

Trumpet Lessons
Job 19:23-27, I Corinthians 15:50-58
The First U.P. Church of Crafton Heights
April 2, 2017
Pastor Dave Carver

*If you would like to hear the sermon, you can do so by visiting
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2017/04/sermon04-02-17.mp3>*

I have a confession to make.

For a minister, I don't talk about heaven very much. To be honest, it makes me uncomfortable.

There are a few reasons for that. For starters, I'm really wary of what might be termed a "transactional faith", in which I try to boil the entire message of the scripture to a simple exchange wherein I insist that Jesus came and lived and died and rose again so that I could get my sorry butt into heaven when I die. I know, it doesn't sound that great when I say it like that, but the truth is that's what a lot of us believe and you can visit any Christian bookstore in the world and find volumes and volumes written from that particular perspective. Jesus came to save my soul from the fires of hell. Amen. I think that there has to be more to it than that.

Another reason I don't like to talk about heaven too much is that I find myself agreeing with famed American author Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., who once complained that "some people are so heavenly minded that they are no earthly good." You know people like that – they are so set on getting pie in the sky in the sweet bye and bye that they can't be trusted to do the shopping or clean up from the youth group meeting...

And lastly, I think I don't often bring up heaven because I'm pretty sure that I don't really understand it all that well. Is heaven a real place? What happens to us when we die? Our

bodies decompose and fade away... but what happens to the “us” that is “us”? I mean, you can send out a tweet that makes heaven sound pretty good, but the more you think about it, the more questions we face...



¹When I was a child, there was an old lithograph that hung above the sofa in the living room. We weren't usually allowed to spend much time in that room – it was for the grownups – but I'll always remember this image of “The School of Athens.” In it, we see Plato and his star pupil, Aristotle. Aristotle is gesturing outward, indicating his belief that what truly matters is that which is tangible and can be empirically experienced. Plato, on the other hand, points to the heavens as he indicates that ultimate reality is always and only spiritual – the things that we think we see or experience here on earth are only shadowy forms of something more real or more true in the spiritual realm.

I'm not sure why my mother chose to hang that print there. It may be that there was a give-away at the grocery store and she had a blank spot on the wall. It may be that she had a soft spot for ancient philosophy of which I was unaware. But that image captures what was the dominant western mindset at the time the Bible was written: that to be human means that we possess a body and a soul. When we die, our body rots away, but our soul is freed for eternity. The soul is limited by the reality that the physical body imposes, and once death arrives our soul is finally able to achieve the state for which it was intended.



²For too many Christians, that view has received a quick baptism and has become our dominant belief. We are born into this vale of tears and suffering, and for a while we do our

¹ Detail from *School of Athens*, Raphael (1509-1511)

² *The Soul Hovering Over the Body Reluctantly parting with Life*, William Blake (1813)

best. But eventually, these bodies fail us and our spirits are freed to go to heaven where the troubles of the physical existence will be forgotten.

When we think about humans as having an immortal soul, we get into trouble. For one thing, that diminishes the significance of the bodies we've been given. If there is no value to the human form, then why bother to help those who are suffering through famine or natural disaster? I mean, if this life is so horrible, then why not rejoice when you get to leave it and go straight to heaven? And if this physical existence is not significant, then why should I care about climate change or pollution or the health of the planet?

If my immortal soul is the only thing that matters, then who gives a hoot about what I do with my body or to yours?

But you would say, I hope, that those things do matter. That the ways we interact with each other, the things we do with and to our bodies, and the ways we relate to the cosmos that surrounds us – they all matter.



³That is, I hope, because you've come to embrace the biblical truth that the notion of an immortal soul trapped in a decaying and virtueless body is simply a lie. When the Bible talks about how life came into being, we're told that God scooped up some of the dust – which he'd already made and pronounced as "good" – and breathed into it the breath of life. When the breath of God met the dust of earth, the man was given *nephesh* – a life force. Neither the breath of God nor the dust of the earth is the totality of this experience of true life... our existence is the product of both these things.

³ detail from *Creation of Adam*, Michelangelo (c.1512)

Scripture is pretty clear about the value of our physical selves. Leaf through just about any book of the Bible and you'll find laws about what God's people should or should not eat, or wear, or do with their bodies. More than that, there are expectations as to how we treat each other and animals, too. We are even instructed to care for the earth.

All of this points to a value of the tangible, physical, corporeal self. The truth of scripture is that whatever makes you who you are is some combination of your body, your mind, and your heart.

That is to say, there is not some essential "Daveness" that can be isolated merely from the things that I think or feel. I am a white male human who has taken 56 trips around the sun. I have a lot of hair, high cholesterol, and a body mass index that is way too high according to that scary chart my doctor has hanging in his exam room. All of those things contribute to me knowing who I am. I am not, nor have I ever been, and nor will I ever be a "real" Dave that is tethered to an irrelevant bag of bones that my soul just has to cart around until I die.

The Bible teaches that the creation of all that is, seen and unseen, was beautiful and right and true... until somehow, it was not. That which was perfect became sullied and imperfect; things that were designed for life began to suffer death. But the Creator, not wanting to see the universe so twisted, began to talk of making things right. The means of this making things right is resurrection.

There is a current reality, which you and I are experiencing right now. You are aware of the hardness of your seat, the temperature of this room, and the effectiveness of your morning coffee. When this current reality has run its course, it will be replaced by a new reality that not only contains the essence of that which we know

now, but fully matches the intentions of the Creator. The prophets all talked about the “new heavens and the new earth.”

Job pointed to this in the passage you heard a few moments ago. He was in the midst of pain and alienation and estrangement, and yet declared that somehow, in all of his Job-ness, he would encounter the Divine. He saw his flesh heading to destruction, but he trusted that such was not the end. There would be, in some fashion, a re-making.

Paul, in his letter to the Corinthians, lays out a careful theology of resurrection. In chapter 15, he points to the resurrected Jesus as the indicator of that which is to come in all of creation. Using the analogy of a garden, he compares our current physical selves with seeds that undergo several transformational steps, and yet retain their full integrity at every stage.

For instance, I could show you a seed, a tree, a blossom, a piece of fruit, and a pie. If I were to ask, “What kind is this?”, the answer in every shape and form would be “apple.” The appearance and in fact the cell structure, aroma, sound – all would be different in each of these expressions of that which we call “apple”, but each of these is, undeniably, “apple.”

As a gardener and baker, I seek to be attentive to “apple” in whatever form I find it – treating each iteration of “apple” with attentiveness and respect even as I do what I can to appreciate what it is, what it has been, and what it might become. I can only be faithful with what I have in front of me at the moment and seek to create a future in which that which is now only potential might, in fact, be realized.

You and I, along with the entire created order, are, I believe, headed toward a reality in which beauty, grace,

integrity, love, relationship, truth, worship, and God are all central. Those are things that matter forever. Our task, therefore, at this particular juncture of space and time, is to be attentive to those things in such a way that prepares us to experience eternal reality. We are called to practice those things in whatever way we can right now even while we wait for a fuller and richer understanding and experience of them in the future that God has prepared.



Listen: when I was in high school, I was hired to teach a young man named Billy how to play the trombone. Each week, I was given \$7 to sit next to him on the piano bench in his living room. I showed him the positions of the slide, talked with him about his embouchure, and noted the importance of emptying the spit valve in appropriate places. I was a fair trombonist at the time, and the band in which I played won some renown.

That was forty years ago. I don't know where to find my trombone these days, but I'm sure it's dusty and unused. I'm not sure I could spell embouchure to save my life. Yet if you were to Google my former student, you'd find that he's a professional trombonist who has performed in many, many venues and led great musical ensembles.

Why?

Because he did what I stopped doing: he practiced. In 1977, I was a waaaaaaay better trombonist than Billy was. And yet today, he's wearing tuxedos and blowing his horn in ways that he would not have believed then and I can only dream about now. Because he practiced.

“The trombone will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.” (I Cor. 15:53) I know,

your translations say “trumpet”, but I’m convinced that there’s been an error in the Greek manuscripts...

The resurrection of the dead is not just some amazingly complicated mystery that preachers fall all over themselves to explain. It is where we are headed. And since it’s our future, I’d suggest that we practice resurrection living right now.

I know... we’re not very good at it all the time. We fail, and we try again. We fall, and we get back up. We sleep, and we are jolted awake. We suffer, and we look toward healing. Each of these is a mini-resurrection that is in some way preparing us for that which is to come.

In his amazingly profound book *Practice Resurrection*, Eugene Peterson writes,

Church is an appointed gathering of named people in particular places who practice a life of resurrection in a world in which death gets the biggest headlines: death of nations, death of civilization, death of marriage, death of careers, obituaries without end. Death by war, death by murder, death by accident, death by starvation. Death by electric chair, lethal injection, and hanging. The practice of resurrection is an intentional, deliberate decision to believe and participate in resurrection *life*, life out of death, life that trumps death, life that is the last word, Jesus life. This practice is not a vague wish upwards but comprises a number of discrete but interlocking acts that maintain a credible and faithful way of life, Real Life, in a world preoccupied with death and the devil.⁴

We are God’s people, called to practice God’s way of resurrection life. We do this all in the context of the

⁴ *Practice Resurrection: A Conversation on Growing Up In Christ* (Eerdman’s, 2010), p. 12

relationships we have, using the bodies we've been given in the knowledge that one day our understanding and experience and our selves will be complete.

How does it work? I'm not sure, exactly.

But I want to keep practicing. Thanks be to God.
Amen.