

WHAT THE PERISHABLE REMEMBER

I Corinthians 15:50-52, 58

A sermon by Larry R. Hayward on the Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, November 6, 2022, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia. This sermon was preached at the 8:30 a.m. service. The church was acknowledging All Saints and its traditional Remembrance Sunday.¹

SCRIPTURE

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.

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...

Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.

During COVID, like many of you, my reading expanded with more time at home and less time in traffic. A journal I discovered and now read regularly is entitled *The Point*, published primarily by philosophy graduates from the University of Chicago. Many of the articles are beyond me, but a recent article caught my attention. It is called “Minor Resurrections,” and is written by a journalist from Brooklyn named Elisa Gonzalez.

She begins by describing how the story of Jesus’ raising of Lazarus from the dead – found in John’s Gospel – came back to her as she grieved the loss of her younger brother. Her brother, always a rebel, was killed violently. The story features how Lazarus’ two sisters, Mary and Martha, react to his death. Gonzalez points out that in the story, Martha is called “sister of the dead man.” Gonzalez writes:

I, one of six sisters of the dead man, read and reread John 11 as if it were a novel...

When in the story Martha brings up the stench of the tomb, from which Jesus orders Lazarus to emerge, Gonzalez writes:

Martha is not protecting the others from a *noxious* odor; she is shielding herself and her sister from *sensory* confirmation of their brother’s death.

I.

But then Gonzalez begins to recount some ways we remember people who have died, some of which are, in fact, *sensory*:

- Calling into the other room to ask our spouse a simple question only to realize – almost immediately – they no longer occupy that space.

¹ I am deeply indebted in this sermon to an article by Elisa Gonzalez, “Minor Resurrections,” in the *The Point Magazine*, Issue 28, Fall 2022, available at <https://thepointmag.com/examined-life/minor-resurrections/>.

- Walking up the stairs, thinking we hear footsteps behind us, but turning around, realizing no one is following.
- Keeping a final message on voice mail for months, even years, so as always to have access to the voice of someone we love who no longer leaves messages on voice mail.

Since the death of my wife's mother in 2018, there have been times one of us has caught ourselves about to say: "Call Mary Elizabeth verify when Caroline's birthday is" only to remember that her mother can no longer be the encyclopedic reservoir of such family data.

Gonzalez labels such experiences "minor resurrections," times in which those who have gone before us seem very close to us.

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Sometimes, these minor resurrections occur not simply in our minds, but have a physical – almost bodily – dimension to them.

- We inherit a piece of jewelry and wear it nearly every day the rest of our lives; the same with a favorite hat or sportcoat.
- We go explore a cedar chest and see
 - Pictures we had never seen
 - A divorce decree from a marriage kept secret
 - Birth and death certificates – only a few days apart – of an infant we never knew existed
 - A lock of hair neatly preserved between a fold of wax paper, a perfumed handkerchief, tapping into our senses of touch and sight and smell.

We learn something we didn't know – a newness of life for us, bittersweet, but still – a minor resurrection.

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Likewise, monuments we erect to honor the dead also provide a physical space which they continue to occupy much larger than that required for their bodies or ashes.

- Anytime we visit the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial, we see people stencil the name of someone they love from the black granite of the monument onto white paper – a physical likeness, a minor resurrection.
- The flags on our mantles in their memory; the flags on their graves at Arlington National Cemetery are ways we bring back to life who no longer walk the face of the earth in the way we walk.

T. S. Eliot wrote: “Love is most nearly itself/when *here* and *now* cease to matter.”² They are no longer *here*, *now*, but our love for them remains, “most nearly itself.”

II.

In the Christian faith, the resurrection of Jesus Christ is central. “On the third day he arose again from the dead,” we say, in the most ancient creed of our faith.³ Through the resurrection Christ differs from other teachers, healers, and martyrs who have come before him. His resurrection animates nearly every page penned by his followers.

Yet even Christ’s most eloquent articulator – the Apostle Paul – says of the resurrection: “*Lo, I tell you a mystery.*” “*A mystery.*”

In nearly all appearances of the risen Christ in the New Testament, his appearance is *changed*. His disciples don’t recognize him. He forbids them to touch him. The physicality of his resurrected life is *different* from the physicality of his life *before* the resurrection. Paul describes Christ’s post-resurrection “state” as a “spiritual body.” Is it body? It is spirit? Is it both? Not even Paul can explain it. “*Lo, I tell you a mystery.*”

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But let me venture this.

On this side of death, in our *earthly* life, we are what Paul describes as “*perishable.*” We see, hear, taste, touch, and smell “*only in a mirror dimly.*”⁴ Our knowledge has *limits*.

But those who have gone before us he labels “*imperishable.*” They have been raised. They now live with God. They are part of the “communion of the saints” we also affirm.⁵ And we can be comforted – *deeply* comforted – by that *promise*. We benefit from these “minor resurrections” of the imperishable we experience in our perishability.

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Early in my ministry I was called to visit a family whose young mother and wife was near death from a lengthy bout with cancer. She was married to an older man who was both wealthy and ne-er do well. She had three young children, and over the few days I sat with the family, she never regained consciousness; and her children did not return from their boarding school in Europe until the funeral.

The funeral was held in the small, neighborhood church I served at the time. It brought people from all over the world: an array of business associates of her husband and art collectors from the avocation they shared. The night before, I had a dream in which I saw her float from her bed toward heaven and pause along the way to kiss on the lips each of her three children. I awoke with a start, but also with a sense of beauty. The dream was a minor resurrection that I as a young minister needed in order to lead that funeral service in a way that was best, especially for her children.

²“East Coker,” Section 5, from *Four Quartets*, 1943. Quoted in Gonzalez.

³ The Apostles’ Creed.

⁴ I Corinthians 13:12.

⁵ The Apostles’ Creed.

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Perishable as we are, what we experience as we touch a gravestone, stencil a name on a sheet of paper, awaken from a dream, is *imperfect*. But what we experience in these in these minor resurrections is also *love*. We join in what Dante describes in his last sight of heaven as “the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars.”⁶

It is a love that, in Paul’s words, can keep us “steadfast” and “immoveable” – “always excelling in the work of the Lord” – until that day when the trumpet sounds and we who are *perishable* put on *imperishability* and join those we *love*.

Amen.

⁶ According to Gonzalez, these are the concluding lines of the *Commedia*.