

The Border between Death and Life

Sermon for Eternity Sunday

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-44a



But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"³⁶ You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.³⁷ And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain.³⁸ But God gives it a body as He has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. ...⁴² So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable.⁴³ It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power.⁴⁴ It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

For Aunt Frederike, the past few weeks were a nightmare. It all began with a slight pain in her husband Peter's upper arm. When the ambulance came, it was already too late. Peter, her beloved husband, with whom she had lived for 6 decades, was dead; Peter and Frederike brought children into the world; raised these children; worked, quarreled and forgave each other again. At over 80, neither of them could imagine how life would go on without the other. Death must come eventually. Everyone knows this, but for Aunt Frederike, it was still incredibly hard to see her beloved husband's empty chair. She couldn't bear that he was just gone. He had become a part of her life. They were like trees that had grown together as little plants, and now... one was just gone. Her heart and soul burned with pain and she occupied herself with the question: Where is Peter now? He must still be somewhere. He can't simply be gone!

There is hardly a more heartbreaking question than this one: Where is my friend, wife, husband, grandpa, or grandma when they are dead? We human beings are so very rooted in life that we simply

can't imagine seeing ourselves or a loved one dead! Will we meet again? And if so, how? These are the questions that we are dealing with this Sunday. In Germany this Sunday is, on the one hand, called a commemoration of the dead because we remember our deceased relatives. On this day, many go to the graves and light a candle there for a deceased person. The memories remain. On the other hand, this Sunday is also called Eternity Sunday because we believe that our life doesn't cease here on earth but will continue into eternity. For the apostle Paul, using the term Sunday in commemoration of the dead would not be appropriate! If we believed that our life ended with a dead body, we would be the poorest of all people, he said. He uses a very strong picture to illustrate that we human beings are not going to die. He uses the image of a seed. A seed is also placed in the earth and dies. When it goes into the dark soil, nothing more can be seen of it. But not long after that, new plants sprout and life becomes even more splendid than it was before. This is how Paul describes everlasting life in the lines above. Paul uses this practical example because he knows how difficult it is for us human beings to imagine life after death. If one from among us is suddenly dead, none of us can really believe that this body that lies there could be alive again. And that's exactly why Paul writes a letter to the Corinthians. He wants to make it clear for the Corinthians and for us that we have life in Christ.

So, let's go along with Paul, and let's actually begin on the border between life and death. When Aunt Frederike could no longer see her beloved Peter, a part of her life was torn away. That hurt her! Aunt Frederike could in no way go to her husband. There is a boundary between this and eternal life that we can't overcome. We can therefore also not imagine what it will be like in eternity. In our Apostles' Creed, we confess that we will experience a physical resurrection. That means when we are in eternity, it is we ourselves who will be there. We will be there with all our limbs and with all our understanding. Now, some might ask just as the Corinthians at that time, how is the dead body supposed to come back to life? That's not possible! And which Peter will be in heaven, the 80 year old man or will he be 20 years old again? With such questions, Paul became firm: "You fool!" he scolded the Corinthians. Don't you know that the seed that falls into the ground is something different than the new plant that grows from the ground! And then Paul contrasts all the negative things of this earth with the things that are in heaven. It will be sown perishable and what is raised is imperishable; it will be sown dishonor and will be raised in honor. It will be sown in weakness and will be raised in power. Paul wants to tell us: "We will be happy in heaven! Imagine being among people who are completely there for each other; imagine being in a place where no one wants to oppress or cheat another; imagine being in a place where the people trust each other. Where there are no more borders. And where a jail is no longer needed to imprison people. Our life here on earth is the seed. In this life there is none of that. Instead, we endure a lot of pain and hate and suffering. And at the end, this seed, that is our body, is given to death. Only then comes something new. All problems that we dragged along for years are left lying in the grave. God will wipe away all the tears from our eyes and God will make us new. God is actually the answer to all our questions about eternal life and death. When God first formed a man out of clay, He had to breathe His living breath into Adam's nose. Only then did he live. And so, God will also make our lifeless bodies, which have long since become sand and ashes, alive. God will lovingly form us just as He did before with Adam. Then breathe His living breath into our nose. "See, I am making everything new!" God tells us. And it is He alone who can do something like this.

The singer Eric Clapton lost his 4-year-old son after he fell from the 53rd floor of a skyscraper. After that, he wrote the song "Tears in Heaven." In the song, he asks his boy: "Would you know my name if I saw you in heaven? Would it be the same if I saw you in heaven?"

In answer to this question, we must look to Jesus. The disciples recognized Him after His resurrection and lived with Him for a while. He was the same and yet He was different. He was risen. And it's precisely this fact that struck His disciples. They were struck by the fact that Jesus was the same, and that death didn't have the final word over Him. And that's why they went out into the world and spoke constantly only about this risen Jesus. Death could no longer frighten them. And they could also already see heaven here and now through Jesus! We are still on this earth. We can't clearly see or understand God and the new resurrection. We can only see how it works through Jesus Himself. Here and now we are still on the border. We are in this life and looking over into the other life. There is still so much death and suffering around us. So many people must die. And that's why our soul cries out for life and God and Jesus. Jesus Himself taught us: "See, the kingdom of heaven is near!" The kingdom of heaven was near because Jesus had come near. And the people who were around Jesus understood what that meant: from Him flowed love and an intimate relationship with God. Because of Jesus we know where heaven is! And this heaven begins here and now where we believe in Him and He comes to us. In our longing for this God and for this heaven, we pray again and again every day: "Our Father who art in heaven!" Amen.