

Scripture Readings: I Corinthians 15: 12-50 selected vv.

<sup>12</sup>Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead? <sup>13</sup>If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised;... <sup>17</sup>If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. <sup>18</sup>Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. <sup>19</sup>If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. <sup>20</sup>But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. <sup>21</sup>For...as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ....

<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>39</sup>Not all flesh is alike, but there is one flesh for human beings, another for animals, another for birds, and another for fish. <sup>40</sup>There are both heavenly bodies and earthly bodies, but the glory of the heavenly is one thing, and that of the earthly is another. <sup>42</sup>...What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. <sup>43</sup>It is sown in dishonour, 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>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.

Matthew 10:5-42 selected vv.

<sup>10.5</sup>[Then] Jesus sent out [the twelve] with the following instructions: <sup>7</sup>...Go, proclaim the good news, 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.' <sup>8</sup>Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.... <sup>16</sup>"See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves...." <sup>28</sup>Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.... <sup>39</sup>Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. <sup>40</sup>"Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever

“A burning question”

Preached By: Rev. Karla Wubbenhorst on July 13, 2008

welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me....—truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.”

### Sermon Text:



“Cremated, eh? Well, just try not to get all over everything.”

I wonder if it’s a reflection on the average age of this congregation that of the 12 topics you wanted me to preach on this summer, 2 of them have to do with death. They are somewhat different topics since the one has to do with what happens here, to our mortal remains – how we should dispose of them. And the other deals with what happens, in the spiritual realm, to our souls, after we die. Some Christians think there is a connection. In other words that it damages the chances of your soul going to heaven, if the wrong choice is made about the disposal of your

body, and I want to say right away that I am not one of those Christians. The teaching of Scripture is clear, that the only thing which affects our personal destiny after this life, is whether we have believed the gospel, and entrusted ourselves fully to our faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.

I was approached a couple weeks ago by one of our members who said that the issue had come up for discussion in her apartment building. There were those there who were strongly opposed to cremation, on the grounds of Christian conviction. And this dear lady was troubled to the point of saying to me jokingly, (but I think also somewhat earnestly): “I sure hope I don’t die before July 13<sup>th</sup> when you’re going to preach on cremation! My arrangements are all made, and I was planning to be cremated, but now I’m having second thoughts. It would be awful to have lived my whole life as a Christian, and then to lose my reward, just

because of what’s done with my body.” If any of you have that concern about yourselves, or about loved ones who have been cremated already, I would say to be at peace. God doesn’t bar the way to paradise, or deny the gift of resurrection, because of such a technicality.

On the other hand, while it may be a *technicality*, as far as getting into heaven is concerned, what we choose to do, to mark the end of our life, including the handling of our final remains, is not a *triviality*. I believe it is important that Christians give thought to these things, and try to achieve as fitting a rite as possible, given our Christian faith and our hope of resurrection.

Let me first give you a bit of history about cremation which will hopefully make some sense of the Christian bias against it. And it’s true that Christianity has been biased against cremation from its earliest days. It inherited this feeling from Judaism, which in distinction from the cultures around it, always buried its dead, or as the bible says laid them to “rest with their fathers” Orthodox Judaism continues to forbid cremation, as does Islam. Not all Jews believe in the resurrection of the dead – not today and not in the time of Jesus, when this was the great issue that divided the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Where it did develop within Judaism, resurrection of the dead was a relatively recent idea, so it was not any connection between burial and resurrection which lead the early patriarchs to seek burial, (as, for example, Abraham did for Sarah). Rather I think it had to do with respect for the body, and with achieving a kind of full circle in which man, having been first formed by God from the dust of the earth, returns to God, by being returned to the earth and eventually biodegrading into dust.

It’s worth noting that the goal of burial in the Jewish and early Christian traditions was not to preserve the body, but to aid its natural decomposition. Often a limestone sarcophagus was used. The word sarcophagus literally means “flesh-eating” because the limestone was thought to hasten dissolution. This is in sharp contrast to the burial customs of ancient Egypt, which the Jews would have known well. These involved embalming, and

mummification, and were, pretty clearly, aimed at preserving the corpse for as long as possible. Our modern funeral industry is more influenced by Egypt than by the ancient Jewish and Christian tradition in these matters, with its promotion of the bizarre ritual of embalming, and its line of “premium” caskets, designed to remain impenetrable in the ground for centuries.

The context in which the Christian church originally contended for burial versus cremation was the context of ancient Rome. In the Christian belief system destruction by fire was never a good thing. The idolatrous golden calf was destroyed by fire (Exodus 32.20), the converts in Ephesus destroyed their books of sorcery by fire (Acts 19.19). Like being sentenced to hang on a tree, the person whose body was destroyed by fire was seen to have suffered a curse or a punishment – this was something done to one, not by one’s loved ones, but by one’s enemies (Joshua 7: 15-25; I Corinthians 13.3). Later in Christian history the flames were reserved for witches, heretics and apostates: wicked people, in other words. The idea was that the earthly fire foreshadowed the eternal flames which would punish the wicked in hell. The feeling of the Romans toward fire, however, was quite different. The two most prevalent religions in ancient Rome were stoicism and epicureanism. The epicureans had no view of the afterlife, so for them fire was just a convenient means of disposal. Stoics had a very positive view of fire. Their view of the afterlife was that individual souls, which each carried a divine spark, would be reabsorbed at death into the great eternal fire. So you can see how fitting cremation would be, if *that* were your belief system.

Although the Romans were religious people, they were ultimately afraid of death. They were superstitious about ghosts. They would not go anywhere near the catacombs where those who were buried reposed. This is what made the catacombs such a safe hide-out for persecuted Christians. One of the greatest things early Christianity had going for it, was this ability to triumph over the fear of death. The Christian martyrs faced horrific deaths cheerfully because of their supreme confidence in the resurrection.

And so in ancient Rome the lines because firmly drawn between Christians with their joyful funerals and their preference for burial, and the Romans with their fear of death, their hysterical mourning and their preference for cremation.

The Roman Catholic church, coming out of this context, has always felt negatively about cremation, but in 1886 actually made it against the rules, for a Catholic in good standing (“The bodies of the faithful must be buried; their cremation is forbidden (Canon 1203: 1) And “anyone who has requested that his body should be cremated shall be deprived of ecclesiastical burial unless he has shown signs of repentance before death” (Canon 1240:1). In 1963 it relaxed this rule (*Piam et Constantem*) and in 1985 it granted permission for cremation, given a number of circumstances. The circumstances are such that they can be stretched and made to apply to almost anyone. (“The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching.” (The Code of Canon Law, 1985, #1176.3) While the Church still prefers burial or entombment, after the manner of Christ's own burial, out of respect for the human body and belief in the Resurrection, cremation may be chosen for “sufficient reason.” Eg. Cremation may be requested for hygienic, economic or other reasons of a public or private nature. Some examples would be: transfer of the remains to a distant place, possible avoidance of considerable expense, national tradition or custom, a severe psychological or pathological fear of burial in the ground or a tomb). Only last year did cremation become legal in Greece, (although they’ve yet to build a crematorium) and the Greek Orthodox church continues to oppose it, denying funeral rites to anyone who has been cremated (viz.

<http://deviousdiva.com/2007/02/27/cremation-issues/>).

Protestantism, arising out of Catholicism, kept the preference for burial, so that *in all lands where Christianity prevailed, burial predominated.*

This is in fact the strongest argument that is advanced by those today wishing to dissuade their fellow Christians from cremation. They say that burial is a *witness* to our belief about resurrection, not that cremation will *prevent* resurrection. They say that it is a Christian *identity marker*. Certainly burial marked off the Christians from the pagans in ancient Rome, and since about the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to about the 1970s it marked off the Christians from the unbelieving in our society, who considered death to be the end, and cremation to be a cheap and efficient means of disposal. Since the 1970s and especially since the mid 1980s when the Catholic church removed its strictures, cremation has entered the church in a big way. Today in Ontario 47% of people who die are cremated (according to 2005 statistics quoted by David W. Cloud in his online article against cremation <http://www.wayoflife.org/fbns/cremation.htm>), and that percentage probably holds true in our churches no less than in our society at large. I would say it holds true in my experience.

So have Christians lost an important identity marker – one of the things that distinguishes us from non-believers and testifies to our belief about resurrection? Let’s think about that for a minute....How, in our day and age *is* or *should* a *Christian’s* approach to final arrangements differ from a person’s approach who does not share our beliefs and our great hope? Maybe like in ancient Rome, the **Christians ought to become known for their joyful, worshipful funerals**. Personally I believe that for a Christian, a funeral *in the church* sends the clearest message that that service, like any other that takes place here, is primarily an act of worship to the Lord of Resurrection. Today when I do a funeral and explain to the family that my service will be primarily an *act of worship*, because as a Christian minister my business is *leading worship*, not being a kind of professional MC, they look at me strangely. This is because the funeral home has said nothing to them about *worship*; it has told them that what they are doing is “celebrating their loved one’s life,” creating “an honouring act of remembrance.”

I have the greatest of respect for the funeral directors in this town and enjoy working with them one and all, but one has to remember that their perspective is not a religious one, they are in business, they are selling a service, and the ethics of business demand that they give satisfaction to the customer. You'll notice that in a funeral home chapel these days, hardly ever do you see a cross, that's because a funeral director, by his code of ethics, has to be a Christian for the Christians, a Jew for the Jews, a Hindu for the Hindus and a secularist for the secularists. Funeral directors cannot express a principled preference for cremation or for burial: whatever the customer wants, that is what they do. Because the funeral home is officially belief-neutral, the easiest thing for them to do is to reinterpret the funeral as something which is less a witness to belief, and more a tribute to the deceased person's life and tastes.

Occasionally you run across tastes and aspects of a person's life which run counter to anything you would want to be witnessing to, as a Christian officiant. Suppose a deceased person's favourite song was “Sexual Healing” by Marvin Gaye, does that mean that it's appropriate to play it at their funeral? The Catholic church has recently taken the drastic step of banning eulogies. I personally have not had such bad experiences with eulogies but I have sometimes felt that I'm working very hard to witness to the resurrection while the person giving the eulogy is working very hard to undo everything I've just said. They will give witness to some sentimental new age doctrine of the afterlife, or celebrate those very aspects of a person's life and character which the church would have to call their sin.

The funeral industry today is dominated by subjectivity – so I think one of the best witnesses a Christian can give – one of the best Christian identity-markers within our modern climate – is to the objective aspects of our belief around death. In our traditional hymns, and where funeral preaching is truly allowed to be a sermon and not merely a eulogy, there is a witness to Christ's

death for our salvation, Christ’s resurrection, and so too, our hope of a resurrection, which is tied to his.

Secondly I think **Christians today witness to their belief about resurrection by rejecting** what I’ve heard one of our local funeral directors refer to as “**the vanity cult**” -- this, well, *vain* concern that some people have get the biggest monument and most exclusive casket. Do you know they sell caskets with interior lighting? Surely in the face of such nonsense, any Christian is justly entitled to shake their head and ask “why?” Do they expect you’ll be doing a little light reading down there? There is a classic episode of *All in the Family* called “the Saga of Cousin Oscar” (1971), in which Archie Bunker’s cousin Oscar comes to visit. Archie doesn’t like his cousin very much who in childhood was a bit of a bully and who has matured into a nightmare houseguest, a real sponger. When Oscar dies suddenly during his visit with Archie and Edith, Archie is stuck with the funeral arrangements and the bill! Unfortunately the funeral director sees him coming. Archie is a bit guilty about never having liked his cousin, so it is easy for an accomplished salesman to play on that guilt and convince him to make posthumous amends by buying cousin Oscar the best casket and the platinum funeral package. If Archie had a better faith grounding, he could have resisted that kind of salesmanship, because he would have known that we honour people best by the way we treat them in life, not in death. He would have known that wherever cousin Oscar was, he was certainly not in the box!! (however well lit and comfortably cushioned). Should a Christian be cremated? Why does no one make an issue of the type of monuments Christians choose, or the type of casket, or whether they are embalmed?

Perhaps one of the best identifying marks of a Christian funeral in these days of vanity is its *simplicity*. And honestly, that is one of the strongest things cremation has going for it. Whereas traditional funerals begin at around \$3000 and generally come out closer to \$7 or \$8 thousand, immediate cremation can be done for under a thousand (source:



<http://www.funeralplan.com/askexperts/funeralcost.html>). That is a difference to make the Presbyterian heart sing, but Christians, even Presbyterians, should not be known as people who make decisions only on the basis of cost either, but in an age of extravagance, perhaps it is a very *good* witness when we spend little on the body, which is no longer “where the action is” so to speak, and turn our thoughts more to the heavenly realms where we believe the souls of the faithful continue their life. Christ says in the gospel “do not fear those who can harm the body but not the soul. Fear rather him who can destroy both the body and the soul in hell” (Matthew 10.28). He is telling us not to put our emphasis in the wrong place. Not to worry so much about the body, which, as Paul says, is destined for “perishability” anyway (I Cor. 15.40, 42, 50), and to worry more about things like how we live here and now, and the state of our immortal souls.

John Calvin, the principle theologian for us Presbyterians, writes on the resurrection of the dead in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and as far as I can tell, the statement in the Westminster Confession (which we’ll read later in the service as our affirmation of faith) and in all the Reformed Catechisms, take their cues from him. Calvin didn’t believe that we get a newly created body in the resurrection, perhaps created according to the same blueprint as the first, as some in his day thought. He believed that God raised up our *self-same* body, redeemed from decomposition and made glorious, though he freely admits that how God can do this when thousands of years have passed and we are fully degraded into atoms is too much of a miracle even to bear thinking about (Inst. 3.25.3-4). Calvin speaks favourably of burial, though he does not think fire or any other thing which has the power to destroy, can destroy us so completely that God cannot raise us up. This is what he says: “*The corruptible body, therefore, in order that we may be raised, will not perish or vanish away, but, divested of corruption, will be clothed with incorruption. Since God has all the elements at his disposal, no difficulty can prevent*

*him from commanding the earth, the fire, and the water, to give up what they seem to have destroyed” (Inst. 3.25.8).*

If you want to know what I personally will do -- I who have lived my whole life by the symbols and stories of the church, and am more content in that world of story and of symbol than in a world of philosophy or science or stark, economic practicality -- I wish to be buried. The symbolism of it makes sense to me. I would choose cardboard or cloth if I had the option. I want a funeral service in a church with all the joyous hymns about resurrection and the communion of the saints, and perhaps Glen Soderholm’s very moving modern piece of Christian music called “Wedding Day” (listen to a free sample of it or download it for 87 cents at <http://bitmunk.com/media/6827098>). If Glen’s still around then maybe he can even be persuaded to sing it. I want a sound Christian preacher who believes it all: the empty tomb, the bodily resurrection, the last judgement, heaven and hell, and who will read I Corinthians 15 at my graveside. I want a simple monument, flush with the earth about 12 inches square which says “Karla Wubbenhorst 1973 to whenever, and the epitaph “Jesus slept here.” As I won’t have any family, I shall probably have to involve a funeral director, but for those with family, I don’t think that should by any means be a given. I have always rather liked the funerals I witnessed in Orkney where the members of the deceased’s family frequently washed the body, and dug and filled in the grave themselves. Quite apart from what you might think, a little hands-on involvement with the rituals of death can be quite therapeutic as opposed to our sanitized customs where we pass the bodies of our loved ones into the hands of strangers. For me this would be the ideal. The ideal for you will depend very much on your tastes and circumstances. Perhaps the ideal for you is cremation. But whatever you do, may it reflect your faith as a Christian. May it be simple and hopeful and above all joyous, because truly “we do not grieve as people who have no hope, but as those whose Saviour has pioneered for them the way from death through life to life eternal.”