**“What is Real?”**

As we gather on this Memorial Day weekend, our Lectionary text seems quite appropriate. This is the holiday that our nation has set aside to remember the sacrifice made by men and women who service in our armed forces to provide us the security and freedoms we enjoy today. Some made that ultimate sacrifice dying on the battlefield and their remains brought home to be interred on sovereign soil. Some were buried on foreign soil where they fell in battle. The fate of others remains unknown, but they are not forgotten. Others lived to die at times beyond their years of service but their sacrifice we continue to honor and remember.

This weekend, though originally set apart to remember those whose sacrifice was costly, we also cannot let this time pass without remember other loved ones who also are no longer with us, who though they never served their country in military capacity, their lives left an indelible mark up upon us in many remarkable ways. In our own memories are those who this day we also lift up for they passed on to us the story of faith, that which was passed on to them, and which now gives us strength in this time of suffering and pandemic, in this time of heartache and struggle, in this time when the future seems to be uncertain, and we hear so many voices which lay out varying paths to follow, none leading to bright and hope filled futures, but each seems more bleaker than the next.

Yet, Paul has a vision for which you and I can place our faith and trust. Let us turn to the fifteenth chapter of Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians and hear words of hope for a world encircled by despair. Before we do so, let us turn to God in prayer.

Prayer

Scripture

I went on the website for Rockbridge County this week out of curiosity and you probably already know this but the population of this county as of 2018 is 22, 752. As of Friday morning, May 22, the number of deaths in New York City alone attributed to Covid-19 totaled 23,083. Can you imagine for a moment the population of Rockbridge County being completely whipped out? Not a soul left. That is not only creepy, that seems like some apocalyptic movie script. All your neighbors – gone. Farms houses standing empty. No traffic. Lexington, Buena Vista, and Fairfield – ghost towns.

In New York City, there is an Island called Hart Island. Some of you may have heard of it. It is home to City Cemetery: a potter’s field where bodies of the unclaimed or unknown are buried. New York City bought the island in 1868 and has used it as a mass graveyard since 1869. Each year about 1,000 bodies are laid to rest there, as well as 40 disinterred and reclaimed by families. Since the outbreak, New York City is burying up to 24 unclaimed bodies attributed to Covid-19 a week on Hart Island.

At the time that Paul wrote his letter, there were competing theories about life after death. No one doubted that there was life after death. The Greeks and Romans believe in the immortality of the soul. This belief is still very prominent today. This belief entails the separation of the physical body and a spiritual soul. At death, the physical body dies and decays and the soul, the spirit if you will, leaves the body and goes on to either heaven or hell. Sometimes it gets trapped and we have these ghosts that float around and haunt us. Psychics profess to be able to connect with this spiritual plane and speak with these souls or spirits.

And there are those who today deny that there is any afterlife at all. That death is the end. Life just ceases to exist. We live on a biological plane and beyond that there is nothingness and when the heart stops, and breathing ceases, and brain activity comes to and end, then there is nothing.

And Paul says, “What if?” What if Christ has not been raised? What if there was not resurrection? What if all of that is a myth as so many say? What if it is true that at death there is no afterlife and we all just return to dust? What if after death we all become ghosts floating around like Marley in a Dickins novel carrying around the chains we forged in life, haunting houses, and graveyards? What if all we must look forward to is spending eternity talking to psychics and pushing around little pieces of plastic on Ouija boards?

What if it has all been a lie? If it has all been a lie, then we have been deceiving ourselves and this has all been one great 2000-year hoax. If this has been a hoax, then you and I and millions of people, intelligent people mind you who have written books and tomes that have filled libraries, and established colleges and universities, built hospitals, and founded nations, have all been fools, and yes committed great sins. We are all most of all, as Paul says to be pitied.

And all of those who have died in the faith, who have died because of the cross. All of those who have died placing their faith and hope in the resurrection to eternal life have died in vain. All of those who spent their lives in service of the church, of the gospel, their lives wasted spent for nothing.

“But in fact,” writes Paul, “Christ has been raised from the dead.” And of this we do have hope, and our lives, our faith are not in vain. For death is not the end. Death is a reality, yes. But death is not the victor. For in death Christ destroyed death, and in rising again Christ overcame death and won for us the victory.

To those who say that there is no life after death we say that Christ conquered death and rose again and appeared to many Biblical witnesses, which historians could not refute.

To those who speak of the immortality of the soul, we speak of the resurrection of the body, which we proclaim every week in the Apostle’s Creed.

Paul proclaims that we shall be changed. This flesh and blood body tainted with sin cannot stand in the presence of the holy and perfect God. Therefore, in must be changed. Something must happen that our human and imperfect and incomplete minds cannot comprehend. But we must be changed. This mortal, flesh and blood, corruptible body must put on an incorruptible and immortal body. This physical body must put on a spiritual body.

In other words, we must be changed. We will be changed. We will have a body. We will not be some ethereal disembodied ghostly spirit. We will have a body. We will be recognizable and yet different. Just like the resurrected Jesus. On the road to Emmaus the disciples did not recognize him until he broke bread with them. Just like in the upper room. Until Thomas saw the holes in his hands and his feet. Just like outside the tomb when Mary thought he was a gardener. They saw Jesus, but at first, they did not recognize him. He was familiar but he was different.

We too shall be the same but different. What will be I cannot, Paul could not describe. We will be the same but different. We shall be changed. We shall be transformed. We shall be resurrected.

It is a mystery. We shall not all die. But we shall all be changed. In the twinkling of an eye. All those who have died in the faith shall be raised.

All those caskets on Hart Island will be opened and the faithful shall rise.

Covid-19 will not have the final say.

War will not have the final say.

Cancer will not have the final say.

Dementia in all its forms will not have the final say.

Diseases of any kind will not have the final say.

Death and destruction will not have the final say.

*Death has been swallowed up in victory.”*

*55 “Where, O death, is your victory?*

*Where, O death, is your sting?”*

*56The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. 57But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

*58Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain[[1]](#footnote-1)*

1. [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](https://ref.ly/logosres/nrsv?ref=BibleNRSV.1Co15.54&off=150&ctx=ill+be+fulfilled%3a+%0a%E2%80%9C~Death+has+been+swall) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 1 Co 15:54–58. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)