

Body

This morning I want to share a verse from one of my favorite songs. It was recorded recently by Peter Mulvey, an artist I recommend everyone see at least once in their lives. He is a local artist, now, too, so he is easy to find. The song is called *The Cardinal*, and it reflects on the life of a friend of his who had died some years before. It begins with a summation of her character in life.

So, you've long since learned the secret
That no one knows what's best
But that little one ring circus
Is still burning in your chest
You're still so ashamed
To let the angels in¹

Do you know people like that—folks who guard their hearts against even the possibility of holy realities? It is not an uncommon stance to take these days—many people believe all holy, religious and spiritual matters to be works of misguided imagination or childish thinking. But that perspective is hardly just a modern phenomenon. In fact, the first disciples—those very blokes who learned directly from Jesus when he was on Earth; those same perps who witnessed him work miracles and did some healing of their own—are guarding their hearts as this morning's passage begins.

And not just their hearts, because it is important to remember that they were gathered behind locked doors according to a previous passage. The first description of them as they encounter the Risen Jesus uses the words “startled,” and “terrified,” and concludes with their shared belief that Jesus must be a ghost. People from all sorts of cultures and faiths in the ancient world believed in ghosts, and their arrival was hardly ever a good thing.

And the idea of Christ's resurrection as strictly spiritual, and not bodily, is an idea held by many Christians throughout history and still today. So, we can't blame Peter and company for assuming that, I suppose, even if they did have many opportunities to learn differently during Jesus' ministry. After all, even as Jesus is working to convince his followers that he is fully embodied, he also managed to just appear among them somehow—which is not something we can do with our everyday earthly bodies. He just shows up, like he was beamed in like a character on Star Trek. The disciples may well have feared they were being haunted for failing their slain master, because they were still struggling to understand his death in light of their now dashed hopes for an earthly liberation from Rome.

Fear is actually a huge piece of this passage because of how Jesus helps the disciples through it. He begins with a greeting of peace to them all—an attempt to ward off the fear into which they then descend. Strike one for Jesus—but the beaming in sure didn't help. He then invites them to experience his body for themselves, by touching him directly, having read their minds that they thought he was a ghost, an idea which he speaks directly against. Apparently, there is some hesitation to do so, but the offer does lead to a change in mood among the disciples. They move

¹ Peter Mulvey, “The Cardinal”, from *There is Another World*, ©2019.

from outright fear to an interesting emotional cocktail of joy, disbelieving and wondering about the truly weird scene unfolding before them.

So, Jesus parlays that near miss into a request for food. Bible scholar Stephen Cooper has this to say about that:

Some Christians assumed that Jesus' resurrection appearances were that of a spirit or ghost; his demonstration of corporeality through eating fish puts to rest any such possibility (vv. 42-43). The Gospel intends something quite different: Luke and John present not a ghost or disembodied spirit but a living, walking, talking, and eating Jesus, alive as you and me.²

That idea may make the resurrection more challenging for some of us today, as it has throughout history. It challenges me sometimes, for sure. My faith is less like an unchanging rock and more like a wind which keeps changing direction. It's always there, but it keeps on moving!

Once upon a time, I may have felt compelled to defend the idea of the bodily resurrection to you as a pastor. My reasoning being that pastors had ought to side with orthodoxy at least usually if not always. There are some good reasons to side with orthodoxy on this one, even if it is a somewhat confounding perspective to hold. One such perspective comes from Stephen Cooper, Bible Scholar, who we heard from before.

The theological significance of this lies not so much in a matter of fact (which is historically unverifiable and therefore historically unknowable) about the nature of the resurrection body, but as a characterization of Christian hope and a rejection of totalistic systems of thought—scientific or otherwise—that limit the vision of the future to the shape of what seems probable according to current conceptions.³

In other words—it is an act of theological humility to accept what might be an intellectually challenging teaching. We are not just our minds, after all, but whole beings comprised of everything we are and do as humans—doubts, fears, wonder, love and more... We need to take all of that into account in our faith, or it becomes a blithe, and possibly naïve, acceptance of things unpondered, un-prayed over and unproven through experience. We should wrestle with our faiths with all of our beings—not just a single part—no matter how appealing it is or how well it serves us in the rest of our lives.

But ultimately, I think there are two much better reasons to lean into the teaching of a bodily resurrection, and to strive to accept it. The first is to notice what the acceptance of it does for the disciples. They begin the reading as scared individuals hiding out, locking away both their hearts and their bodies. They then freak out a little more as Jesus offers for them to touch him. But finally, after Jesus eats fish, they are transformed into believers. The scripture tells us he “opens their minds” to this odd and compelling truth. This is accomplished by reviewing scripture with them and reminding them of how it points to him. This is the best ad for Bible Study I have ever seen, by the way. Reading that good old book can truly be transformational.

² Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume Two, Theological Perspective, Stephen A. Cooper, pp. 424-425

³ Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume Two, Theological Perspective, Stephen A. Cooper, pp. 428.

And it appears to work for the disciples, too. Because it is immediately after the Bible study that the minds of the disciples are opened. Which Jesus puts a bow on by reminding them all that they are witnesses to the resurrection. All Easter Sunday long, the disciples have multiple encounters with the Risen Jesus in smaller groups and in different settings. It is only when the whole body of believers is gathered that the truth of the resurrection is fully manifest. Said another way—it is in gathered religious community that we find our ways to our fullest understanding of God. We certainly have experiences on our own as well, but when we gather and share our truths, a fuller picture emerges. That is the essence of what the congregational way is all about. We best understand God in communities which offer a variety of different views to enrich and challenge us and grow our individual faiths.

My second reason for strongly encouraging a belief in the bodily resurrection is my favorite, however. Because I think it says something profound about the way God loves every one of us. When we divide our understanding of ourselves in two between body and soul, we inevitably establish some sort of disparity between the two. Have you heard the saying “You are not a human being having a spiritual experience. You are a spiritual being having a human experience?” It has been attributed to different people over the years, but I don’t believe there is consensus about who actually said it. My point is I think it makes an unnecessary contrast between our humanity—or embodied selves—and our souls. And its arrangement suggests that souls are better than bodies, doesn’t it? That assertion directly negates the ancient Jewish understanding of what it means to be alive, with which Jesus and his disciples were no doubt raised. Our being is not divisible between our soul and our body—together they make up our human being. We are living and spiritual because they work together, not because one is better than the other.

So, in that context, the ancient Jewish idea of resurrection needs both soul and body to be present. There is no life, whether usual or resurrected, without both soul and body together. I treasure that notion, but not because I want to support ancient Jewish orthodoxy any more than modern Christian orthodoxy. I treasure it because it suggests that God wants to save every little bit of us. Not just some special good part, which flies away from the rest on death, but all of us.

God loves every bit of us. Every virtue we treasure, and every mole which makes us wrinkle our noses in distaste. Every good thing we do and all our foibles. Our body parts we reveal to the public and those we keep hidden. God loves our every atom, not just some rarified part of us, or some so-called highest or best part, but every nook and cranny of who and what we are. We are truly beloved of God.

As human beings we will have times when we doubt it. Life is challenging for us far too often sometimes, and we may wish some or all of it away. But not God. God loves you—and every single bit of you. So, ask yourselves, friends—is there some place you are guarding your heart, or body or soul against the grace of Jesus? Are you still so ashamed to let the angels in?

Let it go. Let it go. Please... let it go! God loves every single bit of you. And that’s the good news of the bodily resurrection on this third Sunday in Easter.

Amen?

Luke 24: 36b-58

Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you."³⁷ They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.³⁸ He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts?"³⁹ Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have."⁴⁰ And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet.⁴¹ While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?"⁴² They gave him a piece of broiled fish,⁴³ and he took it and ate in their presence.⁴⁴ Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled."⁴⁵ Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures,⁴⁶ and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day,⁴⁷ and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.⁴⁸ You are witnesses of these things.⁴⁹ And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."⁵⁰ Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and, lifting up his hands, he blessed them.⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.⁵² And they worshiped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;⁵³ and they were continually in the temple blessing God.