

People of God, I wanted to begin my sermon by expressing great thankfulness to you and the elders for allowing and encouraging me to go to Pastor Gregg Strawbridge's funeral last week. As you can imagine it was bitter-sweet. There were hundreds of people there, at least 30 pastors from the CREC. We even got to spend sometime together to tell some Gregg Strawbridge stories. It was wonderful. There was such a great outpouring of love and thanksgiving for this man. It was wonderful, and extremely sad all at once. There were so many people, in fact, that one of the funeral home directors said to me that it was definitely the longest funeral procession of cars going to the grave site that he had ever seen.

I was honored to be one of the pall bearers for Gregg, along with other ministerial students he had throughout the years, and we carried Gregg to his grave. And after the grave side service was over, Sharon, his wife said to me, twice, "Thank you for carrying him." And I just said, "Sharon, Gregg carried us." Because he did carry us, as a father carries his children, so Gregg carried us with the hope of the Resurrection of the dead.

A few of us stayed behind after everyone left to back to the wake to watch them lower the casket into the ground. And right as we were leaving the funeral director spoke up and said, "If Christ is not raised from the dead, then our faith is in vain, and we are above all men most to be pitied." Amen.

People of God, the Gospel hope of the resurrection of the dead is not mere platitudes that you say to someone in order to make them feel better when a loved one dies. The hope of the resurrection of the dead is God's response to sin and death in his good creation. It is God's victory over sin, death, the devil, and the grave. And if you do not have this hope of the resurrection of the dead, then you are not a Christian, and you have no hope of eternal life.

Certainly there is the question of how do you comfort a person, and how do you comfort yourself in the face of death, if there is no resurrection. I don't know how you can. How can you go through the death of a loved one, or even face the reality of your own inevitable death if there is no hope in the resurrection from the dead? The memory of the dead will be forgotten. All their work is in vain, only to be passed on to others. Vanity of vanities. It is all a striving after wind, says Solomon.

In other words, life is meaningless. And there is no hope for any of us but to eat and drink and enjoy our work, for tomorrow we die. If there is no resurrection of the dead, then all we ever have is this moment right here, and right now. So maximize your pleasure. This is it. For when death comes, your life is ended, and you and your works perish forever.

But I think there is something within each one of us that knows that is not true. God has placed eternity into each one of our hearts, and somewhere deep inside we know that death is not the end. Death is the great enemy of God and man. But the question is, is God stronger than death? Can God defeat death? Can God make all the sad things become untrue? And if He can, how?

Some people, even Christians, think that God defeats death simply by bringing the souls of people to heaven when they die. As if God's final response to the problem of death is Heaven, and our final existence is to be a disembodied spirit forever.

But Church Father Justin Martyr said to Trypho the Jew that those who believed that were "godless, impious heretics." "Do not imagine that they are Christians", he said. Heaven is not the final state. Heaven is not God's final word of victory over death. The removal of the soul from the body is not at all what we hope for and put our trust in.

When Paul says “Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” the victory he is referring to is the resurrection of bodily corpses from the dead. This is the Christian hope. The Eternal Future is a physical reality.

Do dead people come back to life or not in their flesh? This is THE issue for the Apostle Paul. And he absolutely believed that God did in fact bring dead corpses back to life. In fact, there is no Gospel message without the preaching of the resurrection of the dead corpses. There is no hope of eternal life without the resurrection of the dead. He says: If there is no resurrection of the dead, then even Christ himself is not raised from the dead.

Apparently Paul had to deal with some people in the Church in Corinth who thought that there was no resurrection of the dead. Who were these people? We know that there were Jews who were of the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. Perhaps some people were influenced by them. And we know that in the city of Corinth there were those among the Greeks and Romans who thought very highly of their own intellectual abilities and considered themselves wise, having studied much philosophy. So probably, like in other places in the Greco-Roman world, when the Apostle Paul preached Christ to the Gentiles he was heard eagerly, at least up to the part where he taught about the resurrection of the dead, when he would then be mocked. These mockers are the wise people in Corinth, those who have been educated in philosophy.

Thus Paul says in chp. 1 of 1 Corinthians, “*Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debate of the age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world (referring of course to Greek Philosophy)? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.*”

God was pleased to save people through the foolish and ridiculous preaching of a message of the resurrection of a corpse from the dead. This idea was complete foolishness to the Greeks. Those who have been enlightened by the Philosophical schools of men such as Plato and the Epicureans and the Stoics, and all those who have studied Greek Philosophy, they all believed that the whole point of life was to escape the prison of the body. The accumulation of wisdom in one's life was to help the soul escape the prison of the flesh. And yet Paul insists that the message which was preached to the Corinthians, and which the Corinthians themselves believed, and were saved by, was the message of the resurrection of the flesh and bones and blood and skin and hair. This body, will be raised back to life again, and our eternal existence will be in this body. Glorified Heavenly body, whatever that means, but a body nonetheless.

And so he reminds the Corinthians of the gospel he preached to them, "which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved," he says, "if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain."

What is the message that you must stand fast in and believe which is saving you? The message is the Gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead in accordance with the Scriptures. So then, if Christ is so powerfully proclaimed among the Corinthians as to be risen from the dead, and if they had come to believe and have been saved by believing such a message, then how can some say there is no resurrection of the dead? What did they believe then, if not in the message of the resurrection?

If Christ is not raised from the dead then the whole foundation of the Christian faith and eternal life in a resurrected body has been removed, and a series of disastrous consequences follow.

If Christ has not been raised from the dead:

1. Our preaching is in vain – the apostle’s mission to bring salvation to the people of the world by preaching this message of the resurrection of Christ from the dead is a sham, a hoax, a falsehood, and absolutely completely pointless if Christ is not raised. No one ought to waste another second of their lives preaching Jesus, if there is no resurrection of the dead.
2. We are found false witnesses for God – In fact, the apostles, and every other single Christian church throughout the history of the world is not just engaged in a pointless endeavor, to get people to believe a lie, but we all would be false witnesses for God. We would be telling lies about what God said and did. We would be actively a tool of lies and deception and giving people false hope. Our whole existence would be that we are telling lies about God.
3. Our Faith is in vain – If our preaching is in vain, and if we are false witnesses of God, then anyone who had believed such nonsense that God raises corpses from the dead, is also believing in vain. It is pointless. There would be no salvation in believing the message about the resurrection, if God did not raise people from the dead. There would be no point in celebrating Easter. Why have faith at all then? It is in vain to have faith in Jesus if God doesn’t resurrect the dead.

Incidentally we would have to ask what in the world all these liberal churches that do not believe in the physical resurrection of the dead are doing? For there are so many Christians who are wise according to the world’s standards who, like the wise Greeks in Corinth, who think that resurrection is something more akin to this: *The resurrection of Jesus is a wonderful metaphor for spiritual change that God works in the lives of those who possess knowledge of the truth. “Resurrection”*

symbolizes the power of the Spirit that we experience in our wisdom and in our spiritual gifts. But the image of resuscitated corpses is only for childish fundamentalists. Those of us who are spiritual find such a teaching repugnant.”

If that is what you really believe about the resurrection of the dead, then your faith is in vain, Paul says.

4. We are still in our sins –If there is no salvation in the message, because the message is a lie, then we are all still in our sins. We have no forgiveness, we all labor in vain under the wrath of God that is still upon us all, and we have no hope whatsoever of being saved, redeemed, resurrected, freed, or anything else. In fact,
5. Everyone who has died in Christ has perished (*apolonto* – they are lost forever). Once a person dies, that is it. They are in the grave with Jesus, there to remain forever with no hope of resurrection, no hope of their spirit being freed from the body. Nothing. If there is no resurrection from the dead, all we have to look forward to is perishing, and our bodies being turned to dust and ashes, and our memory being forgotten, and our works being in vain.
6. And so, if Christ is not raised from the dead, then those who hope in Christ in this life are the most to be pitied. For our whole hope has been for the world to come, and the life we have lived in this world has been lived for the sake of receiving a reward in the world to come. But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then we have totally wasted our lives believing lies, teaching lies, giving ourselves over to lies, falsely hoping something better for our loved ones who are dead, and for our ourselves when we die, and worst of all, we are all still in our sins. If there is no resurrection from the dead, then Jesus Christ is not resurrected. And if Christ is not resurrected, the only thing you should do is live for the moment, for that is all you have. Let us eat and drink for tomorrow we die. That is it.

These are the sad consequences that follow if we do not believe that God raises dead corpses from the Grave. But we do believe that God raises corpses from the grave, We do believe that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. We do believe that the dead in Christ will rise to life immortal, and we will one day be further clothed, so that what is mortal will be swallowed up by life.

We do believe that God does raise the dead and so our preaching is not in vain. We are telling the truth about God. And our faith is not in vain, but it is in the truth. We are not in our sins, they have been forgiven in Jesus Christ, and all our loved ones who have died in Christ have not eternally perished, they are alive now, and will be alive again in new glorified bodies at the resurrection. And finally, because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, we are of all men most definitely not to be pitied. We live our lives for the world to come, and we have a certain and sure hope that this life is not the only life there is. This life is the training ground and preparation for the life of the world to come. And so we are placing all our investments in heaven where they can never be destroyed, and will follow us into the glory of the new world at the resurrection. And here lies our hope.

I have three brief applications to us today that flow from this glorious truth that God raises dead bodies from the grave.

1. This physical creation is good, and God has not abandoned our physical bodies to the grave. Our salvation is not a rejection of creation, but it is the glorification of creation. And so we are to see that creation and salvation go hand in hand. They are not to be separated. The promise of the resurrection of the body is God's affirmation that he loves creation and that he loves your physical body so much that he promises to give it to you forever. This naturally leads into my second application.

2. Do not despise your body. Do not abuse your body. Do not reject your body. This body you inhabit now will be raised from the dead and glorified, and you will live forever in your body. So live now in such a way that your eternal life is tied to your body. Because it is. Consider the significance of much of Paul's moral commands. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. God raised the Lord and will raise us by His power, so glorify God in your body. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. And we are taught in Scripture that it is God who is at work within us. If God is at work within us, can any of God's works be destroyed? Ecclesiastes says.

"I perceived that whatever God does endures forever; nothing can be added to it, nor anything taken from it. God has done it, so that people fear before him." What God does in you will go on forever. So fear God and keep his commandments and obey God in your body.

3. And thirdly, since God will raise us from the dead, and since what we do in the body matters, let us remember that our labor in the Lord is not in vain, and that the Spirit wrought works we do in this body will be the stones with which we build the World to come. Not only will our bodies be resurrected, but somehow God will even resurrect and remember our labor and work that we did in this body and he will carry them over into the resurrection and they too will be glorified. Even our hidden works will be revealed on that day, following us into the New World. This is why the apostle Paul concludes this long chapter on the resurrection saying these words – "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord, your labor is not in vain." The Lord Jesus Christ lives forever, never to be destroyed. Therefore all the works we do by faith in Him are not in vain, they too will last forever, and at the resurrection they too will be glorified.

So live in this life people of God, as people who have hope. As people who laugh at death, and who do not cower before it. For we know the one who made his way out of the grave, and he has brought us up with him. Jesus Christ has the keys to death and Hades, He alone has broken death's strong gates. And he is alive forever more, and we in Him, and He in us.

CONCLUSION

At the Grave side service for Gregg Strawbridge, Pastor Lawrence Windham read John Donne's Sonnet, Death Be Not Proud, allow me to conclude with this:

*Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom thou think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be,
Much pleasure; then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go,
Rest of their bones, and soul's delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men,
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell,
And poppy or charms can make us sleep as well
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.