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Hope Within Us

1 Corinthians 15:12-20, emended

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified of God that God raised Christ—whom God did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.

I have never before nor since felt pain like I did giving birth to my first child, a little girl whose name meant life, but who did not live. This was not a usual labor as I was also battling a massive infection and a host of other issues not worth naming now. I was in so much pain, I wanted to claw out of my body, to leave it behind like a shell. After the pain, my body felt alien to me and then too small to house my new understanding of what it was capable of. It took me years to regain some semblance of trust of my body, to have any modicum of unity. I wanted to believe that my body, that Judas, was somehow separate from me; but that is impossible. We, we people, are complete entities, body and soul. C.S. Lewis calls it an “organic unity.” The truth is that all of me—all of you—was created by God and every inch of us is called good, deemed holy, and given abundant life—eternal life. We are a resurrected people: a truth that tell us hope is not somewhere beyond us, but within us.

Corinth was a thoroughly Greek city. The people were influenced by Greek ways of thinking that separated body and soul, a dualism we often ascribe to Plato. These beliefs were probably in this tiny congregation by the preachers who followed Paul. They were Gnostic preachers who believed and taught that this world and everything material was evil except for our souls, which were made of the same essence of God. Understanding this—*gnosis*, the root of the work Gnostic, means “knowing”—having this special knowledge was the way to transcend the flesh and achieve immortality. So, Paul gets word that people in the Corinthian church are saying there is no resurrection of the dead. And he’s not having that. He says, bluntly, if there is no resurrection of the bodies of believers, then there is no resurrection of Christ. No resurrection, then no faith.

Even today we often confuse resurrection with immortality, but they are not the same. Immortality of the soul simple condemns the body. To condemn the body is to condemn

what God made and called good in the beginning. The resurrection may humbly remind us that without God we do not exist, but the resurrection of the body tells us that hope isn't somewhere beyond us, some far away, ethereal plane to which our souls alone transcend, but hope is within us and within the world God made. Bodily resurrection says what is broken will be made whole. What lies in ruin will be renewed. What is corrupted will be purified.

Dualism is alive and well today. You see it, for example, in the belief that we don't need to combat climate change because we'll be taken to live with God. But our creeds reject this understanding of mind versus body, even when we know that dualism can make everything easier. In her book *Honoring the Body*, Stephanie Paulsell, who now teaches at Harvard, tells of a friend who was terminally ill. She writes, "As he grew sicker, his body first became a stranger and then an enemy to him, a source of nothing but anguish. In the last months of his life, he told his friends of his feelings of having been abandoned by his body." It is, I think, a common experience, feeling abandoned by our body. When we are in pain, when our body fails us, we would love to just abandon it for palaces of gold in the sky. But these bodies are *our* bodies, and, in the beginning, God creates not just souls, but entire, complete beings, breathing life into them and calling them in their entirety "good." Paulsell says that her friend's friends learned therapeutic massage. She writes, "They began to gather regularly in his home, to stroke his hands and feet, to touch his skin, to offer his body back to him as a source of comfort, not of pain alone. "They showed him there was hope within him, that what seemed a source of pain could also be a source of comfort.

We have to be careful, when we reject the immortality of the soul alone, we can overemphasize the body, leaving out the many of us with complicated relationships to our bodies, or whose bodies complicate our relationships with the rest of the world. Embodiment is all the rage, though I rarely know what it means. Like so much jargon, it is most often wielded like a bat to bludgeon anyone who doesn't agree with me. An article in the New York Times a week or so ago urged churches to abandon online church now that COVID was "no more risky than the flu." To the author. Who isn't immunocompromised. She cited "embodiment," writing, "For all of us — even those who aren't churchgoers — bodies, with all the risk, danger, limits, mortality and vulnerability that they bring, are part of our deepest humanity, not obstacles to be transcended through digitization. They are humble (and humbling) gifts to be embraced. Online church, while it was necessary for a season, diminishes worship and us as people. We seek to worship wholly — with heart, soul, mind and strength — and embodiment is an irreducible part of that wholeness."

Her article wasn't well-received in most circles. And I really want to edit her comments: bodies are part of our deepest humanity and not merely obstacles to be transcended. That would have been a great place to end that sentence. While I find compelling her points about taking the risk to gather together when we can, even in the face of risk, in the end, I worry she simply creates a new dualism: in person, online. One is good, the other representative of the evil of this world; one for immortality, the other destined for destruction. In a response piece, she writes that one reader challenged her to understand

the difference between embodiment and interaction. The reader, Tanya Marlow, writes, “I am embodied. I am always embodied because I have a body, albeit a disabled one. When I am in bed, watching a service, I am worshiping with my body. Please don’t confuse geographically less proximate with disembodied.” It is true that the digital world is just as broken as a body can be. It can exacerbate how we, the church, itself a body, can feel abandoned, disassociated. But perhaps God can even renew digital spaces. Rather than wholly condemning the digital as evil, we could consider how even there hope may be found. That even online, or hybrid, the church gathers, and within it, hope is found.

A little group of us have gathered for a few weeks on Sunday evenings—this isn’t an ad or an attempt to shame, just some observations. We gather to share requests for prayer and to gather together in quiet stillness. It is, admittedly, the eerie, complete silence of the muted Zoom world. And yet, it is a shared silence. I am not close enough to the bodies on the screen to hear their breath, to feel the warmth emanating from their bodies, nor experience the weird perception we have of just knowing there is a living being nearby. It is something other than what we once felt inside the nave on a celebratory Sunday, packed in and singing our Alleluias. But the silence is shared, and I feel it within me. These have gathered in need of prayer, and gathered in case I am in need of prayer. How is there not hope within that? Hope that these moments, these mere words shared through electrons, might sway reality toward the wholeness and the holiness our resurrected, whole and holy God intends for it.

Beloved, the resurrection of the body unleashes us on the world, to investigate every situation, every moment for the hope it holds, to allow pain to draw out compassion, to seek renewal for everyone and everything we encounter.

Amen.