

Life - On the Other Side

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1 Corinthians 15:50-
58

**Sermon Series: The
Kingdom of God**

***“I make my
own rules.”***

- Jack Nicholson

In the 2007 movie *The Bucket List*, two terminally ill men, played by Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, take a road trip to do the things they always said they would do before they “kicked the bucket.” Anticipating the film’s release, Nicholson was interviewed by Parade magazine. The magazine sports a picture of Nicholson on the cover with the accompanying caption, “I make my own rules.” Nicholson is known, as the article says, for “his cool worldliness and womanizing.” Nicholson says, “I used to live so freely. The mantra for my generation was ‘Be your own man.’ I always said, ‘Hey, you can have whatever rules you want—so I’m gonna’ have mine. I’ll accept the guilt. I’ll pay the check. I’ll do the time.’ I choose my own way. That was my philosophical position well into my 50s. As I’ve gotten older, I’ve had to adjust.” The approach of death does that to people, even celebrities like Jack Nicholson. At the end of the article, Nicholson waxes philosophical: “We all want to go on forever, don’t we? We fear the unknown. Everybody gets to that wall, yet nobody knows what’s on the other side. That’s why we fear death.”

I’m struck by Nicholson’s comment, “Nobody knows what’s

on the other side.” The unknown frightens us.

The Pillars of Hercules was a poetic name for the Straits of Gibraltar. Medieval geographers believed there was nothing beyond the Pillars of Hercules except the empty ocean. That’s why the Spanish put the Latin phrase *Ne Plus Ultra* on their coat of arms to express the belief that there was nothing beyond. When Christopher Columbus proved them wrong, that there was a rich land beyond the sea, they changed the Spanish coat of arms to the motto *Plus Ultra*, “There is something beyond.”

Whether you are guests or members, you may be longing to know whether there is something beyond. Despite all the cynicism that surrounds religion, we yearn for someone to unlock death’s mystery for us.

The Bible asserts Jesus Christ stepped from the grave to declare there is something beyond. Paul affirms in 1st Corinthians 15:3-4 three beliefs of primary importance: First, “Christ died for our sins.” For is a preposition meaning “on our behalf.” Second, “He was buried.” That is, he really died. Third, “He was raised on the third day,” which sent a message over the bow to Greeks and Gnostics alike, who believed in the immortality of the soul but denied the resurrection of

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the body. The perfect tense, “was raised,” suggests this raising happened once and is still in force. Christ is alive forevermore. These words, written 20 years after Jesus, are most likely borrowed from an ancient creedal formula in use in Paul’s day: “Christ died, Christ was buried, Christ rose from the dead.”

These words bear a striking resemblance to the Apostles Creed recited earlier, “...who was crucified, dead and buried. On the third day he rose again from the dead...I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.”

The communist party used to conduct indoctrination meetings in the Soviet Union. At one such meeting, a communist lecturer addressed a large audience on the horrors of religion. He finished his talk with the words, “There is no God. Jesus Christ never existed. There is no such thing as the Holy Spirit. The church is an oppressive institution and anyway, the church is out of date. The future belongs to the state and the state is in the hands of the communist party.”

He was about to sit down, when an old, Russian Orthodox priest, seated near the front, stood up. “May I say three words?” he asked. The lecturer looked at him with disdain but gave him permission to speak. The old priest turned and gazed upon the vast crowd. He stretched himself to full height and shouted, “Christ is risen!” There was a momentary pause, and then the crowd

thundered in return, “He is risen indeed!” Christ died, Christ was buried and Christ is risen!

The focus of the first eleven verses of 1st Corinthians 15 is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, while the remainder of the chapter, verses 12-57, is devoted to our bodily resurrection. Christians will be raised body and soul together. Our bodies, like our computers, will undergo a significant upgrade.

John envisions in Revelation the coming of a new earth (21-22). God will reconstitute earth as the kingdom of God where Jesus will reign. We will be given new bodies to reign with Christ on earth. We serve God now in mortal, perishable bodies, but we look forward to the day when we will put on immortal, imperishable bodies.

How does this happen? Paul says it best: “Listen! I tell you a mystery. We will all not die, but we will be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised imperishable and we will be changed” (1 Corinthians 15:51-52).

I cannot read these words without the music of Handel’s *Messiah* going off in my head, especially the words, “The trumpet shall sound and we shall be changed.” I arranged it to be sung so you could hear a portion of this nine-minute bass aria as well as keep you awake! We often associate Handel’s *Messiah* with Christmas, when, in reality, only the first movement references his birth. The last two movements focus on Christ’s death and

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resurrection, as a prelude to our resurrection to eternal life. That's why it premiered in the Easter season of 1742.

Paul speaks of death in the middle of this chapter as our "ultimate enemy" (15:26). In essence, this whole chapter has been coming to terms with death. Death is not something to be taken lightly. Indeed, God took death so seriously that he sought to destroy it for all eternity. Death has been vanquished.

Paul's tone becomes mocking at the end of the chapter. He has the audacity to taunt death. "Where, O death is your victory? Where, O death is your sting?" (15:55).

We had a bee colony in our backyard last summer. They colonized in holes in our backyard. Bees have become scarce in Virginia lately, so I didn't want to do anything to disturb their habitat. These creatures normally don't attack people unless provoked. So we didn't bother them and they didn't bother me. I was mowing grass last summer and forgot all about our insect neighbors. But they didn't forget me. I suppose running a lawnmower over a hole of bees qualifies as a provoked attack. Immediately, I was enveloped in a swarm of bees. They got me good—a dozen or more times. Fortunately, I'm not allergic to bees, although we're no longer on speaking terms.

The bees that unloaded their stinger in me lived only a few more hours. "O death, where is your sting?" Jesus Christ has

disabled death. Death has become as harmless as a bee without a stinger.

The last verse in this chapter may strike you as anticlimactic. For Paul to shift from a soaring passage of resurrection to everyday, garden-variety, ethical imperatives seems rather abrupt. You might have expected Paul to conclude, "Therefore my beloved, you can look forward to the resurrection of the body that awaits you." Instead, he redirects our gaze to the present. "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, for you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain" (15:58).

We've been preaching on the kingdom of God for months now. We've said previously that the kingdom of God is not only a place believers go after they die. Jesus said, "The kingdom of God has come near" (Mark 1:14-15). Any work we do for the kingdom of God endures to eternal life. Every act of kindness, every gesture of concern, every heartfelt prayer, every resistance to temptation and every word of witness will not be in vain.

A few years ago, leaders in Charlotte, North Carolina invited their favorite son, Billy Graham, to a luncheon. Billy hesitated to accept the invitation, given his struggles with Parkinson's disease. But the leaders told him that they didn't expect a major address. They wanted him to come so they could honor him.

After wonderful things were said about Billy Graham, he stepped to the podium and said, "I'm reminded

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- C.S. Lewis

today of something that happened to Albert Einstein, the great physicist, while traveling by train. The conductor came down the aisle, punching the tickets of each passenger. When he came to Einstein, he couldn't find his ticket. He checked his pockets and briefcase, but couldn't locate it. The conductor said, "That's okay, Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it." Einstein nodded appreciatively.

The conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets. As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and happened to see Dr. Einstein on his hands and knees looking under the seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. No problem. You don't need a ticket. I'm sure you bought one." Einstein looked at him and said, "Young man, I too know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going."

Billy Graham went on to talk about the importance of knowing who we are and where we are going. Can we really know in advance where we are going?

A new study by the Barna Group indicates that 75 percent of Americans say the story of Jesus rising from the dead, after being crucified and buried, is literally true. Yet, the anecdotal evidence suggests otherwise. Not by any stretch of the imagination are three out of every four Americans living lives dedicated to the resurrected Jesus.

Do you believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord? Not, do you give assent to him intellectually, but do you trust him? Do you give your heart, mind and soul to him? In the words of C.S. Lewis: "You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?"

Trusting Christ is, in reality, a matter of life and death. God through Jesus Christ is offering us life: abundant, everlasting life. Will you not receive it?

PRAYER:

Some of us long to know with confidence there is something beyond this life. We're seeking, Lord; do not desert us in our time of need.

Some of us have become cynical about religion. It's not you, Lord; it's your followers who drag us down. Lead us to true believers who can restore our trust.

Some of us are earnestly seeking to be Christ followers, but we have lost our way. We are discouraged, doubting whether you really care. Fill us with your hope.

Some of us seek to be steadfast and immovable; always excelling in your work, but we know in our heart of hearts that we do not measure up. Restore us in your grace.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

