**Third Sunday of Easter**

**April 18, 2021**

**Text—Luke 24:36-49**

If I were to ask you right now, what is the end goal of being a Christian, what would you say? In other words, what, in the end, do you hope will happen to you as a result of being a Christian? I don’t know how any of you specifically would answer that question, but I think that many Christians in the world today would probably say something like this: “The end goal of being a Christian is to go to heaven after I die. I want to escape this sinful world, this vale of tears, and ascend to the spiritual realm where I will live with Jesus forever.” This is what many Christians would probably say, and from a biblical perspective, it is wrong. The end goal of being a Christian is *not* to die and go to heaven. Now, that will probably happen to all believers, but it’s not the end of the story. The true end of the story, in fact, is much better than dying and going to heaven. Unfortunately, in the church today, we have largely lost sight of what God actually has promised us, and we instead have placed our hope in a biblical doctrine that is true, and yet was never intended to be the final goal for Christians. Let me explain what I mean.

First, let’s take a look at our Gospel text for this morning. In Luke’s account of the resurrection, this was the first time that Jesus appeared to his disciples after he was raised from the dead. When he arrived, he said to them, “Peace to you!” But the disciples were terrified, because they thought that Jesus was a spirit, or a ghost. Jesus told them that no, he wasn’t a spirit, and that they should see the wounds from the nails in his hands and his feet. He wanted them to touch him, and see that he was solid matter, not a spiritual ectoplasm, or whatever it is they call ghosts these days. Then, while they were still marveling and disbelieving, he asked them for some food, so they gave him some fish, and he ate it in their presence. Jesus thus took great pains to show his disciples that he was not a ghost, and he was not a spirit; rather, he had been raised from the dead, both body and soul. His body had been dead, but now it was alive again. Jesus had not “died and gone to heaven;” he had been physically raised and glorified to everlasting life.

What happened to Jesus on Easter morning has profound implications for what will happen to those of us who believe in him. We often tend to think of the afterlife, or heaven, as a place that is purely spiritual: we will no longer have physical bodies, but we will float about as spirits for all eternity. Maybe we will sprout wings and turn into angels, playing our heavenly harps and singing God’s praises forever. Because the end goal of being a Christian is purely spiritual, that also means that our physical bodies, and the physical world, are ultimately irrelevant to us. We can abuse our bodies as much as we want to while we’re alive, and we certainly don’t need to take care of them after we die. Why would we, if we’re just going to discard them and go to heaven forever?

But such an attitude is completely at odds with what the Scriptures teach not only about the physical world and our physical bodies, but also about the future of God’s creation. When Jesus came to earth, he didn’t come just to redeem our souls: he came to redeem every single part of us, physical and spiritual. He did not come to help us escape this vale of tears; rather, he came to repair this vale of tears that had been broken by the fall into sin. He began that process during his ministry, when he cured diseases and healed people’s physical bodies. He continued that process when he raised people from the dead, freeing them, however temporarily, from the power of death. And he completed that process when he himself rose from the dead and paved the way for everyone else who would trust in him to do the same. Now we who believe in Jesus can look forward to rising from the dead ourselves, both body and soul, so that we can be glorified in our bodies just as Jesus has been.

All of this will occur on the last day, when Jesus returns to earth from his glorious throne in heaven. That is the day when he will raise all people from the dead and completely renew the entire creation. Everything in this world that plagues us: sin, sickness, pain, and death, will all be taken away and destroyed. All that will be left will be the perfect world that God first created, an eternal Garden of Eden and new Jerusalem, in which we will dwell as God’s people forever. The book of Revelation tells us that the river of the water of life runs through this eternal city, and the tree of life grows beside it, so that all of the people of God can eat from it and have everlasting life. This is far better than hopping around on the clouds forever as a disembodied soul: this is having everything restored to us that was taken away by sin and death. God will not let any part of us perish: all of it will be redeemed, whether material or spiritual.

This is not to say that Christians do not go to heaven when they die. They certainly do. Jesus told the thief on the cross who confessed faith in him: “Today you will be with me in paradise.” And St. Paul told the church in Philippi that he would rather depart and be with Christ than continue his current life in jail. So yes, the souls of those who die in the faith do immediately go to heaven to be with Jesus. They are in a place of peace, comfort, and joy in the presence of their Lord. We even have a special theological term for it: the intermediate state of the disembodied soul before the resurrection. It is a good place to be. But it is not the best place to be. The best place is the renewed heaven and earth that will arise when Jesus returns on the last day. That’s when we get our physical bodies back, whole and undefiled. That’s when we get to be in the physical creation again, except it will be perfect and without sin. So those who have already died in the faith are also still looking forward to something. They have not reached the end yet; they will get there at the same time as everyone else. When Jesus returns, that’s when all of God’s promises will be fulfilled for all of God’s people, both those who have already died and those who are still living.

The question for us now is this: why have so many in the church placed their hope in an incomplete version of the eternal blessings that God plans to give us? Why have the biblical teachings about the resurrection of the body been downplayed? We confess in the creed every single week that we believe in the resurrection of the body, and yet it seems that many Christians don’t understand what that actually means. Why is that? The answer is complicated, but one reason is that we have become accustomed to regarding the physical world as fundamentally evil, and the spiritual world as fundamentally good. We often conceive of the Christian life as a war between our bodies and our souls: our bodies trying to lure us into sin and the pleasures of the flesh, and our souls nobly resisting the body’s urges. We also think of the spiritual realm as a “higher” plane of existence, and the material world here as “lower” or “lesser.” But that’s not how the Bible talks. The Bible speaks about all of God’s creation as being good; fallen and corrupt, yes, but still fundamentally good. Nothing that God makes is evil, whether spiritual or physical. And nothing is immune to the corruption of sin, either, whether spiritual or physical. We are not sinful because our evil bodies oppress our pure souls; no, we are sinful because both our bodies and souls are corrupted by original sin, and they both equally need to be redeemed. The whole human person is saved through faith in Jesus Christ; salvation does not involve our pure souls discarding our impure bodies. Such ideas come more from Greek philosophy and the ancient heresy of Gnosticism than they do the Bible. But somehow these concepts have made inroads into the church, with the result that many Christians do not understand what their true hope is. Our true hope is that we will be raised from death on the last day, and dying and going to heaven is merely a stepping-stone toward that ultimate goal.

This is why Jesus was so insistent with his disciples that he was not a ghost and that he had risen bodily from the dead: he wanted them to understand that his work of redemption encompassed everything in all creation. He did not rise again from the dead so that all of his followers could live as disembodied spirits forever: he rose so that we would rise too! He wanted the disciples to know that their ultimate fate was the same as his, so that they could have hope for the renewal of everything that God had made. And he made sure to tell them: “You are witnesses of these things.” They had seen that Jesus had risen from the dead, and so it was their responsibility to proclaim this joyous news to all nations. That is what Christ’s church continues to do today, to proclaim that we believe in the resurrection of the body. We have a wonderful message of full and complete redemption to share with the world. Let’s make sure that we understand exactly what that message is, so that we don’t undersell the many blessings that God has granted us in Christ.

So if someone were to ask me, “What is the end goal of being a Christian?” I would say something like this: “I look forward to the day when my Lord Jesus Christ will return to earth and raise me up to eternal life, both body and soul, in his new creation.” I wouldn’t say anything about dying and going to heaven. In fact, dying is something that I’m hoping to avoid. If Jesus returns before I die, then I’ll get to skip all that unpleasantness and go straight to the glorification of my body and eternal life. But if, in the likely event that I do die before Jesus returns, I will still have the hope of resurrection. My soul will be in the intermediate state of the disembodied soul with Jesus in heaven, at peace in the presence of my Savior, patiently awaiting the day when he returns to earth and raises me back to life. Either way, the end result of my faith will still be the same. I will rise with Jesus and with all other people who have trusted in him, and I will never have to worry about sin, death, or the devil again. And this is true of all of you here who believe in Jesus as well. You will share in those same blessings of resurrection and eternal life in God’s kingdom. Your bodies will not be lost to you forever, but you will get them back when Jesus returns. So don’t settle for something less than what God promises you in the Bible. Don’t listen to the Gnostics or Greek philosophers who disdain the material world. Embrace the fullness of what God has promised you in Christ, and look forward to that final day with hope, because that is when you will truly see your full redemption, both in body and in soul. Amen.