

**WELCOME AND ANNOUNCEMENTS****CALL TO WORSHIP:**

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ!*

*In his great mercy, he has given us new birth into a living hope,  
through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,  
and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade!*

(1 Peter 1.3-4a)

Let us worship God.

**HYMN:** O servants of God, your Master proclaim!

**PRAYER OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION:**

Almighty, holy, and loving God:

We praise you for your power and love, your righteousness and your grace.

We come into your presence to worship you, now, in response to your call, and in gratitude for your blessings and promises. May our worship be pleasing to you; and may it help us to center ourselves and get us heading in the right direction in the week ahead of us.

As we begin our worship, though, we acknowledge that we find it challenging to live consistently in your ways, and that we often fail in doing so. Our sinful impulses are strong and hard to resist, and they lead us to act in ways that are self-serving, rather than self-giving. We expect others to see things the way we see them, while not being willing to reciprocate. We are quick to find fault with others, but have difficulty seeing our own shortcomings.

Gracious God: We confess our sin to you, and ask for your forgiveness. Through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, empower and enable us to resist our sinful impulses more successfully, and to live in your ways more faithfully.

We pray in the name of Jesus, our Savior; and we pray together, now, as he taught us:

**THE LORD'S PRAYER**

(Matthew 6.9-13, KJV)

**ASSURANCE OF FORGIVENESS:**

Hear this good news from the scriptures:

*Who is like our God,*

*who forgives sin,*

*and pardons the wrongdoing of his people?*

(Micah 7.18 )

*For the wages of sin is death,*

*but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ, our Lord.*

(Romans 6.23)

So, if we have confessed our sin to God sincerely,  
let us be assured that God will forgive us.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS:

### - **Old Testament Reading:** Genesis 45.1-15 - “I am Joseph!”

This passage is the climax of the story of Joseph. Joseph, who had been sold into slavery by his brothers, has now become a high official in Egypt, in charge of food distribution during a severe famine.

His brothers travel to Egypt from Canaan to buy food from Joseph, but they don't recognize him. In today's reading, then, Joseph tells them who he is.

### - **Psalm:** Psalm 37.1-11, 39-40 - “Do not fret because of those who are evil”.

Psalm 37 is a wisdom psalm.

In it, the writer expresses the orthodox Old Testament belief that God blesses those who live in his ways, and punishes those who don't.

He therefore advises his readers not to fret about how unrighteous people seem to get away with their misdeeds. He assures them that, in the end, God will destroy those who do wrong, and vindicate those who do right.

### - **Letter Reading:** 1 Corinthians 15.35-38, 42-57 - The resurrected body

This is part of a larger discussion on the topic of the resurrection of the dead, which takes up all of Chapter 15.

In today's reading, Paul talks about what the resurrected body will be like.

### - **Gospel Reading:** Luke 6.27-38 - The Sermon on the Plain: Love; Judging

This is part of a collection of Jesus' teachings known as “the Sermon on the Plain”.

In this reading, Jesus speaks about how his followers should treat the people around them — enemies, as well as friends.

**HYMN:** Give thanks with a grateful heart

**SERMON:** “The Resurrection of the Body”

We return to the readings from the Common Lectionary today, following a two-week pause.

As you've probably noticed, I focus on the Gospel reading for the day most of the time, but today, I've decided to focus instead on the reading from the Letters — which is a portion of the apostle Paul's discussion on the topic of the resurrection of the dead. The way the lectionary is set up, this reading doesn't have much to do with the rest of today's readings — so let me just say a few words about how the creators of the lectionary have chosen these readings.

As we've seen in the past few weeks, the Gospel readings for the Season after Epiphany are semi-continuous readings from the early days of Jesus' ministry. This year, the third year in the three-year cycle of the lectionary, those readings are mainly from Luke's Gospel. The

Old Testament readings for this season have been chosen to tie in with the Gospel reading for each Sunday; likewise, the psalms have been chosen to tie in with the Old Testament reading each week. On the other hand, the readings from the Letters in this season are semi-continuous readings from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians — and this means that the theme of the reading from the Letters doesn't necessarily tie in with the theme of the rest of the readings for the same Sunday. And this is certainly the case with the readings for today.

In the first year of the lectionary's three-year cycle — called "Year A" — the Readings from the Letters in this season are from the early chapters of 1st Corinthians. In the second year — "Year B" — the readings are from the middle chapters of 1st Corinthians. And this year — "Year C" — they're from the later chapters of the letter: Chapters 12, 13, and 15. Chapter 12, as we've already seen, contains the first part of Paul's lengthy discussion on the gifts of the Spirit; Chapter 13 is his famous passage on love; and Chapter 15 contains a lengthy discussion on the topic of the resurrection of the dead. If we had used the lectionary readings for the past two Sundays, we would already have read *two* passages from Chapter 15; today, we're reading the third.

Today's reading from the Letters, then, is a passage I use from time to time in funeral services. Today, the 7th Sunday after Epiphany in Year C, is the only time that it comes up in the lectionary. Not only that, we don't have seven Sundays in the Season after Epiphany; we do only in years when Easter is late. In years when Easter is early, the Season after Epiphany is shorter — with only five or six Sundays. In other words, then, this passage from 1st Corinthians 15 comes up only rarely in our Sunday services.

With that bit of an explanation, then, let's look at what Paul has to say in today's reading. As I've already mentioned, today's reading is part of a larger discussion on the topic of the resurrection of the dead, which takes up all of Chapter 15 — that is, all 58 verses. It appears that some people in the congregation in Corinth had difficulty believing in the idea that those who believe in Jesus will be raised from death, and given eternal life in the kingdom of God in the age to come. *Why* they had difficulty believing this is not explained. Perhaps it simply didn't make sense to them that a corpse could be brought back to life, especially if it had already been in the grave for a long time. Or perhaps it went against the Greek philosophical belief that, when a person dies, the soul automatically leaves the body, and goes to a better place. According to that view, there would be no *sense* in raising a physical body back to life.

Whatever the reason for their skepticism, Paul grounds the idea of the resurrection of the dead in the fact that Jesus himself had been raised from the dead. Earlier in Chapter 15, he has said, *Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those that have fallen asleep. For, since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. For, as in Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive. But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then when he comes, those who belong to him* (1 Corinthians 15.20-23).

The term "firstfruits" refers to an annual thanksgiving offering that Jewish farmers made from the very first grain, or olives, or grapes they harvested. It was a thanksgiving to God in *antic-*

*ipation* of the harvest, not at the completion of the harvest. So, in using the word “firstfruits” as he does, Paul means that Jesus’ resurrection was to be the first of many resurrections — the resurrections of all those who believe in him. His resurrection, then, was the pattern for the resurrection of all believers.

In today’s reading, Paul goes on to answer two specific questions that he himself poses: *How are the dead raised?* and *With what kind of body will they come?* (1 Corinthians 15.35).

Paul begins his answer by using an agricultural analogy: that of a seed sprouting and growing into a living plant. Although seeds are not, strictly speaking, dead, they certainly *look* like they are; they’re dry and hard. But, when planted and watered, they sprout and produce a new plant. Paul’s point is that the plant that grows from the seed is not the *same* as the seed, although it does *come* from the seed. In the same way, he argues, instead of bringing a dead body back to life, resurrection involves the person being given a whole *new* body. Paul’s seed analogy thus emphasizes the continuity between the body that dies and the resurrected body. It also implies that the resurrected body is superior to the body that dies in every conceivable way.

Paul drives this point home by using a series of contrasting pairs of words. He says, *The body that is sown [meaning the body that dies] is perishable; it is raised imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body* (1 Corinthians 15.42-44a). The contrast he makes between the body that dies and the body that is raised is sharp: perishable vs. imperishable; dishonor vs. glory; weakness vs. power; natural vs. spiritual. Without saying so explicitly, Paul’s point is that the resurrected body is suited for eternal life, which the mortal body is not. The resurrected body thus doesn’t have the weaknesses and limitations that the mortal body has; it’s not subject to disease, injury, disability, infirmity, or death, as the mortal body is.

In the next paragraph, Paul returns to the contrast between Adam and Jesus that he introduced earlier, when he said, *As in Adam all die, in Christ all will be made alive* (1 Corinthians 15.22). The mortal body, he argues, is like the body of Adam, the first human being, while the resurrected body is like the resurrected body of Jesus. Paul says, *The first man [meaning Adam] was of the dust of the earth; the second man [meaning Jesus] is of heaven. As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of heaven. And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so we will bear the image of the heavenly man* (1 Corinthians 15.47-49).

This sounds very similar to something that Paul says in one of his other letters — Philippians — in which he writes, *Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body* (Philippians 3.20-21). Resurrection thus involves transformation; the mortal body is transformed into a body of a completely different order — one that is capable of living for ever. In today’s reading, therefore, Paul says, *Flesh and blood can not inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the per-*

*ishable inherit the imperishable* (1 Corinthians 15.50).

In reading this chapter, we see clearly that Paul expected the resurrection of the dead to take place, not one at a time, as people died, but rather, all at once, when Jesus returns from heaven — his so-called second coming. We already saw this earlier in 1st Corinthians 15, when Paul said, *each [will be made alive] in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him* (1 Corinthians 15.23).

We need to remember, of course, that, like all Christians in the First Century, Paul expected that Jesus would come again in his own lifetime — Paul’s own lifetime that is — within a few years, at the most.

This, then, leads to another question: If believers who have died are raised and given new bodies when Jesus comes again, what happens to believers who are still *alive* at that time?

Paul’s answer is that believers who are alive at the time of Jesus’ second coming will instantly be transformed; in other words, they will receive the resurrected body — the “spiritual body” — without first dying. He puts it this way: *We will not all sleep [meaning, we will not all die], but we will all be changed [that is, transformed] — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality* (1 Corinthians 15.51b-53).

We need to remember that, when talking about the resurrection of the dead, we can’t say anything with certainty. We *believe* certain things about the resurrection of the dead, but we don’t *know* those things for sure. As Paul puts it somewhere else in his letters, *We live by faith, not by sight* (2 Corinthians 5.7).

One thing that has changed our perspective on the resurrection of the dead somewhat is that, close to two thousand years later, Jesus still has not come back from heaven. Does this mean that believers who died years ago — or even centuries ago — are still waiting to be raised up from death? We don’t know, of course, but church leaders eventually came to theorize that resurrection must take place shortly after a person’s death, or even immediately after.

It’s important to remember, though, that unlike the germination of a seed, resurrection is not a natural, automatic process. That’s the one flaw in Paul’s seed analogy. Resurrection is something that only God has the power to do; it doesn’t happen by itself.

It’s important to realize that beliefs and understandings have changed and evolved over time, even in biblical times. For example, in most of the Old Testament period, the people of Israel did not believe in the possibility of life after death. To them, the word “salvation” meant simply long life, good health, and prosperity in the land of promise; nothing more. They believed that when people died, they went to a dark, cavelike place underground called “Sheol”, which was sometimes nicknamed “the Pit”, especially in the Psalms. Sheol was not a place

of reward or of punishment, it was simply the world of the dead. As such, it corresponded roughly to the ancient Greek concept of a place called Hades — usually pronounced “hay-deez” in English. And so, when the Old Testament was first translated into Greek, the name “Sheol” was translated “Hades”. That name is therefore found in the New Testament, as well.

Belief in the possibility of life after death arose in Israel only in late Old Testament times; and the only explicit reference to resurrection in the Old Testament is found in the Book of Daniel, where we find these words: *Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness like the stars, for ever and ever* (Daniel 12.2-3).

Nevertheless, in First-Century Judaism, there was a difference of opinion as to whether or not there *was* life after death. The sect known as the Pharisees believed in life after death, while the more conservative sect called the Sadducees did not. For Christians, then, the resurrection of Jesus is the decisive sign that God *does* have the power to make those who have died live again.

Paul’s discussion of the resurrection of the dead here in 1st Corinthians 15 is the longest and most systematic treatment of the subject anywhere in the New Testament. However, we see traces of other beliefs or views elsewhere in the New Testament, as well. One example is Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus, in the Gospel of Luke. In it, Lazarus and the rich man go directly to heaven and, hell respectively, immediately after they die (Luke 16.19-31). There is no reference in the parable to Jesus’ second coming. Another example is the scene in the Book of Revelation, in which the souls of those who were killed in the great persecution cry out, in heaven, to God to avenge their deaths (Revelation 6.9-11). The Book of Revelation *does* speak of Jesus’ second coming, of course, but it takes place long after this scene, toward the end of the book.

Notwithstanding this little vignette from the Book of Revelation, the idea that, at death, the soul is freed from the body, and automatically goes to a better place, comes from ancient Greek philosophy, not from the biblical tradition. This is why the Apostles’ Creed says “I believe in ... the resurrection of the body”, rather than “I believe in ... the immortality of the soul”.

The belief in the promise of life after death is an essential element of our Christian faith. However, how and when resurrection will actually take place, and what life in the age to come will actually be like, remain a mystery. Over the centuries, people with fertile imaginations have attempted to fill in the blanks. Whether their speculations are true or not remains to be seen, of course.

It’s not that often that we get to look at this element of our faith in a regular Sunday service, so I thought it would be worthwhile to do so today. I find Paul’s discussion on this topic in 1st Corinthians 15 to be very helpful, especially his teaching about resurrection being a transfor-

mation, in which those who are raised from death are given a new body, superior to their original, mortal body in every respect. In funeral services, I often choose *this* passage as one of the scripture readings in situations in which the deceased person suffered from a debilitating disease, infirmity, or disability. It's comforting and encouraging to think that the difficulties of the present will be replaced with a glorious existence in the future.

And so, as Paul says at the end of today's reading, *Thanks be to God, who gives us victory [over death] through our Lord, Jesus Christ!* (1 Corinthians 15.57)

**HYMN:** In the bulb there is a flower

### **PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE:**

Living and life-giving God:

We give you thanks and praise for your gift of life. We thank you for the life we have now, as well as for your promise of eternal life for all who believe in Jesus — whose death on the cross pays for our sin, and whose resurrection foreshadows our own resurrection. We praise you that your power is greater than the power of death, and we thank you that you have promised to use that power for our benefit. The prospect of eternal life in your kingdom relieves our fear of death, and gives us hope for the future. The prospect of receiving a new body at our resurrection gives us encouragement, especially if we are dealing with the frailties of our mortal bodies.

We thank you for the privilege of being part of your church — your worldwide family. In spite of its shortcomings and failures, may the church nevertheless be a sign of your kingdom in the world. Help us, its members, to embrace more and more fully the values of your kingdom, and to put them into practice — not only in our individual lives, but also in our life together. May your values of love, compassion, and generosity permeate everything we do, and in that way, give glory to you.

Hear our prayers for members of our congregation and others close to us who are undergoing times of difficulty and stress, in particular, those whom we name before you now: \_\_\_\_\_ . We pray for their well-being, and ask for your blessings of guidance, strength, or healing, according to their needs.

We pray also for the world at large. We continue to pray about the increasing polarization and intolerance in our society. We are saddened to see and hear vulgar and disrespectful language being used in public discourse, and we pray for a return to courtesy and good manners. Help us ourselves to take care in the way we speak both to and about people with whom we have differences of opinion, and not to belittle or demonize them.

We give thanks that many of the political demonstrations and blockades of the past few weeks have come to an end, or are in the process of coming to an end. Give wisdom to both governments and police forces as they deal with these situations. May they make appropriate use of the power and authority at their disposal, and not use excessive force. May protesters

with extreme views be discredited in public opinion. May residents and businesses that have been affected by these demonstrations soon be able to get back to normal, and may cross-border trade not be further impeded.

We pray again about the tensions between Russia and Ukraine. We pray that there may not be a further escalation of the low-level conflict that has been going on there for the past several years. Give wisdom also to leaders in the international community who are working to resolve the conflict, and to maintain Ukrainian independence.

We continue to pray about the pandemic. We give thanks that numbers of hospitalizations are continuing to decrease; and we pray that this may mean that the pandemic is waning, at last. We pray in particular for doctors, nurses, and others in the health care system, who have been under a lot of stress, that they may see a return to more normal hours of work, more opportunity for rest, and a return to their pre-pandemic responsibilities. We pray also for people waiting for tests, treatments, and surgeries, who have had to wait all the longer while priority was given to COVID patients. Grant your guidance to those who schedule these procedures, we pray, so that those who need the most urgent attention may receive it first. We pray also for all of us, as restrictions are in some cases eased, and in others eliminated altogether. Help us nevertheless to be cautious and prudent, and not to take unnecessary chances.

We thank you that you hear our prayers, gracious God; and we offer them up to you in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

## **OFFERING**

### **PRAYER OF THANKSGIVING AND DEDICATION:**

Gracious and generous God:

We give you thanks and praise for giving us life, and for preserving our lives, through the many blessings we receive from you day by day. We thank you for the new and abundant life in relationship with you that you offer us through the sacrificial death of Jesus; and we thank you for the promise of eternal life in your kingdom in the age to come.

Accept, then, these offerings, which we present to you in gratitude for your love, grace, and generosity. Use them to strengthen and prosper the work that your church does for you in the world; and grant that that work may help you accomplish your purpose.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**HYMN:** Love divine, all loves excelling ...

### **COMMISSIONING AND BLESSING:**

Sisters and brothers in Christ:

Go into the week ahead, now,  
in peace,

and in the strength of the Holy Spirit,  
to return to your daily service for God,  
as his people and representatives in the world.  
And may God bless you:  
May he continue to guide and equip you,  
and to give you his strength and peace;  
in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.