

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, November 10, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“RESURRECTION – PAST, FUTURE AND PRESENT”

Luke 20:37,38

A man complained, “Every time I come to church, we sing the same old hymns.” “Well, how often do you come?” his minister asked. “Regularly,” the man said, “Every Christmas and Easter.”

Now we chuckle about C & E Christians, but they are present when the two main doctrines of the Christian faith are proclaimed and celebrated – the incarnation of Jesus Christ at Christmas and the resurrection of the crucified Christ at Easter. Every sermon throughout the year should keep these doctrines in view. In fact, every Sunday points to Christ’s resurrection. Christians worship on Sunday because that’s the day Jesus was raised from the dead. So a sermon on what the Bible teaches about the resurrection is always appropriate.

The Jewish group called the Sadducees didn’t believe in the resurrection. They couldn’t find it in the first five books of the Bible, which were their authority. The Sadducees must have thought that Jesus believed in the resurrection. Did someone tell them that Jesus said, “The Son of Man must undergo great suffering...be rejected and killed, and after three days rise again?” Perhaps. In any case, they tried to trip Jesus up by presenting him with a tricky question.

There were seven brothers; the first married, and died, childless. The second brother married the woman, in order to raise up children for his deceased older brother. But he too died, childless. In turn the next five brothers married her, and all died childless. Such practice was prescribed in the law, but never really followed. Finally, the woman died, too. “So in the resurrection whose wife will she be?” they asked. They were trying to ridicule the resurrection. Jesus wisely replied, “Marriage is for this age, but those who are considered worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection will not marry. They cannot die anymore because they are... children of the resurrection. And the fact that the dead are raised Moses himself showed, where he speaks about the Lord as the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. They have died but God is still their God, now. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living, for to him all of them are alive.” (Luke 20:34-38)

Jesus was saying, “You Sadducees say there is no resurrection, but you are wrong. Search your Scriptures and you will find that the dead are raised. There is a resurrection.” The whole New Testament underlines Jesus’ teaching. The Older Testament hints at it. There is a resurrection, past, future and present.

First, let’s think of resurrection past.

In history there has only been one true, physical resurrection and that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, Jesus raised up Lazarus, plus the son of the widow of Nain, and Jairus' daughter. But those were not a full resurrection. For all would be die again.

Now there can be no doubt that Jesus died. Water and blood gushed from his wounded side on the cross, which was a certain sign of death. He was buried in a cold tomb. But on the third day, he was raised from the dead by his Father so that death no longer has dominion over him. He cannot die again. He lives forevermore. He is the Everlasting Man. That is what makes Jesus' resurrection unique and the only true resurrection in history.

Some people speak of Jesus' resurrection as just a spiritual matter; but Jesus' resurrection was surely physical, as well. Remember the tomb was empty. The stone had been rolled back. His body was no longer entombed. For forty day Jesus interacted with his disciples. He appeared to them. He spoke to them. He ate with them. He showed them the wounds in his hands and side. God raised Jesus bodily, physically, from the dead. Now certainly God's power transformed Jesus' body so that it took on an added spiritual dimension, no longer subject to physical limitations. The Risen One was able to appear or disappear at will. He could move through locked doors. In the resurrection God gave his Son a body fit for time and for eternity. When we say in the Apostles Creed, "I believe in the resurrection of the body", we are referring first and foremost to Jesus' body.

The evidence for Jesus' bodily resurrection is very strong. There is the empty tomb, the eyewitnesses, more than 500, who saw the risen Christ with their own eyes, the change in the disciples from cowardly, fearful men into courageous witnesses and powerful preachers. Plus, there was the amazing growth and spread of the Christian church, despite great persecution. The only conclusion that fits all this evidence is that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Now, believing in Jesus' resurrection still requires a leap of faith, but the leap we must make is small indeed, given the weight of the evidence. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead can reasonably be considered a solid historical fact. So when we speak about resurrection past we are referring to Jesus' resurrection. It is the only true resurrection that has taken place in history.

Now let's speak of resurrection future.

The Bible teaches that there will be a future resurrection and judgement of the dead. Paul writes, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ..." It will take place when Jesus returns as Judge and Lord to establish God's Kingdom. The graves will be opened and the dead will be raised up by God's mighty power. God did it for one and he will then do it for many. Jesus said, "And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all those he has given me, but raise them up at the last day." Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 15, "For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed...But each in his own order; Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end when he hands over the Kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power... the last enemy to be destroyed is death." Martha speaking to Jesus about Lazarus, said, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day."

So the Bible speaks of a future resurrection which has not happened yet. But when it does we who are in Christ by faith will be brought safely through judgement to eternity, with all our sins covered by the blood of Christ. Those who have rejected the Saviour will perish and be lost. But God will give believers a new resurrection body, like Christ's resurrection body, fit for life in God's new heaven and new earth. When Job says, "then in my flesh I shall see God," he's not talking about this present body, but the new resurrection body with new eyes. In God's new creation there will not be a sign or a hint of death. Revelation tells us that "death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away."

Now the teaching about the future resurrection raises questions. One is "When?" We don't know. Only God knows. For now, we simply need to be faithful and courageous witnesses to the One who is coming again. When we look at the state of the world, we can't help but hope that he comes soon. And so we pray, "Come, Lord Jesus."

We might ask, "How will this future resurrection happen?" Again, we don't know. It's a mystery, Paul says. We came from dust and to dust we return, but God can remake us from the dust. He is Almighty and sovereign. Some people ask me, "Do you believe in cremation or in burial?" From the perspective of future resurrection, it really doesn't matter. A nearly intact body or just a bit of dust is enough of a seed for the new resurrection body. It's true even if one's ashes are cast into sea. Revelation tells us that even the sea gave up the dead. None of us are ever lost. God always knows where we are. He never loses sight of us and even a single cell is sufficient for his resurrection power.

Now we might ask, "What about our loved ones whom we have buried? Are they just lying in the grave dead, waiting for the final resurrection?" Well, yes, but even so they are not dead to God. Jesus said, "He is not the God of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive." All God's people, the saints and martyrs of every age, the saints of this church; all who have died in Christ, are alive to God, now. They don't yet have their resurrection body, but to God they are alive in some form, in spirit, perhaps. "If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die we die to the Lord; so then whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's." So our dear ones who have passed away are alive to God now. They live in his keeping. That's all we need to know and all we can know. Their souls are with him and will one day be joined with the resurrection body.

Sometimes people ask, "Will we know our loved ones in heaven?" Yes, in our resurrection bodies, I am sure we will. And why not? One of our fondest hopes is to see and interact with those who have gone before us. There is no marriage in heaven, but God is a God of relationships. And he who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for our sake, will certainly give us everything good we need and long for. There is a future resurrection which we look forward to with hope.

Finally, there is a present resurrection.

Yes, God raises people now from the dead. Obviously not physically. But God raises us from the death of sin here and now to live in union with the living Christ. Paul writes in Ephesians, "You were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once lived... But God, who is rich in

mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved through faith...” The present resurrection happens by the grace of God as we come to faith in Christ. From death to life. Here and now.

Jesus spoke about those who are worthy of a place in that age and in the resurrection from the dead. He spoke of children of the resurrection. How does one become worthy of a place? How does one become a child of the resurrection? It’s through faith in Jesus Christ. John puts it like this. “God gave us eternal life and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Do you have Christ? (or – does Christ have you?) Have you put your faith and trust in One who is the Resurrection and the Life? If you have, then you are a child of the resurrection, now and forever. And you will have nothing to fear in the final resurrection.

During the Second World War, when Hitler conquered France, he shut down the borders to keep the people from leaving the country. But one town’s population diminished rapidly, and the Germans wanted to know why. Here’s what happened. This French town had a cemetery that straddled the border with a neighboring country, which was not under Nazi control. So the locals opened up an ancient gate in the cemetery, and they kept having “funerals” – except the people attending those funerals, apparently mourning their loved ones, never came back! They went to the cemetery but they just kept on walking, right out the back gate, to the freedom of the next country.

For children of the resurrection, physical death is the gateway to freedom in the nearer presence of God. God is not the God of the dead, but of the living. In Christ, we are alive to God and he to us, now and forever.