

July 16 – I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body

2 Peter 3:8-10

Today we finish our look at the Apostles' Creed examining: I believe in... *the resurrection of body and the life everlasting*. This part of the creed is asking a seemingly universal question, "What happens to us when we die?" The question doesn't simply ask what happens to our bodies; it asks, whether any part of us continues to live after our bodies have died. Is there something more? Is there an afterlife? To all these questions the Creed answers a definitive yes!

The one thing that all of humanity shares is that we will die. In our death denying culture we often view death as a failure. The doctors failed, medical science failed, the treatment failed and so on. Now I am the first to admit that some deaths are very tragic, but death in and of itself is not a failure. It is a part of life. Even though we know this we are, at times, very good at pretending this isn't our reality. I visit frequently with families after a person has died to find out they have never created a will, talked to their families about what they want or don't want for a memorial service, or anything else. No one had the conversation as if talking about one's dying is going to make it happen! The creed in this statement affirms the fact we die but then moves right on to the bigger question of what happens!

I think it will be helpful here for us to have an understanding of what the people who wrote the creed had concerning death and afterlife. This will help us to understand some of Jesus' parables and will even help us to understand a bit about what the writer of the Book of Revelation was sharing.

After a person dies there was an initial judgement in that the righteous went to Paradise and the unrighteous went to Hades or Tartarus and there was a great gulf separating them. This is so aptly shown in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Both die and Lazarus goes to paradise and nestles into the bosom of Abraham. The rich man is in a place of torment. He can see Lazarus and talk to Abraham, but there is a great chasm between them. Or, think about what Jesus said to the repentant thief. Today you will be with me in paradise. After some time there is a resurrection of all who

had died and a second judgement. At this time you go either to Heaven or to the eternal fires of Hell. We hear this in the stories in Revelation that talk about the second judgement. What is implied, but not stated in most of these theories, is that you get a second chance after you die. You can change your status; there is a get out of Hades card, if you repent. I guess you could fall away as well but why would you? This idea of an interim time before the final judgement finally morphed into the Roman Catholic doctrine of purgatory. When they talked about belief in life everlasting, they were talking about eternal life in paradise and in heaven for those who believe.

Now what does resurrection of the body really mean? I, like Adam Hamilton, am a bit perplexed by this statement. I believe in the resurrection of the soul, that after death we live on. But the resurrection of the body is more challenging to understand. I don't believe that it means the bodies we have will be resurrected. At least I certainly hope not. Now, don't get me wrong. I have enjoyed this body and hope to use it for many more years but it's starting to show its age. I've lost most of my hair, I need to use trifocals to read. I don't quite have the stamina I once had and I don't see it getting any better. And if we have a resurrected body does that mean we get the one we died with or do we get to pick an age that we felt most vibrant? Since our bodies return to dust whether we are buried or cremated, does God have to find all those pieces of dust to resurrect us? Now I understand God is all powerful but, if we have scattered someone's ashes decades ago, that might be a challenging prospect even for God!

Now I realize the writers of the creed do not have all of our advanced scientific understandings about bodies and atoms and nuclei so let's turn to the scriptures to see what they might have been referencing. From Jesus' resurrection stories, we learn that his body had changed. Mary Magdalene, the first to see him, did not recognize him. The two disciples walking to Emmaus thought he was a stranger. When his followers gathered around him before he ascended to heaven some of them did not recognize his appearance. Yes, he had the ability to eat, and there were scars from his crucifixion on his hands and side. He had flesh they could touch. But, he also walked through walls. Paul offers an explanation in his letter to the Corinthians. "A rotting body is put into the ground, but what is raised won't ever decay. It's a physical body when it is put into the

ground, but it is raised as a spiritual body.” Paul says that God does not require what was rotting in the ground to give you a new body, but somehow, your “spiritual body” is connected to that fleshly body. What I love about this idea is that we will not be a disembodied spirit after death but instead we will have a glorious new body by which those who have known us in the past will know us in heaven.

When we talk about life everlasting that makes us ask, “What is heaven like?” Ultimately we don’t know. The only one who has ever been there and come back, Jesus, did not spend any time talking about heaven to the disciples. The Bible uses analogies to help us to understand. Jesus mentioned that it would be a place where judgement would take place. He also talked about it being like a wedding banquet. A wedding banquet was one of the most joyous times in most people’s lives in Jesus’ day. It was three days of feasting and celebration. The Book of Revelation talks about streets of gold and pearly gates. They were trying to convey how wonderful it was.

We all have our ideas about heaven. Different images and symbols are more comforting for us than others. I think about my own father as he was nearing death. One day I asked him if he was afraid to die. He said “no, not afraid, just curious.” When he saw my surprised look he said, “I have been a pastor for 50 years. I had hundreds of funerals and preached about heaven regularly. Now I get to see if I got it right.” For me, the last part of the Book of Revelation is the most comforting image of heaven. It talks about the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. It says there will be no need for the sun or the moon for the glory of God will be its light. That image, of living in the light of God’s glory, sounds like heaven to me. What that means, I trust to the one who loves us.

So this last phrase challenges us to affirm our death as a part of life. We are to live getting ready to die! We should not be afraid of it because we know we will live eternally in a new and glorious body. I am counting on it. I have bet eternity on it.

In closing this series I want to say this. The Apostles’ Creed offers a very short list of things that were considered essential to confess if one were to be baptized as a Christian. Most scholars believe that this was the original intent of this creed. It was an

affirmation one had to give before being baptized. Think about what they saw as being essential. We believe in God, in Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We believe Jesus lived, died and rose again. We believe in a universal church, that forgiveness is possible and that we will find eternal life. That's it. That was what was considered necessary to call oneself a Christian.

Many of the things that various Christians believe today, and are willing to fight over, are not found in the Apostle's Creed, nor in any of the other Creeds that date from the first five centuries of Christianity. Whether it is the proper way to be baptized, or who is the head of the church, or even social issues like the role of women or the GLBT issue, they are not there. Yet today, we are willing to split churches and be nasty to one another in the name of Jesus over issues like this. And, the church has done this from almost the beginning. These creeds were written to help people to know what to believe and, just as importantly, what was not acceptable beliefs, but where there is nothing mentioned, it was left to conscience sake. We need to embrace these creeds and be more open and loving and tolerant of those who disagree.