

SERMON TITLE: "I Believe in Life Everlasting"  
SERMON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 15: 35-38, 42-44, 54-57  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: March 3, 2019, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

This has been quite a week for me emotionally. After church was over last Sunday, I went home and began watching the Livestream of the United Methodist General Conference. I watched it throughout Sunday afternoon into the early evening. Then, on Monday and Tuesday, I was back at it, watching as many hours as I possibly could.

I couldn't look away because something very big was happening with The United Methodist Church, and this is the church that I love. This is the church where, for 30-some years, I've devoted and developed my faith, fulfilled my calling from God, practiced my preaching, cared for God's people, earned my salary, and even stashed away a pension fund. In so many ways, you could say I have a vested interest in this institution we call United Methodism.

It wasn't always that way for me. When I was a teenager, college student, and young adult, I was a member of the Church of the Nazarene. It was through the evangelical ministries of the Church of the Nazarene that I was invited to church and offered an opportunity to accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. It was through the lay and pastoral leadership of faithful Nazarene people that I received my first education in the Bible and theology, in Sunday School, worship services, Vacation Bible School, youth group, and church camp. It was through Northwest Nazarene College that I earned a scholarship and a bachelor's degree in Philosophy and Religion. It was in a Nazarene church in Montana that I taught my first Sunday School class to kindergartners, and it was in Nazarene churches in Idaho that I taught Sunday School to second graders and fifth graders. It was in and through a Nazarene denominational program for college students that I served as a summer missionary volunteer in an African American congregation in Detroit. Another summer, a Nazarene Church in Montana gave me my

first ministry job with a salary. I married my Nazarene husband in a Nazarene church. It was through Nazarene Theological Seminary that I studied and received a Master's degree in Religious Education. It was the Church of the Nazarene that granted me my first license for ministry, and it was a Nazarene congregation that called me to serve them in Buffalo, New York.

So, in 1986, when my husband told me that he didn't want us to be members of The Church of the Nazarene any longer, it was a horrific blow to me personally and professionally. I actually considered divorcing him because of it. But that wouldn't have solved my problem, because I wouldn't have been able to serve as a minister in the Church of the Nazarene if I were divorced. They had rules against that sort of thing. So, I finally figured that I might as well stay married to my husband and change denominations with him. It wasn't easy, though. I went to counseling over it. I was angry and hurt. I told my counselor that it felt like my whole family had died.

It was hard like that for quite a while. Almost everyone I knew—socially, religiously, and professionally—was in the Nazarene Church. I was losing my identity. It took some time to grieve, to adjust, to forgive my husband, and to find my way in the new United Methodist denomination we had chosen. But, when I did find my way, it was like life had been reborn. Sure, there were things about my old church that I missed—the hymns especially. But there was so much freedom, joy, curiosity, and room for growth in the United Methodist Church. In many ways, it was a new lease on spiritual life. It was like I had died and gone to heaven. It was like a resurrection to life everlasting.

I'm telling you this personal story because I know some of you have been through experiences something like this as you have left behind other churches to come here. And I know that the news of the recent United Methodist General Conference has stirred a rollercoaster of emotions for some of you this week, maybe causing the life of the church or your own life to flash before your eyes. But I want you to know that, however this messy United Methodist situation turns out, God is faithful. The mortal things of this life will pass away. But—if we allow ourselves to trust in God—in one form or another, our

faith can survive any ordeal, and the body of Christ can live on. As we've just recited from *The Apostles' Creed*, we are a people who proclaim, "I believe in life everlasting."

### **1—RESURRECTION IS POSSIBLE**

On Friday morning, a group of us met in the Wesley Room and watched a Livestream of a United Methodist gathering in Denver. The purpose of the gathering was to debrief the General Conference. About 250 people were present in the sanctuary of Hope United Methodist Church. The meeting began with worship. Rev. Claire McNulty-Drewes preached a sermon from Ezekiel 37, the chapter that talks about the valley of dry bones into which God breathes new life. Rev. Claire described seeing and smelling a dead animal carcass near a path where she regularly walks, and then she said that's how General Conference seemed to her—like our United Methodist Church was a stinky dead carcass. She hoped, instead, that the United Methodist Church could be like a bird that flew into a window, knocked itself lifeless for several hours, and then sprung up and flew away as if nothing bad had happened. She wondered if--yes, she believed that-- somehow God could raise the United Methodist Church up out of our stupor and allow us to soar to new life like that.

In the Apostle Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, chapter 15, he writes about death and resurrection life. In the beginning of the chapter, Paul writes about the resurrection of Jesus. In the middle of the chapter, Paul writes that, since God raised Jesus from the dead, now it's possible for the rest of us also to share in that resurrection. In verses 35 and following, Paul then spells out some details about what that resurrection life will be like.

We can tell from the exclamatory word "Fool!" in verse 36 that Paul was responding to a strong challenge from someone who didn't believe in the possibility of resurrection. This was no friendly conversation. This was a high-stakes debate. In the context of this whole chapter, you can see that Paul was fighting for the very vitality of Christian faith. He was trying to persuade the Corinthians that, indeed, they could believe and trust in life everlasting.

## 2—BODIES AND SEEDS

The “someone” that Paul was debating had apparently mocked the idea of resurrection because it seemed absurd to think that our physical bodies would be raised just as they are. But Paul called out that idea as foolish because it was far too literal. A belief in resurrection doesn’t mean that the person will be exactly the same as before they died, said Paul. Quite the contrary.

To explain this difference, Paul speaks of death and resurrection like a seed. What a farmer or gardener plants into the soil is just a tiny, hard or shriveled, often brown or black, dead-looking thing. And yet, when the seed later sprouts, tender and green, it grows into something quite different, quite full of energy and life. Paul says that’s like our bodies that are buried and returned to the soil, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. What we are at the time of our death, says Paul, is nothing at all like what we will sprout and become in the newness of resurrection life.

Just because we believe in life everlasting doesn’t mean we have to believe that we are going to be raised in flesh and blood bodies that behave in the same ways they have here on earth. Personally, I think that’s a huge relief. It takes away all those weird questions like, Will my heavenly body be the decrepit one I had at age 90, the overweight one I had at 60, or the pretty and strong one I had at 30? Matters of bodily concern to us now won’t be issues for us in heaven, for our existence there will be quite different in the spiritual bodies that God will provide for us.

So, what will that spiritual life in heaven be like? Well, according to 1 Corinthians 15, it will be immortal and imperishable. Other verses of the Bible use words like *eternal* or *everlasting*. In other words, we will be with God who always was and always will be. As we read in 1 John 3:2, “We shall be like [Christ], for we shall see him as he is.”

Think of a Bible verse that you know: John 3:16. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Another favorite scripture of mine is Romans 8:38-39, in which Paul wrote, “For I am convinced that

neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor power, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” The most important aspect of our everlasting life is not what kind of body we’ll have, but that our spiritual life will be in union with our everlasting and ever-loving God.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the mid-to-late 1990s, I was appointed to the Yuma United Methodist Church in northeastern Colorado. That was a rural community surrounded by millions of acres of winter wheat, corn for animal feed, sugar beets, milo, and sunflowers. Each of those crops had their own beauty. The winter wheat was planted in the fall, and it was so hopeful to see the tiny green sprouts poking up through the snow of winter, giving the promise that spring was coming. Then, as the wheat grew and matured, it changed color. When the wind blew, it rippled like a field of gold. I also was intrigued by the sunflowers. They grew so tall! They stood like an army ready to take orders, as their heads always faced the sun. In the morning, their big yellow and brown heads would face east. Throughout the day, they turned their attention like a crowd of people watching a performer dance across the stage. As the sun moved west, those big sunflower heads all pivoted toward the sunset.

Thinking of those sunflowers, I decided to give you an object lesson today. You probably noticed the sunflower seed taped to your bulletin. It’s there for a reason. Just as the Apostle Paul said that the seed had to die in order to be reborn and raised to new spiritual life, I wanted you to think of those giant sunflowers with heads about a foot in diameter, standing tall in faithful attention. The tiny, dead-looking little seed that starts all that is quite a contrast. But it’s absolutely amazing what comes from it.

When our mortal bodies die, and someone sticks us in the ground or scatters our ashes somewhere or even leaves them in a box on a shelf, there will be so much more that is yet ahead. Think of a seed that can change and grow, and join me in affirming, “I believe in life everlasting.”