

Heaven¹

Remember the Muppets? Remember the Muppets from Space routines that depicted the Muppets on the bridge of the rocket ship traveling through the Universe? In one episode the space ship loudspeaker announces "We will arrive at the end of the Universe in five minutes, at which time the meaning of life shall be revealed." Of course, the Muppets are excited. Immediately after this, the loudspeaker announces that beef stew is being served in the dining hall. The beef stew announcement is also clearly exciting and one or two of the Muppets on the bridge slip away to the dining hall. Then one by one the Muppets leave the bridge for the stew, until none are left to find out the meaning of life.

Well, here we are, talking at long last about the ultimate—what our destiny is after this life—and, of course, the congregation is everywhere but here. It just goes with the territory. This topic is just destined to remain a mystery.

Maybe if someone who was busy out at Camp Viola this morning asks you what the minister said about eternal life this morning you can sum it up in one sentence: "Jesus' resurrection is the key." Most of the answers to questions we may have about life after this life can be answered simply by looking at Jesus' resurrection.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon on July 12, 2009 at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Georgia.

For example, who will experience eternal life? We all feel anxiety in the face of our inevitable death and the coming death of everyone we know and love. On what do we pin our hopes? The way I come to confidence about that question is to ponder how Jesus came back from the dead. What can you and I surmise about that process? We can say that God the Father gave Jesus new life. Jesus was good and dead. The Romans certainly knew how to kill people. He was good and buried. Sealed in a tomb. So, we're not talking about a near death experience where a body may look like its dying, but not all the systems have shut down and then surprisingly revive themselves.

In Jesus rise from death we're not looking at a surprising resuscitation. We're looking at a love relationship between Jesus and the Father. God was simply not willing to let his son go. And so, in the manner that Jesus was given human life in the first place, Jesus received human life back again from his loving Father.

That's the pattern for you and me. The all important principle here is our relationship with God. Why? Because when all else is gone, our bodies and brains, much of our accomplishment in this world, one thing will remain—God's love for us. The relationship. After the manner of Jesus'

resurrection that love, that relationship, will be the tether that will draw us from death to new and everlasting life.

And don't we talk about that relationship with God all the time. We confess our sin in a ritual way every Sunday. Then we hear the assurance of forgiveness. That's a foretaste of resurrection. In the same way that our sins can't separate us from God because his love always holds us, neither can death.

Now, if you or I spend a lifetime avoiding that relationship, pushing God away, living with ourselves substituting for the one who made us, the danger is that we will get our wish. Our wish amounts to living a godless life whose logical conclusion is death. What I've said is laid out exactly in our lesson from Romans today: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also."

Pondering Jesus' resurrection also reveals other important aspects of life after life. For example, we will have human bodies. Jesus came back in his resurrection significantly—but not entirely—like he was before he died. You'll recall that Jesus seemed to appear and disappear, which is to say he didn't seem to be limited by time and space. But otherwise the risen Jesus was a human being. A male. He ate food. He remembered

his previous ministry with the disciples. The marks of his crucifixion remained with him.

Now, in Jesus' resurrection we see the pattern of our own. We're not going to be reincarnated as a cat. We're not a drop returning to the ocean. We're not the sun that shines or breeze that blows. We're not going to be ghosts. In the resurrection, we will experience significant continuation of the human life we live now.

Here's how this makes a difference. As our population gets older, we're more and more conscious of depression in older people. There doubtless are physical causes for older people to feel blue or to need medication. But as people approach the end of their lives and their ability to change how things have turned out slips away. We may have cause to feel bitter. Maybe you never had a great romance. Maybe you couldn't have children. Maybe opportunities for success didn't come your way. Maybe you made mistakes that diminished life. It makes an enormous difference whether we approach death with the thought that all opportunity is spent and past, or whether our best time lies in front of us in resurrected living. Jesus' resurrection gives powerful warrant for you and me to look forward to continuation of life which is significantly akin to what we have

experienced here. Think! Resurrection means that our best years are always in front of us.

Now, there is so much I could say about each of these principles, namely that our relationship with God is the key and that God gives us new bodies in the resurrection. But I want to lay out one more wonderful principle. What does God raise us up to do with these new bodies and continued existence he will give us? The answer is that we will reign with Christ.

Do you remember the parable of the Talents where the master goes away leaving the servants in charge? Well, when the master returns he praises the faithful servants and puts them in charge of more. You have been faithful over little, now I set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.

In the resurrection there will be much to do. You and I will somehow share with Jesus his work in the world.

Eternal life will not be an endless church service. We won't be sitting on clouds, happy but with nothing to do. There's a sense of joyous mission that carries into eternity.

One of the questions that has long puzzled me is why God made the Universe so big. We may have an idea. There may well be work for us to do somewhere within this created world. We are in a long habit of thinking that somehow when we live eternally we enter into another reality, another dimension, a

parallel universe. The Bible never speaks about God creating another Universe. And the whole direction of what I'm discovering about the hereafter is that this world is what God loves and intends to bring to perfection and peace.

Maybe we know more about everlasting life than we think—because we know Jesus. We know what it means to be held by a love which is stronger than death. We know what it means to have a body and to have a life. And, as disciples we know what it means to be responsible in this world. Maybe the greatest assurance of everlasting life is simply to look around at the goodness and love God has already given us in this world and conclude, "We're going to be just fine."