

1 Corinthians 15:35-50

Dead Seed and Flourishing Plant

If you have been to my home, you may have noticed that there is not an abundance of live plants there. As well, there is a garden in the backyard, but it is Ken who basically seeds everything, with a little help from me, and he is the one who keeps it alive and growing. I basically do the harvesting and that is about it, and even then, Ken is always in there as well. All this to say that I have very basic knowledge about growing anything and I am really bad at keeping anything alive.

What I do know is that what appears to be a dead seed, when sown and nurtured, becomes something entirely different. I have on a few occasions received a packet of mixed seed as a gift and other than the picture on the front of the package not had a clue what I was getting. I had no idea what seed matched which flower in the picture. Now I realize that there are many others who would have a clue, still, and regardless, what is planted is not like that which grows.

And this is pretty much the basis of the whole diatribe that the Apostle Paul launches into in this part of chapter 15 in the first letter to the Corinthians. And a reminder, this is part of a whole letter. In worship we carve out pieces of scripture to learn and ponder, but we cannot forget that there is a whole background upon which this part of the letter is built. One of the things we also tend to forget is that the reason for writing the letter in the first place was because the church family in Corinth was not getting along. There were people playing games of one-up-man-ship around who had been given the more important spiritual gifts and there were divisions around all kinds of teaching. There were even lawsuits among them and it seemed that taking care of one another had taken a back seat to seeing who could have control and power. It was as if they had lost the understanding of what Paul had taught them about Christ and being the grace-filled loving people they were called to be.

And Paul's writing in this letter seems to hit on a lot of issues, the one being dealt with at this point in the letter is the resurrection of the body. It may not seem like a big issue for us at this time, but it certainly was back then. And though we may wonder what the big deal was, there is something to be learned as we look at how this curiosity and understanding of resurrection could and can impact how we live our lives today.

For starters a little background. In Paul's time, there were people with differing thoughts about resurrection. For Paul, because of Jesus' own resurrection, he connected Jesus' resurrection with our resurrection bodies. Paul says the physical, or maybe a better word would be "natural" body has continuity with our spiritual bodies. This also comes from his understanding of resurrection as a Pharisee, a part of a Jewish sect which

believed in resurrection in some form, but Paul here is speaking to many who are of a Greek upbringing who have learned what they know about Jesus and faith through Paul and other teachers. They do not come from the same theological background as Paul.

Those new Christians carried a lot of their own life experience and understanding with them, as we all do. And for them the thought of resurrection was more like zombie apocalypse than beautiful resurrection bodies filled with spirit. For them it would be like saying to Paul, “Yuck!” And if you read from another translation of scripture than what we heard today you would hear Paul say, “But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” and Paul responds with “Fool!” (v35-36a NRSV) That’s not how it works. And then he goes into the piece around seeds. It is an analogy, and as with all things, the analogy cannot fit perfectly, but it does help with understanding. As Eugene Peterson writes in *The Message*, “⁴²⁻⁴⁴ This image of planting a dead seed and raising a live plant is a mere sketch at best, but perhaps it will help in approaching the mystery of the resurrection body—but only if you keep in mind that when we’re raised, we’re raised for *good*, alive forever!”¹

Another translation, called the Jerusalem Bible, writes of the mortal body and resurrection body in this way. “When it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit. If the soul has its own embodiment, so does the spirit have its own embodiment.”

Another point Paul is trying to make in this part of his letter is that our physical bodies matter as there were some in his time who also thought a few different ways about our bodies. One was that the body was evil and so not of value it was only the spiritual that mattered. Another group thought they could do whatever they wanted with their bodies because they were saved by grace. However, bodies did and do matter. It was into a physical body of a child that God came to earth through the son Jesus. On top of that, Jesus cared for physical bodies, cared for people in his healing, feeding, and teaching. It was Jesus’ fleshly presence that was nailed to a cross and left to die.

It was also after resurrection that Jesus appeared to many witnesses, he prepared breakfast, he ate with them, he could be touched. Yet his body was different, it was now his spiritual body. Both matter...our natural bodies and our spiritual bodies. Our natural bodies are what we have to work with now. Our natural bodies carry our soul, embodies our souls. We are to live in a way that embraces these wonderful bodies as earthen vessels of God’s presence among us. God working in, with, and through us as we live day to day caring for ourselves and one another. In verse 50 Paul writes, “I need to emphasize, friends, that our natural, earthy lives don’t in themselves lead us by their very nature into the kingdom of God.”

Our very nature is to turn to things that really do not bring us life. Somehow it is much easier to be more concerned for ourselves than others, making sure that our needs are

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met while ignoring the fact that each person is made in the image of God and requires our attention, especially when forgiveness, justice, mercy, and grace are in short supply.

Paul is talking about how our natural bodies, which embody our souls, are really important but that in life after death we do not lose everything of who we are, there is continuity, but we end up in a new kind of body, one that holds our spirits. Of course we cannot know what that will look like. Still, we can trust that the two are connected because in Jesus' resurrection body the two were connected, earthly, physical body and his spiritual body. As Jesus was the first fruit of the resurrection, so too will we be raised.

How we live in this body is connected to everything about us. We cannot separate what we do from our soul or our spirit. How we live out our faith in this body is connected to our spirit. This has been a basic tenant of our faith for centuries as the scriptures have been expounded upon and studied.

Resurrection is not just a future concept, it is lived out each day in our lives based in the choices we make about how to live, how to treat others, how to care for communities of faith and communities of people. Particularly in a time when the world is holding so much tension and when we are being given opportunities to make choices from how to share our money, time, and resources, to who to vote for, know that our choices reflect our dying to that which no longer serves us in our faith and rising to life in each choice we make.

I cannot tell you how to do this as each of us faces our own choices, struggles, challenges, and have our own journey. But you do have choices about how you will live. We as a church community can walk with each other and support one another as we live into the resurrection of our bodies now and in a time to come. The promise of new life, flourishing plants, that come from what appears to be dead seed. That is what we live for and why we do this together, nurturing one another as each day we strive to flourish and grow.

I invite you to share along with me in the ancient words of the Apostles Creed. May they affirm your faith and give you hope as you hear the words about resurrection.