

## **“Life’s Refrain”**

Rev. Dr. Peter Bynum

February 23, 2025

*<sup>35</sup>But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” <sup>36</sup>Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. <sup>37</sup>And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. <sup>38</sup>But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body...*

*<sup>42</sup>So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup>It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. <sup>44</sup>It is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. <sup>45</sup>Thus it is written, “The first man, Adam, became a living being”; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. <sup>46</sup>But it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. <sup>47</sup>The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. <sup>48</sup>As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. <sup>49</sup>Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven. <sup>50</sup>What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. (1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-50)*

When it comes to resurrection – the idea that someone who is dead can be raised to new life – I think it is safe to say that everyone has questions. And the people of Corinth certainly had questions. Members of the church community were still having a tough time buying the story that Christ had actually died on the cross only to be raised from the dead three days later. So Paul, who has left Corinth to continue his missionary journeys, sends a letter back to them, not just to chastise them, but to encourage them and reassure them.

First, he reminds them that the resurrection of Christ is not just an esoteric detail – that it is the foundation upon which their faith rests. “*How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?*” Paul writes. “*If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.*”<sup>1</sup> In other words, this is kind of the whole ballgame. So we have to be able to talk about this.

So they kept talking, and more questions come out. That is where our reading picks up. And I will confess right here that the two questions that Paul addresses in this passage are very fair questions. They are natural follow-up questions that you and I would ask. The first one is, “How does this happen? How does it work? How can someone who has died be raised to new life?”

And the second one is, “What is a resurrected body like? Will I have the same body that I had before? Will I be stronger than I was? Lighter than I was? Will I have the brown hair of my youth or the grey hair of my old age? Will the tooth I chipped when I was ten still be chipped?”

As usual, Paul does not allow himself to be pulled down the rabbit hole on these kinds of details, and for good reason. I just threw out a few questions, but you’ve probably come

---

<sup>1</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:12-14.



up with a few more of your own. In this debate, Paul wasn't facing just one or two rabbit holes... not even a rabbit warren. He was looking at a rabbit metropolis – a virtual maze of thousands of individual questions that we could ask about what really happens when a person who has died is raised to new life. Instead of getting everyone lost down in that maze, Paul offers a single metaphor to help us understand – at least a little better – what resurrection means for us as followers of Christ.

And the metaphor he gives us is a seed. In this mortal life, we are a seed. Our mortal bodies are seeds, and within us right now is a kernel – a beginning – of everything we will become. But we are destined to be so much more than what we are now. Now, yes, we do have life -- but we are just a shell of what we will become.

The singer/songwriter Carrie Newcomer is a deeply spiritual artist. As a product of rural Indiana, some have described her as a “prairie mystic,” which tracks well. In her music, the spiritual depth of her Quaker faith combines with a practical, midwestern appreciation for the earth and all of its people. One my favorite songs she sings is called “Leaves Don't Drop, They Just Let Go” which is about the things we learn in every season of life... from our parents when we are little ... when we leave home for the first time to start a life on our own... when we look back on everything we experience in the extended miracle that our life really is. The song ends with these lyrics:

*I've traveled through my history  
from certainty to mystery.  
God speaks in rhyme and paradox.  
This I know is true.  
And finally when my life is through,  
I'm what I am not what I do,  
'cause it comes down to you and your next breath.  
This I know is true.  
'Cause leaves don't drop they just let go  
and make a space for seeds to grow.  
And every season brings a change  
A tree is what a seed contains  
**To die then live is life's refrain.***

Those final words capture what I think Paul is trying to say to the Corinthians, and what this scripture is trying to say to us. “*To die then live*” – that is the recurring refrain of life. It is the pattern that gives shape not only to the grand arc of our lives, but also to the smaller chapters that combine to make up a life. Your mortal life, Paul says, is like a seed that is sown on the earth. But “*what you sow,*” he continues, “*does not come to life unless it dies.*” There is a sadness to that for sure, but there is also a poetic beauty. And that beauty is what Carrie Newcomer sees. A leaf falling in autumn is not a tragedy. It is a natural letting go. When they fall away, they leave room for something new to spring forth – more seeds, that give rise to even more life. “*To die then live*” – that is life's refrain.

And this growth is a good thing, Paul says. The ability to let something die so that something new may be born – that is what creates space for miracles to happen... for new life to happen. That's how Paul invites us to think about our lives – like seeds that need to fall and die before they can sprout into something even more wonderful. What we are now is perishable, Paul says, but we are going to be raised imperishable. Now, we experience dishonor, but then we will be raised in honor and glory. Right now we are weak, but then

we will be strong. Now we are broken and flawed like Adam, a man comprised of dust who fell in disgrace... but when the new life comes, we will be like Christ, the man of heaven who reigns above. “*What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this,*” Paul concludes. “*Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God... the perishable cannot inherit the imperishable.*” So what is sown in us cannot come to life unless and until it dies. That is the way of the world. That is the refrain of every life.

If we can grasp that, we will begin to see our lives in a new light. The little challenges that frustrate us... the things we kick ourselves for messing up... opportunities we missed or times when we just held on too tight... those moments are reframed, even transformed, into opportunities for us to let go... to let leaves that thrived in their season, but have now run their course, to fall away and make room for new growth.

That’s why the great author, pastor and civil rights leader Howard Thurman called those moments “growing edges.” “Look well to the growing edge,” Thurman wrote. “All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born. The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge.”<sup>2</sup>

If you have your worship bulletin handy, I invite you to take a look at the painting on the cover by Saturnino Herrán. Called “The Offering,” the painting depicts a Mexican family traveling together in a boat on the way to a community celebration of Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the Dead. Every age and stage of life is represented, from an infant in her mother’s arms, to a young girl, a husband and wife in the prime of life, and an older man with age in his beard. The family is surrounded with marigolds, the flower that from early Aztec times has been associated with death and the cherished tradition of *ofrenda*, the annual remembrance of loved ones who have passed on. We can imagine the sweet and powerful fragrance of the flowers, which bloom in autumn and are believed to contain healing and cleansing properties. Their bold colors, which represent the light of the sun that leads all travelers home, make perfect accents for decorating crosses and altars. And although the festival is strongly associated with death, the mood of the coming celebration will be joyful, celebratory, and far from somber. But now, in these peaceful moments before the festival starts, this family – from the youngest to the oldest – are all in a more contemplative mood. And they are literally in the same boat, a reminder that all of us are traveling the same journey through the seasons of life, a journey that will end at the same place and in the same way for all of us.

This peaceful and beautiful painting, like Carrie Newcomer’s poetic song, provide helpful context for understanding Paul’s lesson to the church – the lesson that death and dying is a key part of every life and every faith. As human beings, we all have questions about the end. How does it work, resurrection? What will it be like? How will I be the same? How will I be different? There is so much that we cannot know on this side of heaven.

But the world God has created, and the truth God has already revealed to us, gives us enough – enough to know that what is in store for us is cleansing, healing, and bathed in light and the warm colors of autumn... enough to know that whatever will be already exists

---

<sup>2</sup> Curtis Ogden, “Life (and Power) on the Resilient Edge of Resistance” <https://interactioninstitute.org/life-and-power-on-the-resilient-edge-of-resistance/>, December 27, 2020. To see how Thurman’s ideas have inspired Newcomer, check out her podcast at <https://www.newcomerpalmer.com/home>.

within us... that whatever is perishing in us will be raised imperishable.... that whatever is dishonorable within us will be raised in glory... that whatever is weak in us will be raised in power. And that is enough to give us peace that, in the end, like the leaves of autumn, we can feel safe and secure in letting go, and create a place for new seeds to grow... peace in knowing that this is and always has been life's refrain – learning to die, so that we might live. ***Amen.***