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Easter 2C
Sermon notes on
1 Corinthians 15
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"Losing Time"

After the service at South Melbourne a few Sundays ago I was asked to help a 10-year old girl answer questions for a school project. One question was: "what happens when we die?" I replied, "We lose time".

I don't know what prompted that question, but it's worth thinking about for two reasons. *First*, we have celebrated Good Friday and Easter, which requires us to think about what Christ's death and resurrection mean for us personally, especially when one day someone will arrange for our funeral.

Second, we live and die in a world that has either abandoned the gospel or made a mockery of it, especially when a life ends. Life after death is treated with humour or sentimentality, as a writer to *Crosslight* commented recently, when at the funeral of a yachtsman, his friends assured themselves that "he will be still with us on Saturday, riding the waves, in the bar after, and so on."

We should consider the 10 year-old's question not because we want to leave this world for a better one, not because we despise the world, but because if we believe in the resurrection of the dead we should prepare for it with seriousness, and preparing for it become more useful Christians, because only useful Christians can be said to have fought the good fight, to have finished their course, and to have kept the faith.

Today's Epistle sums up Paul's understanding of death in the light of Easter. He wrote as a pastor encouraging his people. His view of human destiny encompasses the whole cosmos, nature and history, and the part every person plays in it. (The same ideas appear in Romans 8)

No doubt you have heard about the man who went down on his own to Florida to prepare for a summer vacation with his wife. She was to follow in a day or so. On arrival he sent her an email but typed out the wrong address, and by pure chance the message reached a certain minister's wife, who had only the day before attended her husband's funeral. The message was unexpected, confusing and somewhat frightening, because it read:

"Arrived safely. Looking forward to seeing you the day after tomorrow. Your loving husband."
PS – It's very hot down here.

I tell the story to remind us that most commonplace ideas about death are a mixture of pagan religion and wishful thinking. We belong to a society that desperately needs the authentic note of the gospel, where writers who are not even Christians are lamenting that the moral tide of Western civilisation is receding; they worry about the loss of Christian values and the failure of the churches to do anything about it. Funny stories about death take our minds off such serious matters, partly because we don't know what to believe about it.

So what does the resurrection of Christ say about our death? First of all, what is resurrection?

It is not a human possibility or a human right. Humanly, it is impossible. It is an event of grace, an interruption of nature, an explosion of energy that breaks the link between death and nothingness; it is the defeat of sin, the triumph of good over evil.

The New Testament says death is the judgment on our lives; it is a crisis of personal annihilation. We are not immortal. The seeds of eternity are not in our bloodstream. One day we will cease to be. Only in the face of that certainty can we say 'Christ is risen'. Only faced with obliteration can we grasp the audacity of resurrection. Moreover, what is raised is the body.

When Paul is asked: "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" He answers with analogies and metaphors about seed-producing plants and the respective glory of sun, moon and stars, animals, birds, fish and humans. As for people, they 'shall all be changed, in a moment, at the last trumpet.' But which moment?

When I said to the girl-with-questions that we 'lose time' when we die, I tried to explain that the world is ruled by space and time. When we die, space and time are of no more use; unless we want to argue that death is just a continuation of this life, in more pleasant surroundings. This would be wishful thinking without seriousness.

As we all know, time is a mystery. Augustine understood this when he wrote: "I know well

enough what time is, provided that nobody asks me; but if I am asked what it is, and try to explain, I am baffled." Confessions X1, 14.

To lose time is a serious misfortune because time is our most treasured possession. We might even say that to lose time is to die. Because then nothing more can be done. The time has arrived for summing up. Until then our life is an unfinished symphony, a work in progress, a mystery to those around us and a riddle to ourselves.

When we die we lose space as well as time. Ironically, we say almost every day of our life that "we haven't got time!" Really to lose time is to have no time for anything. Positively, and on the other hand, time no longer makes demands on us, or has its customary power to make us feel guilty.

But though we have no more time, memory and hope remain. In the *Apocalypse* the martyred Christians cry out "Lord, how long before you will judge and avenge our blood." In the *Romans* letter, Paul says 'the creation waits with eager longing for mankind to be redeemed' so that it, too, can be brought to perfection. The dead, like the living, still long for redemption.

The New Testament declares that death does not destroy the essential person, the ego. We wait and hope for the promised resurrection. Out of contact with this world, we are not deprived of memory or longing or the grace and mercy we knew in this world. No power can destroy such things.

In the Apostles' Creed we say "*I believe in the resurrection of the body*". This does not mean our bodies are reconstituted by some feat of metaphysical magic. That is a pagan fantasy. When we die we do not live on in a different place, as if death was a blip on the radar screen. The curtain falls. Time is no more. We are remembered, but not as we were in our individuality. *We* remember, also, but not in the time frame of this world; where there is no time, where a thousand years are as a day, and one day as a thousand years. But in death we have no advantage over those we leave behind, and they have no advantage over us. Alive or dead, we wait for the 'resurrection of the body'.

This phrase from the Creed points to the resurrected body of Christ. It means that our destiny is to participate in his glory and honour, for which we also are intended. That is our destiny, and it cannot be achieved in the world, but we can begin to grow into it now in the present time. This is why Christ calls disciples – so they can seek and find their true selves, then live accordingly.

"The resurrection of the body" means that no individual's destiny can be achieved except through other people. That is an unpalatable truth. Other people can be hell. Other people routinely foil, frustrate, betray and disappoint us. There are not many people we can trust completely. So we draw in upon ourselves, retreat to a small circle where we can tell our secret thoughts in safety. People can and do destroy our faith in people, because other people carry the infection of death that holds this world in its grasp. And we never can tell how much infection we spread to those around us. Yet we cannot live without other people. If our destiny is to be with Christ, it is also to be with his fulfilled, broken, healed and embodied community – at the end of the age.

To say, with the New Testament, that we will all be raised is to claim that in the midst of life death's power is already broken, that it does not separate us from the body of his resurrection, nor prevent us from waiting with patience and hope . . . for the end of the age, when the power of sin and the curse of corruption are broken forever.

This is Paul's pastoral message. And it ends with an anti-climax. "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord" That seems to be such a trivial counsel after so expansive a vision of the future. But Paul's point is that to believe that Christ is risen is to have no dread of death. It is to be able to be steadfast and immovable, to do the work Christ has for his people in the world. That is why Paul says, "Death is swallowed up in victory".

And so may we.