

Essentials - Kirsten Anonby

Future | 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, 12-26 | June 27, 2021

INTRODUCTION

Do you like to know how a story ends? I do. I'm sometimes guilty of skipping ahead to read the end of a novel if the suspense is really killing me. Or I flip to forward a few hundred pages to see if a certain character is still alive.

I think that we as people have an innate curiosity about the future – maybe even a hunger—a need. Are we, in the end, we want to know, living in a comedy or tragedy? Are the cynics right, or did the dreamers have a better grasp on reality than we knew?

As we look to the Bible to learn what God says about the future, we might be hungry for details—we might be wishing for something kind of like a schedule—that tells us the specifics of “when” and “how.” We don’t, however, get that many details. Instead, we get a lot of images and metaphors that can be difficult to interpret and understand -- there is a certain mystery to them.

The New Testament authors don’t actually focus much on detailed questions about the future. They do, however, have a deep joy and confidence about the future. Their view of it fuels their present – it’s the river of life-giving water that fills them and enables them to be faithful.

But it isn’t details or dates and times that give them joy. It’s the reality of a risen Lord – a king, victorious over death. Their understanding of the future is grounded in what happened on Easter morning when Christ rose from the dead. And so is ours.

The resurrection is the lifeblood of the new testament. Every part of the New Testament sings with the reality that because Jesus was victorious over death, our future is a victorious one.

D Day Vs. V Day

If you read up on the Allied forces’ victory in World War II, you will likely learn about two important dates. The first of these dates is called D Day, and it happened on June 6, 1944. This was the day Allied forces were finally able to invade northern France through successfully landing troops on the beaches of Normandy. It is identified as the turning point of the war – that strategic moment in which the ultimate victory of the Allies was secured. Before this point it often seemed like the Nazis would win. After D-Day, however, even though battles still raged on and many people died, the Allies were confident. “It’s only a matter of time now,” people would say.

Victory in Europe Day (or V Day, for short), was over a year later on May 8, 1945. This was the day in which the Allies formally accepted Germany's unconditional surrender of its armed forces, which officially ended the war.

The resurrection of Jesus is the decisive moment in which our future was secured. It was the moment in which the battle was, for all intents and purposes, won. It was our D-Day – and we are able to say, with much greater confidence than the Allies – that “it’s only a matter of time.” V day is that final day that we are looking forward to – when Jesus will return as a reigning king to judge the world and make things right.

We, right now, are living in that difficult, gritty, but hopeful time between D-Day and V-Day. More people, incidentally, died in that final year of World War II than in all the years before. Some of the fiercest fighting in the whole war happened in that final year, and the war wasn't over. But the people fought with a confidence that they were going to win. And so do we.

You might have noticed that the passage Marsha read for us a few minutes ago was all about the resurrection. I want us look backward at our D Day – so that we can understand the ultimate victory that we are waiting for—fighting for.

It's critical that we do this, because only when we have this hope firmly in our hearts will we be able to be faithful in the here and now. It's this hope that helps us to endure, and that gives us a joy that no circumstance can touch.

So let's look backwards, so we can look forwards with eyes focused on our central hope. What do we learn about our future when we look at the resurrection of Jesus?

JESUS' RESURRECTION MEANS THAT HE WILL RETURN AS A REIGNING KING WHO WILL FULLY FULFILL HIS KINGDOM

If you listen to Jesus' teaching, He talks all the time about something called the Kingdom of God. He says that he needs to tell the good news of the Kingdom, He talks about how to enter the Kingdom, and when He tells parables (his stories with a point) they usually begin with “the Kingdom of God is like . . . ”

The Kingdom of God also something the Old Testament prophets describe, long before the time of Jesus. In Isaiah 11 we are given a picture of the Kingdom that Messiah is coming to bring: It speaks of justice being given to the poor, and of the wicked being destroyed. The chapter describes the land where He lives as being a glorious place. And it describes a world of peace – or of Shalom ---the Jewish word for peace that means more than an absence of conflict, but of things being made right, being made whole.

*Nothing will hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain,
for as the waters fill the sea,
so the earth will be filled with people who know the Lord. – Isaiah 11:9*

This is the new Kingdom that Jesus came to bring. It's a time when people are reconciled to one another and to God. It's a time when people finally have the capacity to treat creation and one another rightly.

And at the centre of all this imagery is Jesus, the reigning King.

Acts 1 does such a great job of describing when Jesus leaves the earth and goes up into heaven. The disciples are standing there, straining their eyes to see him for as long as possible. And suddenly there are angels present who say *"Men of Galilee, why are you standing here staring into heaven? Jesus has been taken from you into heaven, but someday he will return from heaven in the same way you saw him go!"*

We've been waiting for him ever since. We are waiting for him to come and judge the world – to finally make things right.

All the goodness, healing and reconciliation of the Kingdom of God will come because we finally will have the right leader. Both ultimately powerful, and ultimately loving and good. Our culture approaches our leaders with a healthy dose of cynicism. We question our authority figures and are more suspicious than hopeful about our politicians. We are constantly deconstructing our heroes, discovering that they were only human, after all.

But all you have to do is to look at the stories we tell to see that we are still longing for someone to believe in. We look back at people like Winston Churchill, Mother Teresa, or Martin Luther King Jr., -- All of them flawed human beings – but in their moments each showed us a glimpse of the kind of leader we're longing to follow.

Who are your heroes?

We are longing for a true king—for someone trustworthy who will not let us down—we are longing for one who will lead us as no one ever has. Jesus is that King – that true King that every good human leader has given us a glimpse of. And because of His resurrection we can be confident of this: The good guy wins. Easter Sunday showed us how the story ends.

Jesus is returning, and He wins. He is returning as a reigning King.

The end will come, when he will turn the Kingdom over to God the Father, having destroyed every ruler and authority and power. For Christ must reign until he humbles all his enemies beneath his feet. – 1 Corinthians 15:24-25

Those of us who have given our lives to Jesus get to live in the confident hope that, no matter how dark or broken things seem in our world – we have chosen the winning side.

Right now, in this time between D Day and V Day – the Kingdom is breaking in. That's what we, as the church, are all about. We are about ushering in God's Kingdom through the transformation of societal structures, through being reconciled to one another, through creating community that gives people a taste of the Kingdom, through allowing the Holy Spirit to change our own hearts. Every way that God is at work in the world is the Kingdom of God invading our broken world. But right now that invasion isn't complete. We are looking forward to a future when the Kingdom of God will finally all be now. When everything will be made right.

JESUS' RESURRECTION MEANS THAT WE WILL ALSO BE RESURRECTED

Our text in 1 Corinthians 15 was written in response to believers in Corinth who were teaching that there was no physical resurrection of believers after death. Paul begins by explaining that Jesus died for our sins, was buried, and was raised on the 3rd day. He lists all the witnesses who encountered Jesus after his resurrection, Peter and the other disciples, over 500 followers at one time, James, all the apostles, and finally Paul.

And then he considers what it would have meant if these believers in Corinth were right and there was no physical resurrection of dead. If that were the case, Paul insists, then Jesus also isn't raised, and our faith is useless: we are still left with the guilt of our sins. Paul ends this "what if" section by declaring *"And if our hope in Christ is only for this life, we are more to be pitied than anyone in the world."* 1 Corinthians 15:19

"But in fact, Christ has been raised from the dead. He is the first of a great harvest of all who have died." 1 Corinthians 15:20

For Paul, and for the rest of the eyewitnesses to the resurrection, what Jesus is after the resurrection is a glimpse of what we will become. He is, as Paul says, the first of a great harvest.

Death might have come through one man, Adam, in the beginning, but the resurrection from the dead has come through another man, through Jesus.

It seems to me that when we think about our future, our physical, bodily, resurrection is not something that we talk about much. Our view of the future tends to focus more on being in heaven with Jesus. We do know that, as Paul says, to be away from the body is to be at home with God. But the central hope of the New Testament is that when Jesus returns, we will experience resurrection and be given new, physical bodies.

So what does this mean for us?

The future we're looking forward to is tangible.

The future life we're looking forward to is not a disembodied life. Jesus is at this very moment still human and sitting at the right hand of the Father – and we will be like him.

When Jesus is with the disciples in his new resurrection body he is solid and real. He cooks breakfast; he eats fish. He lets the doubting disciple Thomas touch his wounds. Our future life is an embodied life.

And it's a life with bodies suited to live in God's New Heaven and Earth: In vs 50 of chapter 15, Paul explains that our physical bodies can't inherit the Kingdom of God – not the full Kingdom – because "these dying bodies cannot inherit what will last forever."

Our new bodies will not decay or die. After the resurrection, Jesus occasionally does something he wasn't able to do before – like disappear. I'm not quite sure what that's about, but I'm looking forward to finding out.

Stop and think for a moment what it really means that we will have bodies that finally work the way they should – that do not die. I have a dear friend who has lived her entire life in a wheelchair. I can't tell you how important this hope is for her. It matters to her so much that sometimes I think it's painful to hope for it. Her longings and the longings of everyone with cancer, or chronic pain, or fibremyalgia, or mental illness, or cerebral palsy, or multiple sclerosis, will be met.

The future life we hope for is a life when we will be fully and wholly human

It's so important for us to remember that the future we hope for is a life when we will not be disembodied spirits – but when we will finally be fully and wholly human, as we were always meant to be. This means that we will be more fully who we are than we are now.

It's difficult for the storytellers in our world to get a picture of our future right – and how could they? It's difficult to get something right that you don't understand. I have seen movies where the picture of a future life with God is disembodied and bland, with all the grit and passion of emotion gone. This is more Buddhist than it is Christian. In Buddhism, one of central goals is to escape from passion, because this was part of Buddha's solution to problem of suffering.

What we are invited into is the exact opposite of this: C.S. Lewis puts it this way: *"It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."*

We are looking forward to the full, abundant life that Jesus came to bring us, lived out in a new heaven and a new earth.

JESUS' RESURRECTION MEANS THAT DEATH IS A BEATEN ENEMY

We learn in 1 Corinthians 15 that all enemies are going to be under the authority of Jesus – and the last enemy to be destroyed is death itself. This is the end of death – in all its forms: physical death- yes, but also evil, sin, selfishness, apathy, numbness, entropy, decay . . .

I don't think we can fully understand what this means, because our entire experience of life is interwoven with death. Anyone who can't face the reality of suffering and death in our world is someone who doesn't really understand what it means to be human. They don't really have a grasp on reality -- they're in denial. And, in this world, it is often pain and suffering, or even our own wrongdoing that God Himself uses to deepen us as people.

But this is what I know: God uses death, but He has never been reconciled to it. It has destroyed so many of His children – it has ruined relationships, it has de-humanized and sucked the life out of the world. When God made the world and humanity He made it good. That is our birthright—to be human with no taint of death. And Christ has won that back for us.

Death has been, and always will be, the ultimate enemy. The greatest message of the cross and resurrection is that death itself does not have the last word.

CONCLUSION

You know, If you look at church history and even in the world today, the people pressing into the Christian hope are those whose life is hard: slaves, the poor, the marginalized. Read some of the lyrics of the Black spirituals, birthed within of the hearts of slaves. Their hope gave them endurance— it kept their souls from being crushed.

I have felt, in the difficulty of the past year, that there are things Jesus can only teach us in the midst of suffering. This, I believe, is one of those things—to dig down deep into our hope for the future—to let our hearts root in the soil of a future with resurrection bodies, where Jesus draws near to us and is established as King, and where death is vanquished forever. This is what enables us to live faithful lives now – being able to say, like the soldiers in WWII – “It’s only a matter of time now.”

Jesus told his disciples *“Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.”* – John 16:33b

Our deepest longings are pointing to our future with Jesus. Our longing for a home we have never been to—a home that we catch glimpses of from time to time, but which we have never fully seen. Our longing to be fully known and loved—in a way that we catch glimpses of in our earthly relationships. Our longing to be fully present, and joyful, and alive --to be able to fully engage in play --to be able experience life fully. Our Longing to no longer have to grieve over pain and loss, sickness and death. All of these longings and more are met in our future with Jesus.

It’s worth thinking about – it’s worth yearning for.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A great book on this topic is [Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church](#), by N.T. Wright.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- When do you think about our future hope as believers? What circumstances or times in your life have you thought about it a lot? Or have you? Do your thoughts about the future give you life?
- Think a bit about the D Day / V Day analogy – how does that help frame your thinking towards our world today? What does it encourage you toward?
- If a new believer asked you what happens to believers after they die, what would you tell them?
- Is the idea of the physical resurrection in a new heaven and new earth compelling and hopeful for you? Why or why not?
- What are the implications of living in a world where death is completely vanquished? What longings does that stir up in you?
- What further questions do you have about the future?