

Natalie W. Bell
 February 2, 2025
 Black History Month

People of Hope
1 Corinthians 15:19-20, 50-58

¹⁹ ***If for this life only*** we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.²⁰ ***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died.***

⁵⁰ ***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.*** ⁵¹ ***Look, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die,***^[1] ***but we will all be changed,*** ⁵² ***in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.*** ⁵³ ***For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality.*** ⁵⁴ ***When this perishable body puts on imperishability and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:***

“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

⁵⁵ ***“Where, O death, is your victory?***

Where, O death, is your sting?”

⁵⁶ ***The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.*** ⁵⁷ ***But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.***

⁵⁸ ***Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.***

As a pastor and chaplain, ***I’ve been around death and dying—a lot.***

And it’s incredibly ***sacred.***

Especially because I have the opportunity to remind people of the ***resurrection.***

As Christians, we have this treasure—

a living God, who promises us new life here, AND after death.

We believe in the ***resurrection,***

and that belief can give ***HOPE*** to our lives ***today.***

When Paul was ***writing to the Corinthians,*** they were a divided church,

And, ***some of them did not believe*** in the ***resurrection.***

Some believed in it, but ***not of the BODY.***

In the Greco-Roman world, including Corinth,
 the idea of an afterlife was the *SEPARATION of the soul from the body*.
 Many people have this *same idea today*.
 But as Christians we believe in the *resurrection of the BODY*.
 This is what we affirm in the *Apostle's Creed*.

Have you thought about *YOUR belief*?
 What do you think of when you think of *resurrection*?

And why a BODILY resurrection?

Well, it's from the early believers' accounts of seeing the *resurrected Jesus*,
not as a ghost, but as a human with a body,
 They saw him walking, talking, even eating with them in Emmaus,
 and on the beach! (in Luke 24 and John 21).
 Jesus was there in the flesh—with a *new body*.

This part about being made *new, whole, and complete* is important,
 because this is what we believe about *humanity, AND all of creation*.
 Paul reminds us in *Romans 8* that all creation groans for redemption and new life.
 And in *Revelation 21*, we hear about a new heaven and earth—
 not just a spiritual world of disembodied souls.

Methodist Pastor Adam Hamilton, in his book *Unafraid*,
 compares the resurrection to *getting a new cell phone ...*
 Adam Hamilton, *Unafraid*, pg. 212.

Today, smartphones are almost always *backed up in 'the cloud'*.
 So when you get a new physical phone,
 it *populates with 'YOU'*—all your personal data—in that new phone.

This is like our belief in a bodily resurrection.
 We will one day receive a *whole, new, perfect body*.

This promise can bring hope to us—like when a *child* dies,
 Or someone dies after a long illness, or suicide,
 Because we believe they will be given a *brand NEW body*.

Jesus wants us to have hope in the resurrection--
To know that our loved ones are at peace, no longer suffering, hurting, or afraid.
 This is what we believe, and I think it's hopeful, isn't it?

This idea of resurrection is *central* to all of the Gospels.
Theologian John S. Whale said that “the Gospels don’t explain the resurrection;
the resurrection explains the Gospels.”

It’s true—without the resurrection of Jesus,
most of the writings of the New Testament would *not exist!*

And the resurrection is the foundation of our hope today.

C.S. Lewis used to say that he believed in the resurrection
the same way he believed in the *sun*,
“*not only because I can see it, but because **BY IT**, I see everything else*”.

That’s us.

Resurrection helps us understand our Christian faith!
It’s gives us HOPE.

So I wonder, how does it bring YOU HOPE?

So many of our *fears today* are about *what might happen to us*, right?
But ultimately, nothing that happens to us is the end of our story!

We *do not need to fear anything*—because Jesus has already won the battle.
Even if we die, we will live.

This is what Jesus said in John 11: *I am the resurrection and the life.*
Those who believe in me, though they die, yet shall they live.

I was talking to a colleague in ministry this week—and we talked
about the *difference*
between optimism and hope for Christians.

My friend mentioned writer Margaret Wheatley, who writes about this.
Wheatley says that
Optimism is seeing the glass **half full** vs. half empty.

But then she asks: *What a nonsensical question this is!*
Is the glass half full or half empty? Who cares?!
The right questions is:
Who needs the water and how can we get it to them?
What is the work that needs doing,
and how can I contribute to making it happen?

<https://margaretwheatley.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Are-you-an-optimist-or-a-pessimist.pdf>

I love that—that’s *our hope---*
Not a glass half full,
 But, hey--that glass has water—*who needs it, and how can we get it to them?*

A lot of secular people talk about optimism and hope as well—
 And many say that
 Optimism is having *good thoughts* about the future.
 But hope is *putting ACTION to those good thoughts.*

Isn’t that so *true for us as Christians?*
 It’s not enough to think good thoughts and be ‘optimistic’!
 We need to put our *faith into ACTION---which gives us real hope!*

Think about it this way.
Our bodies are sacred—now and forever.
 Believing in the resurrection of our bodies,
 Helps us see the power of using *our bodies TODAY for good.*

Resurrection is a foundation for *social JUSTICE.*
 Because we have an *incarnational faith—*
 We believe that Jesus came in the flesh, AKA the Incarnation,
 So we live in the flesh to do God’s work in this world--
 To work for *justice, even as we believe justice will come when Jesus returns.*

Shawnthea Monroe wrote in *Christian Century*: *Every day I see people putting their Christian faith into action, sometimes at great personal risk. They deliver meals in dangerous neighborhoods. They visit people convicted of violent crimes. They march in protest and dare to declare that black lives matter. For their sakes, I hold fast to the bodily resurrection.*

As Tom Long writes, “A Christ whose resurrection occurs only in our MINDS has no right to call us to put our BODIES on the line for justice.”

Shawnthea Monroe, Lectionary Commentary, *The Christian Century*, March 10, 2016

Belief in the physical resurrection gives *hope and meaning to social justice.*
 What does this mean *to YOU?*
 Could it be *transformative* for your life, today?

It was life-changing for *enslaved people in America.*
 In fact, the early African-American *spirituals* sung by slaves
 often depicted the *hope of the resurrection.*

The spirituals were songs of deliverance, hope, and endurance. When they spoke about freedom, it was also about resurrection!

Many Christian slave owners didn't want to hear African music, but if the songs *were 'Christian' they welcomed* the slaves singing. Most slave owners had no idea the deep meaning of these songs, and some said, well, *if the slaves are singing, they must be happy!*

In reality, they were singing their sorrow, mixed with hope. *Spirituals started out in small groups* of slaves, but they grew to be a force in the larger *fight for freedom*.

The spirituals helped them to *share sorrow*, and it gave them *hope to endure the horror of slavery*. These songs *encouraged* people to keep the faith. And it gave them the *hope of freedom*—literally, and in their hearts.

Slaves also used spirituals *to communicate, in coded language* to pass information from row to row, or from one plantation to another. Coded spirituals were used to pass covert messages, and facilitate the *escape of slaves along the Underground Railroad*.

Harriet Tubman and “Peg Leg Joe,” two of the most notable “conductors,” relied on coded spirituals to *encourage and direct slaves* to the North.

John Ponomarenko, “Coded Slave Songs,” *The Soul Review*

<http://www.localdial.com/users/jsyedu133/Soulreview/Understandingpages/coded.htm>.

These songs—their *hope, and talk of resurrection*, helped slaves deal with the *constant threat of death*. Something that sadly *still exists TODAY*, *for so many of our black brothers and sisters*.

Kaitlyn Greenidge wrote “*Black Spirituals as Poetry and Resistance*”. As she researched this music, she spoke to many older blacks in Brooklyn who had moved up from the South.

She learned that talking about death is sacred. You do not *ask when someone DIED*.

Instead you ask when someone *passed away, or passed over, or went to their homecoming.*

Talking about death in that way is *more PERSONAL than just saying 'died', in a society that doesn't take the death of black people personally enough.*

Greenidge writes that spirituals were *both poetry and resistance songs*, and they often answered profound questions about life, death, and freedom.

These beautiful songs were a combination of *West African and American Christian music*, and this music led to blues, jazz, gospel and R&B, rock-and-roll and hip-hop!

Kaitlyn Greenidge, *Black Spirituals as Poetry and Resistance*, nytimes.com, March 5, 2021.

Howard Thurman in 1945 wrote

"Deep River: An Interpretation of Negro Spirituals".

He asserted that the songs were sung about death, to recognize that God is more powerful than white supremacy and slavery, and there is a *world beyond* this one.

Right after Emancipation, some *black colleges like Fisk University* in Nashville, sent singers around America and Europe, singing these spirituals.

One singer wrote how hard it was—knowing the history of these songs.

They were hesitant to sing them for white audiences at first.

But as they sang, they realized the *profound beauty and power* in them for us all.

Kaitlyn Greenidge, *Black Spirituals as Poetry and Resistance*, nytimes.com, March 5, 2021

In fact, *Fisk University Singers* often sang one of the spirituals we all know so well: *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*.

The song is attributed to an *enslaved man in Oklahoma named Wallace Willis*, Wallace was eventually given freedom and citizenship by the Choctaw tribe, after the Civil War.

He may have been inspired to write about the Jordan River, As he saw the Red River in Oklahoma.

Some have said that when he sang, "I looked over Jordan", he was talking about slaves trying to move north, to a station of the Underground Railroad in Ripley, Ohio.

His song describes a man welcomed to heaven, just like the prophet Elijah, who was taken to heaven in a chariot of fire, in 2 Kings 2.

*Willis apparently was overheard
singing this song at his workplace, The Spencer Academy.*
Headmaster Rev. Alexander Reid heard it,
and immediately sent the song to Fisk University, to be sung by their choir.

We don't know the exact date of the song,
but we do know that W.E.B. DuBois cited this song in his book,
The Souls of Black Folk (which was published in 1909).

*So today, as we think about the resurrection of the body,
And the resurrection of Jesus,*
We remember the **HOPE** that brings—to all of us,
Especially those who are struggling, and those who are facing death.

And we remember that *resurrection is not just some optimistic idea---*
It's looking at that glass half full of water, and saying—
That glass has water! Who needs it, and how can we get it to them?
That's REAL HOPE—when our beliefs lead to faith in action!

Friends, hear the *Good News of the Gospel:*
Because of Jesus Christ, we are people of HOPE!
And our hope is based on the resurrection,
Death is not the end, *trials and troubles* are not the end—Alleluia!
And one day, God will make all of us, and all of creation, new.
And for the gift of resurrection, all God's people can say together, Amen.