GALLOP!
Enjoy Life Beyond Death
Text: Isaiah 40:30-31; 1 Corinthians 15:50-58; Philippians 3:20-21

Have you ever thought about how much life is like a horse race? Ever notice how often God’s Word says it is? In the Book of Acts, in Second Timothy, in the Letter to the Hebrews, in Second Corinthians, and then again in Philippians 3, we are told that life is not so unlike the Kentucky Derby, Preakness, or Belmont Stakes, and that you and I would do well – and I quote the Apostle Paul -- to “run in such a way as to get the prize” (1 Cor 9:24). Have you ever thought of your life in such terms?

We all start out the race the same way. At our birth, we rush out of the gate to cheers and fanfare from all around. The first quarter mile is one of great wonder as we take in the sights and sounds and other racers around us with all the precocious enthusiasm native to the years of childhood and youth. As we hit our stride in the second quarter of the race, we work -- like all adolescents or young adults do -- to find our proper place in the pack. Our eyes gleam with the thought of the professional or social victory that can be ours if we can only keep up the pace.

By the half-mile mark, however, a deeper sense of reality often begins to set in. We may be temporarily exhilarated by the fact that we're making better time than we'd anticipated or discouraged by the fact that others are passing us by. In either case, it is now -- during this mid-life period -- that we usually feel the first real pangs of fatigue, wonder whether we ought to change our course, and begin to make important adjustments in the saddle. And then, at long last, we pass the retirement marker, and round the bend into the final quarter mile.

Whether you consider yourself at the head of the pack at this point, or straggling at the back, it is this home stretch that is in many ways the most challenging part of the great run for the roses. An older friend gave me a little piece of prose that describes some of the experience with tongue-in-cheek: "You know you're getting older when... almost everything hurts... when what doesn't hurt doesn't work anymore... when all the names in your little black book end in M.D.... when you get winded playing chess... when you look forward to a dull evening. You know you're getting older when a member of the opposite sex blows in your ear, and you complain of the draft... when you're 17 around the neck, 42 around the waist, and 126 around the golf course... when you try to straighten the wrinkles in your socks, and you find you aren't wearing any. You know you're getting older when a little gray-haired old lady or man tries to help you across the street, and it turns out the
helper is your wife or husband."

II

On a good day, we can laugh at sentiments like those. On a bad day, however, changes like these can be more than agonizing. I have talked with older friends and family members who share their pain over the loneliness they increasingly feel as dear people who ran alongside them for so much of the race have now fallen terribly behind or dropped out altogether. I've heard others speak of the depressing frustration of living in a world where younger people treat them as good only for the pasture or glue factory. But one of the very hardest parts of this section of the journey is that this BODY we've relied upon sags and lags and breaks down and lets us down — and we feel the approach of the ultimate Enemy, Death himself.

The Apostle Paul would have understood that. At one point in his life he had been — in the eyes of the world — a blue-ribbon winner in a range of race categories. He had been a teacher of the law — one of the thoroughbred’s of Jewish life. His papers read “Citizen of Rome” — just about the most important pedigree in the ancient world. Following his conversion, Paul had gone on to found many important churches, to build up a significant name throughout the ancient world. But at the time he wrote the Letter to the Philippians, Paul was well past the so-called prime of life, only a few years from death, and locked inside a dank Roman prison. If there was anyone who would have had reason to despair that his best days were past, that there was nothing left to do but resign himself to the inescapable victory of death over us all, Paul so easily could have. Yet listen to the aged Apostle’s words: “My only aim is to finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the good news of God’s grace” (Acts 20:24).

If you've been around here over the past few weeks, then you know we've been talking alot about the meaning of this GOOD NEWS that both Jesus and Paul speak of with such passion. We've been trying to communicate that the news is even “gooder” than you may have heard. You see, the Gospel that Christians testify to isn’t merely a mental doctrine or a one-time decision. It is a vision of holistic salvation. It is the message of God’s plan and process for transforming your life and mine and that of this whole weary world.

At the close of our service today, I’m going to summarize what we’ve learned about all this, but right now I want to underline that it is precisely this painfully difficult reality of human mortality which makes the Gospel such good news. If you are struggling with your aging or that of someone you love... If you’ve ever buried a child, or lost some other precious family member or friend ... If you agonize over the horror of what disease or accident or violence can do to a human body... put your hope in the God of the Gospel.
You see, according to our scripture lessons for today, there will come a day when all of us cross life’s finish line in one condition or another. But everyone who has put their trust in Christ for their salvation will receive a prize that will make all the sufferings of this life seem like nothing but flies on the sweat of a champion. You see, says Paul, one day we will be RESURRECTED to new life, just as Jesus was. *"By the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, [Christ] will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body"* (Phil 3:21).

Do you remember what the Scriptures tell us about Jesus’ body after his resurrection? Two words come to mind as I read those accounts: **tangible** AND **transcendent**. Christ’s resurrection body was no shimmering illusion or wispy ghost, like you see on sci-fi shows. It was tangible. It could be seen and touched. It could walk and talk and relate to others. Jesus could cook breakfast for his friends in this body. His unique personality was recognizable in that body. But that body was transcendent too. It took his disciples awhile to recognize Jesus in it, for the simple reason that this body was not constrained by its former physical limits. Christ had been crucified, dead, and buried; but when he appeared to his disciples, he was the exact opposite of a beaten corpse. Christ’s resurrection body was beautifully dazzling and amazingly strong. It could appear behind locked doors and move from place to place without apparent effort. It was no longer subject to pain or tears or death.

The good news is that this is YOUR future, if your life is bound to His. This is the kind of body God will give to all those upon whom his favor rests. *“In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet... the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed... And our mortal bodies will be clothed with immortality... Death [will be] swallowed up in victory”* (1 Cor 15:52-54).

This physical form you and I live in now is the gift of generous God. It is a gift are meant to steward carefully and with gratitude for as long as we live in it; but the good news is that these bodies are not our permanent means of movement. They are, in a sense, merely training vehicles – a preparation and hint at what is to come. I love how C.S. Lewis describes all this in his book, Miracles. Lewis writes:

"These small and perishable bodies we now have were given to us as ponies are given to schoolchildren. We must learn to manage them faithfully: not that we may some day be free of horses altogether, but that some day we may ride bareback, confident and rejoicing, those greater mounts, those winged, shining and world-shaking horses which perhaps even now expect us with impatience, pawing and snorting in the King’s stables. Not that the gallop would be of any
value unless it were a gallop with the King; but how else— since He has retained His own charger—should we accompany Him" on the glorious rides that will be commonplace when we are in heaven?

IV

One of the last public addresses given by the great evangelist, Billy Graham, was to a gathering of civic leaders in his home state of North Carolina. His body wracked with the advanced stages of Parkinson’s disease, Dr. Graham stepped to the lectern, gazed at the crowd, and said: “I'm reminded today of Albert Einstein, the great physicist who... was once traveling on a train from Princeton.” When the conductor got to him, Einstein searched his vest pocket, his trouser pockets, his briefcase, and the seat next to him, but couldn't find the ticket. “The conductor said, 'Dr Einstein... I know who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it’” and he moved on. Moments later, the conductor turned and saw the great scientist down on his knees scouring under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, 'Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, I know who you are. You don't need a ticket...' Einstein said, 'Young man, I too, know who I am. What I don't know is where I'm going.'

The Old Horse of Evangelicalism smiled and continued: “See the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand new suit. My family has been telling me I've gotten a little slovenly in my old age... So I bought a new suit for this luncheon and one more occasion. This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to immediately remember the suit I'm wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am... I also know where I'm going.” And when he gets there, there'll be an altogether new suit waiting for him, a greater mount, a winged, shining and world-shaking horse, on which Billy Graham will GALLOP with the King.

"I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting,” reads the Apostles' Creed. I believe our final “citizenship” is not the dusty track of this earth, but the awesome stables of the King, says the Apostle himself (Phil 3:20). And so: "This one thing I do: "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14). I hope you will too.

Let us pray...

Lord, wherever we may be on the track of life, keep us from looking over our shoulder at the expense of seizing the opportunities of today. Renew in us your Spirit's strength to run the next lengths of the race with faith in our soul, hope in our mind, and love in our heart. Then grant by your grace that one day we might cross that heavenly line and be clothed with immortality and the
life that is truly LIFE. In the name of Jesus who ran the good race before us, we pray. Amen.
Benediction

As I send you out today, let it be with this good news...

The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross wiped away the sin and guilt that blocked you from communion with your Creator. If you will admit your need, believe in his grace, and commit yourself to following him, you can Get right with God (justification). If you’ve never sought Christ in that way, do it today.

Through this restored connection, God’s life will then begin to flow through and regenerate your character. He can help you progressively Overcome your character flaws (sanctification). You can become a whole new creation.

Now you don’t have to navigate through life on guesswork anymore. God’s Word and Holy Spirit are like a GPS that enables you to Set your course by reliable truth (revelation).

The more you pay attention to that guidance, the more you start viewing other creatures and this whole creation with God’s eyes. You see them as the priceless works of art that they are and you begin to Participate with God in his work of reclaiming and renewing the world (redemption). Wherever you go, you seek to foster communities of love, mercy, and justice where people can flourish as they were intended to.

And when you cross the finish line one day, you know that while your race here is over, your life is just beginning. Because of Jesus, you will Enjoy life beyond death (resurrection). You will run and not be weary. You will gallop with God in a way that will make your best time here on earth seem like the life of a snail.

But the news is gooder still. As I’ll talk about in my Thanksgiving message, when you are around the Great Banquet table with God, he will accomplish the final transformation. You will not only be eternally alive. You will Love with the greatest love of all (glorification).

My friends, this is the GOSPEL message. Thanks be to God.