

## I BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY...

Apostles' Creed Sermon Series, week 6  
A sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

John 11:25-26, 14:19  
1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 51-54, 2 Corinthians 5:1-4

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Today, we come to the end of our 6-week journey of reflecting on the foundational Christian beliefs expressed in the Apostles' Creed while also considering why those beliefs matter and how those beliefs impact us. Before I dive into today's final lines, I want to point out that the Apostles' Creed contains what is a relatively short list of Christian beliefs, and yet these beliefs were the ones that began being formalized in the second century so that individuals being baptized as a Christian could profess what were considered to be the most important, foundational beliefs for a Christian.

It says something that many of the things that Christians believe today, and are willing to fight over, are not found in the Apostles' Creed, nor in any of the other Creeds that date back to the first five centuries of Christianity. When it comes to some of the most hotly debated and divisive issues over the past several centuries, issues pertaining to Holy Communion, Baptism, the ordination of women and the inclusion of LGBTQ individuals in the church, I think it both wise and Christlike to hold the view of Peter Meiderlin, a Lutheran theologian of the 1600's who said something like, "*In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, charity.*" This view was held by John Wesley and its sentiment built into who we are supposed to be as Methodists. Of course, that does not mean that Methodist individuals and churches have always lived up to this sentiment.

And now for the last statement of the Apostles' Creed, a statement grounded in the pinnacle declaration of Christianity, "Christ is alive!" It's because of Jesus' resurrection that we declare, "*I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.*" This statement answers the question that all human beings ask at different times in our lives, "What happens to us when we die?" In other words, "Is there something more? Is there an afterlife?" These are questions human beings have wondered about for many thousands of years. In fact, nearly every ancient culture of which we have evidence reveals some type of ritual for marking death, and most held a hope that human existence did not end with death. Clearly, death is the one shared experience of all human beings. We all bury people we love. We all wrestle with our own mortality. And, like all people who have gone before us, we wonder and hope that there is something beyond this life. In response to our questions about death and an afterlife the Apostles' Creed responds with a definitive, "Yes, there is something more!"

Before sharing with you scriptural references, I think you need to understand what most first century people thought happened after someone died. Knowing helps us make better sense of some things Jesus said and some things the apostles wrote. This diagram reflects what people in that day believed. The realm of the dead, called Sheol but also known as Hades, had two distinct areas: Paradise, the place of the righteous dead; and Tartarus also known as Gehenna, the place of the wicked dead. Between those two places was a great divide, so there was no going back and forth. However, consignment of the dead to Paradise or Tartarus was not final, because at some point the dead would be raised and a final judgment would take place. Jesus, Paul, and some of the other apostles taught that there would be a final judgment. At that point both realms of the dead would be brought before the judgment seat of Christ

How and when the Lord will return is unclear in Scripture. Less clear still is how to interpret the various passages that seem to point to it. Many of the earliest Christians believed he would return within their lifetimes, but as time passed most Christians came to accept that we have no idea when it will happen but we still hold onto the hope that it will happen someday. And yet there are those in every generation who despite Jesus saying it is not for us to know the day or time still fixate on correlating the end times with events in their own time and so they predict Christ's imminent return. In the last two hundred years this has happened again and again. For example, the Seventh-day Adventists had their beginning in the teaching of a man who believed Jesus was returning in 1843 or 44. The Jehovah's Witnesses started with a man who believed Jesus would launch his kingdom on earth in 1914. Do any of you remember Hal Lindsey's 1970 book, The Late Great Planet Earth? It strongly suggested that Jesus would return by 1988. That book sold 30 million copies and was made into a movie in 1979. Since then, there has been no shortage of additional predictions by various Christians.

By acknowledging the reality of such predictions, I want to emphasize that the point of the biblical texts as well as the Creed's affirmation that one day Christ "will come again..." was not an invitation to pinpoint that day, but to challenge Christians to be ready for that day, whether that day arrived in a glorious second coming or at our death. The scriptural references about the "end times and Jesus second coming" were not meant to scare believers but to encourage believers who were facing adversity, persecution and suffering. For suffering Christians throughout the centuries, their hope in Christ's return is a hope that ultimately evil, suffering, sin and death will be defeated.

As Christians, we trust that our lives continue beyond death. We believe that Christ will return for us at our death, and most take seriously the idea that one day Christ will bring an end to the world as we know it. Of course, the question many want to know is, what is heaven like? Paul reminds us that "*...no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him*" (1 Corinthians 2:9). Because heaven can't be imagined by human minds or described by human words, biblical authors resort to analogies based on human experience. The prophet Isaiah and the writer of the book of Revelation describe God's heavenly kingdom as a great feast or banquet. Whatever words we find in Scripture about pearly gates and streets of gold are simply ways of saying that if you take the most beautiful and valuable things on this earth, heaven is even more glorious.

There's an old story I think illustrates this well. It's about a man who lived alone and was nearing death. This was in the days before cars, and the local doctor arrived in his horse-draw carriage to check on his patient. The doctor brought his dog along, leaving the dog outside on the front step as he entered the house. The doctor sat down beside the man, took his vital signs, and then told the man that the end was near. The man asked, "Doc, what is death like? What's on the other side?" At that moment the doctor's dog began to whimper and scratch at the front door. The doctor said, "Do you hear that? That's my dog. He's never been in your house. He doesn't know what it's like in here. What he knows is that his master is on the other side of that door, and if his master is in here, it must be okay. It's our Master who is on the other side of death's door."

I realize this story may seem like a good place to end my sermon, but that's not happening because I really need to spend a little time with the phrase, "the resurrection of the body." The phrase is a bit perplexing to me. Personally, I like better