

“But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. For not all flesh is the same, but there is one kind for humans, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. There are heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is of one kind, and the glory of the earthly is of another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for star differs from star in glory. So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.”

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Visitors to the Fiji Islands tell of a strange custom of "calling to the dead." The one who has suffered bereavement climbs a tree or a cliff, and after mentioning the name of the deceased they cry out pathetically, "Come back! Come back!" The heart-rending wail is filled with despair and sad frustration. Those who have lost a precious companion, a dear friend, or a beloved child, can well appreciate that forlorn figure. Just imagine the look upon their face as, with tears streaming down their cheeks, they pitifully continue to plead for the return of their loved one.

Of all the things that can happen in this world, there is nothing so frustrating, nothing that makes us feel so helpless, as does death. Death has been called the great equalizer, because it is something that will happen to all people sooner or later. Death is overwhelming, because there is absolutely nothing we can do to stop it. We cannot reverse it. Death is so permanent, so final.

While we are helpless in the face of death, God is not. Yes, death is the great tragedy of human existence. It is the fitting punishment of an all holy God against the sin of all people, including your sin and my sin. But the grace and power of God is greater than sin and death. Through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and through His glorious resurrection, He can and does overcome death, bringing life and immortality to light. Calling out, “come back!” will not change our loss. The Lord of Life, who Himself rose from the dead, will change that loss, and bring us back to a life of blessing in Him.

If there is one topic that is requested regularly in this summer sermon series, it is the whole idea of heaven and the afterlife. Maybe, as we get older, we become more and more aware of the fleeting nature of our lives. After all, in our teen years, we feel invincible, and think we’re going to live forever. As we age, the reality of mortality creeps in. It is also true that we live in a world filled with violence and death. The recent shootings in El Paso, Texas and Dayton, Ohio remind us how quickly life can end—or be ended. The murders in BC, which ended in that manhunt in Manitoba also show how fleeting life can be. Thankfully, we can confess with confidence the words of the Apostles’ Creed: *I believe in the resurrection of the body*. And yet, we wonder what happens between the time we die, and the day we rise again.

When God created us, He made us to be flesh, which He formed out of the dust of the earth, and the soul or spirit, which He breathed into that flesh, so that man became a living soul. At the moment of death, this great creation is reversed; there is a separation of body and soul. In that moment, the soul goes either to heaven or to hell, determined by whether or not we believe in Jesus Christ as Saviour. The body lies in the grave, waiting for the day of resurrection.

What is that soul like in heaven? What are we like without the body? God tells us a fair bit about what will be on the day of resurrection, when Christ comes again and we rise physically, with body and soul rejoined for all eternity. We just don’t hear so much about the middle part. We do know that the souls of believers are with the Lord, the same Lord who promised the repentant and believing thief on the cross: *“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”* (Luke 23:43, ESV) We also know that the souls of the unbelievers are in hell. At His resurrection, before He came out of the tomb, we are told that

Jesus ***“went and proclaimed to the spirits in prison”***. (1 Peter 3:19, ESV) But do these souls have a body, even a temporary one? Scripture says nothing about this. We are alive. We are conscious. We are with the Lord. God Himself is spirit. He does not have a body as we do. Yes, He does speak about His hands and His feet, His eyes, ears and even His heart. Yet these are what we refer to as anthropomorphism. The indescribable God makes Himself known within our frame of reference. That is the way He speaks of the soul. Thankfully, all that really matters is that for us, as the redeemed children of God, the moment of death gives way to the fulness of joy in heaven.

There are certain things we do need to remember. The souls of the saints do not look down from heaven and watch over us. That is God’s job. The souls aren’t travelling around, stopping by to see how we are doing. They are asking for news about the things on earth. They are kept in perfect bliss and joy in heaven. For that joy to exist, God must keep them from anything that is part of this sinful, fallen world. Let’s face it—would your parents, spouse, children or whoever be happy if they could look down and see some of the things that we still have to deal with in this world? Would your loved ones want to see you going through a struggle with cancer, or the loss of your job? Would those who once again have that perfect holiness God meant for us in Eden be content to see the sinful attitudes, actions and words of our lives? No, they would be grieved, even as Scripture tells us God is grieved. In heaven, the saints know no grief. Their focus isn’t on this world, but on the life they have with God. John is given a revelation of heaven’s glory, and sees the heavenly host. He tells us: ***“Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?” I said to him, “Sir, you know.” And he said to me, “These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. “Therefore they are before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.””*** (Revelation 7:13–17, ESV)

Paul, too, had to deal with questions about the resurrection. The opening words of our text note the interest people have in the resurrected body: ***“But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?”*** Paul quickly points out that things are different. The body that dies is the same, and yet different, from the body that rises. He refers to our earthly bodies as a seed. That illustration is important, since a seed can only produce the same plant from which it came. Yet the seed is not the plant. In other words, there is more for us than what we see now. A little seed grows into a great plant—a plant is totally contained and hidden in that seed. As it grows, it becomes all God enables it to be. Paul says: ***So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.***

When the resurrection comes, the earthly shell of the body, which housed our soul, will rise to be reunited with the soul. But that body will be perfected, glorified and raised in power. We have this glorious hope because Jesus Christ came into our flesh to redeem even our bodies. He suffered in His body as He died on that horrible cross, but then He rose again in glory. We, who are baptized into Christ; who live by faith in the Christ who died and rose for us, share in His resurrection. When Jesus rose from the dead, His disciples recognized Him, because He looked like the Jesus they remember. Yet there was something more to Him. He was still flesh and blood. Christ emphasized that over and over. Our text tells us: ***Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven.*** We are born in the image of Adam, the man of dust, and share in his sin. Thankfully, Christ has repaired and redeemed all that sin did to us, as He pays the price for our sin on the cross. All that death can do, He has defeated in rising again from the dead. Now, united with Him, what dies comes forth as something better than ever. Our heavenly bodies will be freed from all the affects and consequences of sin. They will be freed from the confines of time and space. They will be perfect in every way. Yes, it will still be you, but it will be your best you! Job assures us: ***“For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me!”*** (Job 19:25–27, ESV) When it comes right down to it, that’s all that really matters. God created us. He brings our souls to be alive with Him. He will on the last day unite it with the body He gave, and which He makes perfect for heaven. There, in that glory of the Lord who died and rose for us, we will rejoice to be the best we have ever been, with the Lord who has always given us His very best. Amen.