

“Perpetual Change”  
Sermon by Oby Ballinger  
Edina Morningside Community Church; May 24, 2020

**1 Corinthians 15:19-26, 51-57**

*If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

*But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.*

*Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, but we will all be changed, 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. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality. 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.” “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

One of the gifts of springtime is watching our ferns grow. They’re in a side garden of our house, beneath an overhanging crabapple tree. For days we watch tightly curled fiddlehead ferns, stubbornly pushing their way up from stubby, apparently dead husks that were last year’s stumps. But every year there’s one morning when they all open up into these gorgeous fronds, broad fans lifted skyward in praise. The bare ground has been transformed to the springtime green of new ferns.

That’s the way it is with most everything in spring, right? Javen and I are going on more walks than normal these days, but we see trees blossom, gardens emerge green and flower-filled, and tulips trumpeting their color from buried bulbs. There are few things better than watching iris blades come up through the dirt, and seeing new plants emerging from under last year’s dead stalks. By a mysterious power, and wisdom beyond human knowing, what once was dead comes back to life again.

Reading the Scripture for today, one line jumped out at me. “We will not all die,” writes the apostle Paul, “but we will all be changed.” Through tremendous safety measures, we are keeping the most vulnerable among us from death, and we have *all* been changed. But the change that Paul is writing about here is not only shifting habits, staying at home, or global tumult. He’s writing about the imminent return of Christ, and a time after death when bodies will be changed but will remain for eternity. Death is still a present reality we struggle against, but it’s not an inevitable and permanent reality. Death itself will be undone; death will be put to death.

There’s a centuries-old tradition of reading a sermon by John Chrysostom that proclaims the death of death on the night before Easter. Custom has it that every time “death” is mentioned in the sermon, the people trample their feet, stomping on death to demonstrate victory. Go ahead and try that if you’d like! “Death itself will be undone; Death will be put to Death.” We inherit a mystery in the church, beyond any knowledge but that is held in faith. In rising from the grave at the resurrection, Christ began to pull on the loose threads of death’s shroud, the threatening hood over us that is now unraveling forever. Not only did Christ rise from the dead—we will rise also, along with all those who have died. What happened to Jesus will happen to us. His triumph over death is our own as well. One commentator writes that, “It was as if [Christ] was the first full plant to spring forth from the ground, the sure sign that others would spring to

life in due course.... When we see the first daffodil of spring, we know that eventually others will follow.”<sup>1</sup> Christ’s victory over death is our victory too.

One other sign of resurrection is made visible in springtime: growth and new life requires transformation. In a moment, we will sing an Easter hymn which begins: “In the bulb there is a flower; in the seed, an apple tree; in cocoons, a hidden promise: butterflies will soon be free!”<sup>2</sup> But bulbs, seeds and cocoons do not become flowers, trees and butterflies without burial, metamorphosis, and tremendous change. The transformations we face now are mirrored in a greater change at death, as finite bodies become infinite spirits by a mystery that none of us understand. The “Water Bugs and Dragonflies” book tried to put it into metaphor, which is the best that any of us can do.

At the funeral for George Christiansen on Wednesday, I suggested that perhaps it was fitting for the service to happen over Zoom. There were just eight of us gathered in the large sanctuary, and to the naked eye that was all who were gathered there. But we understood then—as right now in this service—that we are gathered as a far greater host than meets the eye. George and all those who die have changed to a different Zoom room, as it were, still present, though we cannot see them directly. We don’t have cameras or computer screens that give us access to the more-than-physical world where all those gather who have gone before, along with Christ himself and all the prophets. But the traditions and practices of our faith are the portals through which we stay connected.

“We will not all die, but we will all be changed.” This is the heart of Easter faith, the heart of the church’s witness to the world: death and all its forces are no match for the perpetually changing, ever-greening power of new life in Jesus Christ. Let that be our comfort on this Memorial Day weekend, though we are surrounded by such grim reminders of death as we approach 100,000 lives lost to Covid-19. Live nonetheless with the courage that comes from this liberating mystery: “Death itself will be undone; Death will be put to Death.” Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> *Preaching the New Common Lectionary*, Year C: Lent, Holy Week, Easter, eds Fred B. Craddock et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 147.

<sup>2</sup> Natalie Sleeth, “In the Bulb There Is a Flower”, *New Century Hymnal* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1995), hymn #433.