that in time, I will perhaps see more of the beauty of that divine arc and feel the sting of it a little less acutely than I do this morning.

Our affirmation of belief in the resurrection and everlasting life does not stand in a vacuum; it doesn't come out of nowhere but is the final and only fitting conclusion to the beliefs that come before it. Belief in the resurrection and our eternal life with God is credible only because of our belief in a loving, creative Father; a Son who faithfully revealed God to us in his life and revealed the depth of God's love for us in his death; a Spirit of such magnitude and power that death has been defeated. We practice now the resurrected and eternal life of God as we live together as the church and live faithfully as part of the communion of saints past and present. And, of course, forgiveness is a necessary aspect of our relationship with both God and one another.

A common complaint about the church from people both inside it and outside it is that the church, in some people's view, is obsessed with sin. "Every time I go to church it feels like another guilt trip!" And, in some churches, I'm sure that's true. But, notice that the Apostles' Creed doesn't say, "I believe that human beings are sinners," though that is assumed. It says, "I believe in the forgiveness of sins." The emphasis is not on guilt but on grace; not on sin, but forgiveness.

Of course, Christianity's affirmation of the forgiveness of sins doesn't mean much if we don't understand that we need to be forgiven. Forgiveness is an answer to a problem, a spiritual cure for a spiritual illness. And, if you don't understand that you have a problem, you won't avail yourself of its solution.

During the Republican primaries last year, one of the presidential candidates was asked, "Have you ever asked God for forgiveness?" The man replied, "I'm not sure I have. I just go and try and do a better job from there...If I do something wrong, I think I just try to make it right. I don't bring God into the picture." This politician, I think, articulated an attitude that is held by many people: in theory they believe in the forgiveness of sins, but the concept doesn't really apply to them.

Standing in stark contrast to this view is one articulated by 20<sup>th</sup> century theologian Paul Tillich who said, "Forgiveness is an answer, the divine answer, to the question implied in our existence." What are the questions implied by our existence to which forgiveness is God's answer? I'd like to suggest that they are: Who needs forgiveness? Will God forgive *my* sins? And, must I forgive others?

As we've already said in this series, sin, the way the word is primarily used in the New Testament, means "missing the mark." The 4<sup>th</sup> century desert father Evagrius Ponticus outlined a list of foundational or cardinal sins from which all other sins arise: lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy and pride. Contrast these with the fruits of the Spirit we looked at two weeks ago: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

We sin when things we have thought, said and done miss the mark, but also when we fail to think, say or do the things we should have done. Either way, sin is failure to be or do what God intends for us as human beings. The truth is that when we understand the true nature of sin, we will want to avoid sinning. Sin enslaves us. It robs us of real joy. The lure of sin over-promises and under-delivers. Every day we see the impact of surrendering to lust, gluttony, greed, sloth, anger, envy and pride. War, ethnic violence, terrorism, unclean water, lack of basic necessities like food and health care—the underlying causes of all of these can be summarized by one word: *sin*.

The caution we all need to hear is that it is easy to think that these sins apply to the sins of others, while not seeing our own struggle with sin. That's where Alexandr Solzhenitsyn's words offer an important truth:

“If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”

Some people don't think they need to be forgiven and can't see the sin in their own lives, but at the opposite end of the spectrum, there are people who aren't sure whether God can or will forgive them. They carry guilt and shame from events long past. They suffer from an overly active conscience that leaves them in a perpetual state of guilt.

Feeling some measure of guilt is not necessarily a bad thing when it leads us to repentance and to avoid the same behavior in the future. But, Jesus taught us to ask for God's forgiveness which is meant to release us from the burden of sin. You can choose to ask for forgiveness and still hang on to your guilt, but that's not what God wants for you. Forgiveness means you don't have to be defined by the worst things you've ever done. You don't have to be tomorrow who you were yesterday. God *wants* you to be free from sin.

Finally, when we say that we believe in the forgiveness of sins, we're not only confessing that we are sinners, nor only that God is willing and able to forgive us; we are also expressing that *we* are called to forgive the sins of others. As we saw when we studied the Lord's Prayer, we ask God to forgive us *in the same way and to the same degree* that we forgive others. When we are unwilling to forgive, to relinquish the right to retribution, the person we hurt the most is ourselves, because our lack of forgiveness becomes a heavy chain we take on—a chain of bitterness and resentment. Forgiveness, however, sets us free. Forgiving others for the very real wrongs they have done to us is not saying that what happened didn't matter. It is saying, “I choose to release you, and in the process I choose to release myself.” It's not easy to do, as my family knows quite well in our struggle to forgive the person who perpetrated the abuse to our family member. But, the only way to freedom is to practice what we affirm in the Creed: I believe in the forgiveness of sins!

And, that brings us to resurrection and new life. The Apostles' Creed ends where Easter begins, with the resurrection and the promise of life everlasting. Death is the one shared experience of all human beings. We bury people we love. We wrestle with our own mortality. As one point or another most everyone asks, “what happens to us when we die?” As important as Jesus' death is for Christians, it was his resurrection that demonstrated God's triumph over evil, hate, sin and

death. We believe in life beyond death because Jesus rose from the grave, his disciples bore witness to it, and those who came later had profound experiences of the risen Christ. Jesus' death and resurrection were, in part, God's way of speaking to the deepest and most fundamental human crisis: death.

The Church's beliefs about the resurrection address several interrelated concerns. First, as we saw earlier in the Creed, the Church affirms that Christ will come again. Christ will return to earth to fully and finally establish his kingdom, a kingdom that in the words of scripture "will have no end." At Christ's return, he will judge, that is he will set right, all that has gone wrong in the world and as a result, evil, suffering, sin and death will be completely defeated.

But the resurrection also raises questions about heaven. What is heaven like? Paul reminds us that "God has prepared things for those who love him that no eye has seen, or ear has heard, or that haven't crossed the mind of any human being." (I Corin 2:9) Since heaven can't be imagined or described, the biblical authors had to use analogies to try to capture the essence of it. So, we see analogies of a wedding reception, a great feast of rich food and well-aged wines. It is such a joyous celebration that of course, there won't be a single tear, for God will wipe away the tears from all faces. (Is. 25:6-8) The descriptions in Revelation of pearly gates and streets of gold are ways of saying that if you take the most beautiful, lavish things on earth, heaven is far and away more glorious still.

And, then there is the question about what happens to our bodies. Scripture tells us that we will follow in Christ's footsteps and be raised to new life with an imperishable body. While we can't know precisely what this will be like, we have some important clues in Jesus' own resurrection body. Jesus had the ability to eat, and there were scars from his crucifixion on his hands and side. He had flesh his friends could touch, and they recognized him, although not always immediately. But, we also know his body was changed. He could walk through walls. He could appear seemingly out of nowhere.

Saint Paul uses the language of a "spiritual body" that is, in ways we can't exactly understand yet, connected to our current bodies but without the same limitations. We will not be disembodied spirits after we die but will have a glorious body that isn't subject to disease. No more aches and pains. My dad isn't falling anymore or dealing with diabetes or cancer or congestive heart failure. If Jesus' post-resurrection appearances are any guide, we'll be able to touch, feel, eat, drink and see. Yet our bodies will be different from anything we've experienced

on this side of eternity—a glorious body by which those who have known us in the past will still know us in heaven.

One thing that I have seen over and over again as a hospice chaplain and a pastor is that what we believe about death affects both how we face our own death and how we grieve the loss of those we love. It also changes how you face life. The Apostle's Creed and the gospel it bears witness to reminds us that God has an answer to the deepest wounds, longings, and questions of our hearts. It reminds us of what is true. It captures the foundational convictions upon which our lives are built. And, it gives us hope.

I choose to believe these truths. I choose to build my life upon this foundation. I have decided that if I must take a leap of faith, I'll take this leap rather than the other alternatives. What about you?

Stand and recite the Apostles' Creed.