

Grief Mixed with Hope

1 Thessalonians 4:13-18

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Rev. Laurie Crelly, East Church

In 2014 some workers in Boston uncovered a small copper box buried in the cornerstone of the state capitol building. They were there fixing a leak and upon discovery they contacted the historical society to investigate. It was a cornerstone deposit, or some call a time capsule, put there by none other than Samuel Adams and Paul Revere in 1795. The box included coins from the 1600s, various documents, a medal with General Washington's name on it and a newspaper from 1855 revealing that it was discovered once before and buried again in the foundation. After careful recording of the items, they added some items from the 21st century and returned it to the cornerstone of the State house.

Such discoveries are glimpses into the past preserved for people centuries later. We often consider how some things evolved and what things have remained the same over time. In today's reading from first Thessalonians, we have an artifact of sorts. This is the first recorded writing of the New Testament. A pastoral letter written between 49 and 51 CE, less than twenty years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Paul is writing to a young, struggling congregation, encouraging them to stay committed to the new faith they received from him and others a year or two earlier. In Paul's opening salutation in chapter one, he says this about the founding of the church, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for in spite of persecution you received the word with joy from the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For they report how you turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God and to wait for the Son from heaven, whom was raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath."

Later in chapter four, Paul again reminds them to continue living a life pleasing to God emphasizing holiness and modest living. He praises them for their exemplary love and

faithfulness. “You do not need to have anyone write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, and indeed you do love all the brothers and sisters throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more.” (1 Thess. 4:9-10)

We can look at this and agree that much of what Paul encouraged the church to do in the first century, is something we still follow today. We seek to be just, loving and righteous people caring for one another and our world. Love is our primary goal in faith. “To love one another as Christ first loved us.” We also believe in Jesus as divine, whom God raised from the dead. This theme is picked up in today’s reading as Paul works to correct some confusion the early church is struggling with regarding people who had died before Jesus came back. What happened to their loved ones already dead? Are they lost or saved?

Paul realizes this is causing concern among the young believers and he seeks to ease their fears and encourage them to keep the faith. This is at a time that Paul and many church leaders believed that Jesus would return in their lifetime. So, Paul gives them this vivid image of the believers rising up to meet Jesus in the sky along with the resurrection of those who have died.

What is more important here for Paul is that the believers hold fast to their faith, in the face of such doubts and persecution from outsiders. Do not abandon the message of righteousness and love that you received. He even encourages them to share this message of hope with other believers.

This teaching begins to shift as time goes on and more die. In 1 Corinthians 15 we find a comparative passage written a few years later, approximately in 53 or 54 CE. Listen to how Paul’s description has changed:

“But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?” Fool! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.”

“So, it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body.”

“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. Look, 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.” 1 Corinthians 15:35-36; 42-44; 50-53

Again, as Paul prepares to come to Rome, approximately five years later, he writes this about the resurrection of the body. Romans 6

“What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore, we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of God, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Romans 6:1-5

Paul’s understanding of the resurrection goes from a literal resurrection, to a spiritual resurrection, to a transformed life here on earth where we live as people of the resurrection.

So, like a time capsule with several artifacts from different points in time, we see how the teachings of Paul developed over time. Some things have stayed almost unchanged, the call to live a holy and faithful life of love, the threat of persecution of the church and that our reward is eternal life. But when it comes to understanding what eternal life will be like he eventually calls it all a mystery that will not look like our world today. We will have imperishable bodies and will be transformed in an instant.

So what does this mean for us today, the twenty-first century Christian? I believe the message is to not abandon the enduring truth of the Good News that God calls us live in righteousness and in love for one another.

We will see the world fight against the message of Christ and we will see hardship, but keep the faith, have hope even in the midst of sorrow, and keep sharing the good news with others.

In recent weeks we have once again seen the utter depravity of human sinfulness and suffering as hundreds of thousands of people are being killed around the world for power and control of resources in this world. Some even believe that the events, especially in Israel, will somehow speed up the second coming of Christ. This is a very dangerous ideology, because it also glorifies the very things that the Gospel speaks against namely greed, hatred, and the struggle for dominion over all things.

I am appalled at the complicity of western governments and western Christians alike who support this genocide and such crimes against our fellow human beings. Hamas and the Israeli government are both guilty of crimes against humanity, especially the recent attacks, acts of collective punishment, oppressive occupation and ethnic cleansing that the Israeli Government has called for against the Palestinian people, whom they deem as less than human. I am disgusted by the hatred and violent rhetoric from Israeli officials, from some of our own elected officials and religious leaders. Where is the love, where is the compassion, where is the mercy and demands for peace in the face of all this tragedy? We cannot remain silent. For in our silence, we are complicit in such atrocities.

I grieve over the state of the world today. But my grieving is mixed with hope. Not just in hope that one day we will experience the resurrection of those who have died. But more so, I have hope that the truth of the gospel will prevail in the face of such destruction. Christ faced the depths of such human depravity on the cross but love conquered hate on the third day when Jesus rose again. Let us denounce hate and proclaim love. Love for our neighbors: our Jewish and Israeli neighbors, our Muslim neighbors, our Palestinian neighbors, our brown neighbors, our white neighbors and all those who are marginalized and oppressed by the powerful of this world. Let us cry out for repentance and justice, so that love will prevail and transform this world into the kingdom of God. Let us seek first the kingdom of God and God's Righteousness now and always. Amen.