



Roanoke, Virginia

April 18, 2021

“Immortality”

I Corinthians 15:1-11

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This is the third Sunday of Easter. We continue to reflect on the meaning of the resurrection. I want today to consider *immortality*. Is that what we celebrate in the resurrection, the gift of one’s own immortality?

When the question is asked that way—
when the hope is that somehow, I, as an individual,
might have life after death—
when the spotlight of the resurrection shines on me—
I think the simple biblical answer is, “No.”

That is Paul’s answer. The entire 15th chapter of First Corinthians is his reflection on what it means that Christ has been raised, and what it means to be raised with him. As you listen to his words, listen for what will neither whither nor fade: The Word of God which lasts forever.

Now I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, which you in turn received, in which also you stand, ² through which also you are being saved, if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you—unless you have come to believe in vain.

³ For I handed on to you as of first importance what I in turn had received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, ⁴ and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers and sisters at one time, most of



whom are still alive, though some have died. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me. ¹¹ Whether then it was I or they, so we proclaim and so you have come to believe.

“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of our God will stand forever.”

Evonne Plebuch moved away, and I miss her. Evonne was endlessly fascinating.

- She had an early career as a fashion model.
- As with Helen Fitzpatrick, Evonne was easy to spot in worship because of the stylish hats she wore.
- In her home was a piano that once belonged, I think, to Little Richard.
- And she is married to a top physicist who works for NASA, Dick Plebuch.

It is because of that NASA connection that I mention Evonne. Her physicist husband collects articles and papers by scientists who are Christian believers. She shared with me a file containing copies of some of his favorites.

One is by Jim Odom. He was chief of engineering and testing for NASA’s Saturn V program. He wrote a paper called, “A Layman’s Perception of Science and Christianity.” He thinks it is ridiculous to think that “knowing” and “believing” are incompatible. To him, it is clear that each informs the other.

Another is by Stephen M. Barr, a professor emeritus of physics at the University of Delaware. His paper, “Retelling the Story of Science,” ends with the line, “[The search for truth always leads us, in the end, back to God.](#)”

And then there was a published article and an unpublished paper by Wernher von Braun. His name may not ring a good bell for some of you history buffs. Before becoming a NASA scientist, von Braun developed rockets for the German war effort. Though he saw Hitler as—using his words—

- “[a pompous fool with a Charlie Chaplain moustache,](#)”
- a tyrant who thought he was “[another Napoleon](#)” but was “[wholly without scruples,](#)”
- [a godless man who thought himself the only god,](#)”

von Braun still was an enthusiastic Nazi because he saw Germany flourishing economically under totalitarianism. He could excuse everything that was awful about Hitler as long as Germany grew stronger and the economy flourished. He bought into the idea that any means can be justified if it serves Germany’s ends. In the war effort, he both endorsed and employed the use of slave labor.

I think you get a good enough picture of how morally corrupt he was, but I’ll add that he used his high position, influence and income to help him begin many extra-marital affairs.

So why would I quote *this* guy?



Well, after the war von Braun became ashamed of his support of the Nazi cause. Along with other German scientists, he moved to Texas and began working for NASA. A day came when a neighbor in Fort Bliss invited him to church. “I accepted,” von Braun said, “because I wanted to see if the American church was just a country club as I’d been led to expect. Instead, I found a small, white frame building... in the hot Texas sun on a browned-grass lot. ...Together, these people make a live, vibrant community. This was the first time I really understood that religion was not a cathedral inherited from the past, or a quick prayer at the last minute.”

Simply put, von Braun had a *conversion experience*, and he grew more and more devout as his life went on.

The paper he never published but shared with Dick Plebuch is titled, “The Bible in the Space Age.” In it, he explains why he gets as excited by biblical revelations as he does by scientific ones, asserting that reality that is viewed only with the lens of a scientist, *or* only with the lens of a believer, is a distorted view.

His published piece has the same title as my sermon: “Immortality.” As a scientist who once served an egomaniac who craved to be glorified with horrific results, von Braun was troubled by the idea of an individual wishing to be immortal on his or her own...

...which is not to say he did not believe in immortality. As a physicist, he knew that nothing is ever lost in nature. He said, “Science has found that nothing can disappear without a trace. Nature does not know extinction. All it knows is transformation.” Even a nuclear explosion, which destroys all life in its radius, simply transforms matter into energy. Nothing is lost.

That is his view as a scientist. Even physicists who are atheists or agnostic would agree. Nothing is ever lost in the universe.

Remember, though, that von Braun was convinced that only having the view of a scientist is to have a distorted view. For him, simple immortality is a cold and amoral idea that can lead one to serve even a tyrant as long as it serves one’s selfish desires.

As a Christian, von Braun asked himself why his conversation mattered ultimately. Can that elegant vision of God’s love and our redemption be destroyed?

Can the life-enriching truths of the Gospel—

The truth of justice with mercy,

The truth of the grace of reconciliation—

can those truths ever end

even if human history were to end,

even if this world were ever sucked back into some black hole?

Can human souls ever be lost?

von Braun decided it can’t be so. Sure, these are spiritual truths and not material ones; the sort that can be studied and possibly proven to be true by scientists. Still, he can’t believe that the truth that claimed his mind and heart in Texas could ever stop being true. Nothing in God’s realm can ever be lost.



In fact, that is the only reason that von Braun as a Christian could find joy in eternity. It was a cold and uncomfoting thought for him to live eternally if love and grace were not at the heart of what it means to live.

It is the difference between a “So What?” life and a “For What?” Life.

Live eternally?

So what?

Live eternally with Christ?

Well, that means living with purpose and meaning,
living for what Christ lived for: God’s love.

von Braun sharpens his point when he says it is because of our belief in immortality that we live ethical lives. Christ’s kindness, compassion, mercy and forgiveness matter in this life *because they matter eternally*.

This is Paul’s vision in chapter 15 of I Corinthians, of which our passage is the introduction. If Paul were to hear what some Christians say today about being saved, I think he might slap his forehead. Anyone who might suggest to him that the goal of faith is simply to be rescued at death better settle in for a lecture. “No,” Paul would say. The *bodily* resurrection reveals in this material world what is eternally true about God. To be in relationship with the eternal God is to be about what Jesus is about in his life. So, it matters how we treat the earth, it matters how we treat others, it matters if we work for justice and reconciliation because from the evidence of Jesus’ life, it clearly matters to God.

Paul saw Corinthians “spiritualizing” the resurrection, divorcing it from the ethics of life. He talks about giving his all for the sake of the Gospel, not to brag, but because that is the only logical way he knows to live as someone who is raised with Christ. He will live in Christ, and even die in Christ, because whether he lives or dies, what is of Christ cannot be killed. The love and goodness of God will never end.

The *Mission Build Campaign* is a good, concrete way to think about what Paul and von Braun were trying to tell us. Our congregation is challenged to be a leader in helping four mission partners accomplish something that will be transformative for years—and possibly generations—to come.

If the projects are successfully completed, we certainly want them to last. Years. Many years. A century or more would be great.

The odds are stacked in our favor. After all, we are adding strength to strength.

- The PCC keeps getting stronger and more effective,
- the seminary has been around for 200 years,
- our congregation isn’t going anywhere nor is our commitment to missions,
- and the Dominican hospital being built will probably only grow in the coming years.



But we know that longevity is not eternity. There may come a day within our lifetimes when one of these projects we help build ceases to be. And, as the Bible told us and physicists remind us, if we look far enough ahead, human history will one day end.

But the virtues that the projects are to serve—
the kindness, compassion, selflessness—
the healing of lives and community—

those virtues are eternal. And that is why we build these lasting but temporary things. Because we mortals who die are raised with Christ, and in showing God's love through moral and ethical witness, we are living as those who are raised with Christ. That's how mortals live into immortality. To use Paul's words again, whether we live or die, we live in Christ. We live in God's love, which is eternal, and from which nothing can separate us.

