

“I Believe in the Resurrection of the Body”

In the name of him who for us suffered and died, was buried, and on the third day rose again bodily, dear friends in Christ: The resurrection of the dead, the belief that our earthly, physical bodies will one day be raised from death and decay and be restored to life: it's one of the most fundamental teachings of the Christian Church. The Apostle Paul taught it extensively. It appears in all three of the church's ecumenical creeds. In the Apostles' we say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body", in the Nicene Creed it's worded this way, "I look for the resurrection of the dead", and in the Athanasian Creed (that long one we only use on Trinity Sunday) we confess, referring to the return of Christ in judgment, "at whose coming all men will rise with their bodies". Clearly the early fathers of our faith thought the resurrection was of chief importance. And yet for some strange reason, it usually seems to be the church's most overlooked, undervalued, and even forgotten teachings.

And what I mean by that is that it's usually skipped over. Sure, as Christians we all believe in life everlasting. We know that because Christ has redeemed us from sin that we will live forever with him – none of us is denying that (at least I sure hope not); but I've noticed a tendency that people have to over-spiritualize their view of the afterlife. Just for example, we tend to think and speak of our loved ones who have gone on in the faith as having already received the fullness of their inheritance, as if they don't have anything to look forward to anymore. Popular images of heaven portray people standing around on clouds as if they have no substance or weight. And many times, I've been asked things like, "Will we eat and drink in heaven?" "Will we be able to recognize each other?" "Won't we get bored just floating around up there forever?" All these notions and inquiries betray to a certain degree the presupposition that by moving on to the next life we will be casting off the physical side of our beings. There seems to be a reluctance to accept that it is in these selfsame bodies of flesh and blood that we will rise and live again. And I suppose there are a few reasons for that.

For some it's simply too hard to comprehend, the task too big to be accomplished. How, they think, can God possibly bring back everyone? People have been dying and decaying for thousands of years – and there isn't much left of most of them. And what about people whose bodies were completely destroyed, who were burned to ashes or consumed by animals, and whose basic elements have been scattered and recycled into other living organisms a hundred times over. You mean to say that the Lord is going to reassemble them? That's a little hard to swallow. Well, all I can say about someone for whom *that's* the sticking point is that their view of God is way too small.

For others, perhaps, the image is too macabre or intellectually embarrassing. I don't know, maybe they've seen too many bad zombie movies, but the thought of millions of tombs opening and people actually rising from their graves is either too unpleasant or too ridiculous to hang onto. If that's the case though, the problem is not with the teaching of Scripture, but rather with the limits of human imagination. People who are hung up on the resurrection for reasons like these need to think less in terms of Halloween style creepiness and more in terms of the thrill of new life breaking forth from the soil in the spring. The resurrection won't be like a scene from a horror film, but rather a beautiful and wondrous event to behold.

But I think the biggest reason the Scriptural teaching of the resurrection gets short shrift in the minds of many Christians is because they are infected with a latent tendency toward Gnosticism (Hey, there's a ten-dollar word you don't hear every day!). Gnosticism is an ancient philosophy that teaches that the spiritual realm is pure and good and that the material order is inherently flawed and evil. The Gnostics believed that people are truly and essentially spiritual (almost divine) beings who have been trapped for a while in these physical bodies in this tangible reality. They saw the physical creation as something of a prison from which the spirit inside yearns to break out. To escape the body meant the spirit could be forever free of hunger, thirst, pain, and all the other discomforts and limitations the flesh imposes. And this basic Gnostic notion which was born in Greek philosophy is what underlies many of the world's false religions. Hinduism and Buddhism are older expressions of it, the Christian Science of Mary Baker Eddy was one of its reincarnations in the last couple centuries, and it's been given a modern facelift in the teachings of Scientology; but it's all essentially the same thing.

You may remember that when the Apostle Paul tried to evangelize the citizens and philosophy students of Athens, they listened patiently to him as he told them about the life and ministry of Jesus – that is, until he mentioned the Lord's resurrection from the dead. At that point they tuned him out. They didn't want to hear about an afterlife that included anything physical. To them that was an offense. Their view was: spirit is good; matter is bad. And to lesser or greater degrees, this idea has an undying popularity with people. That's why it keeps getting recycled in new expressions. And it's easy to see why. We live in a fallen creation. It's not the way it's supposed to be. It's broken and cursed on account of mankind's sin. But people, being fallen sinners, are always looking for another excuse. We don't want to see ourselves as the problem. So, it's not that, "I'm a sinner and the world is cursed on my account; no, that can't be it because deep down inside *I'm good*. Therefore, the source of my problems must be outside of me. And since I experience my problems in terms of what's physical, that is, hunger, pain, disease, hard labor, unfulfilled desire, and so on, it must be the physical order that's the source of all the evil in my life. Eliminate the physical and I'll be free. I'll be the perfect being I truly am." You should recognize this as one of Satan's oldest and most effective deceptions. Get sinners to blame something other than their own sin for their problems and they won't see the need for a Savior. And if they can be tricked into blaming Creation itself, how can they not ultimately blame its Creator? Man blames God for his evil, and the deception is complete.

How very different is the Scriptural perspective in which the material universe is set forth as the wondrous result of God's careful craftsmanship. At each step in the work of creation he announces his judgment, "This is good." The biblical account exalts the physical order and affirms the goodness of God's design. And we have only to look around and see its magnificent extent – the imagination and detail he poured into it. And it's interesting to me that when the Lord came to the pinnacle of his Creation, the man he created in his own image, he didn't start with his spirit; but rather with the physical form of his body. This he shaped from the dust of the earth as an artist lavishing his attention on what was a labor of love. Only when his sculpture was complete did he lean forward and breathe the spirit into the flesh making the man a living being. And this is key: man was never meant to be a disembodied spirit. For mankind being a living being means the union of body and soul. And so, if we are to live forever as the Scriptures declare, it can only be in physical bodies that the Lord creates or rather raises up again for us.

And this, of course, is what the church has always confessed and taught since it is the clear teaching of Scripture, just as we see laid out for us quite succinctly in today's Old Testament reading from the book of the prophet Daniel. It's to that short lesson that I'd like to direct your attention for the time we have left this morning because there the prophet reveals to us in briefest terms what we are to expect leading up to and on the great day when the Lord shall raise the dead.

We read first that as the end approaches, there will be a time of difficulty and trouble such as the world has not yet known. The Bible consistently speaks of this as if the old earth itself is in labor waiting to give birth to the new Creation. It's going to be a painful, literally earth-shaking process. And prior to that final push, it goes through these periodic episodes of what we might call Braxton Hicks contractions. These are manifest in natural disasters and times of pressure and extreme suffering especially for God's faithful people. History is full of such episodes. The prophet Daniel wrote extensively about a persecution of the faithful that would take place around 165 BC during the reign of the evil Seleucid King Antiochus IV Epiphanes. For Daniel, that was yet some 350 years in the future; but it happened exactly as he said it would. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus too predicts disasters and times of persecutions for his Church. We are most familiar with the Roman persecution that took place on and off over a period of some two hundred years; but there have been many since. A few weeks ago, our speaker on the Siberian Seminary Mission told us how millions of fellow Lutherans were put to death in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 30s. And even today Christians are being oppressed, maimed, and slaughtered in the Muslim dominated areas of Eastern Africa.

These are only the beginning of birth pangs, Jesus tells us; and though they're not pleasant, they are necessary. On one hand, they show that Satan is working feverishly to do the damage he can in the limited amount of time he has left. He knows his days are numbered, and as the end approaches his desperation and level of deceptive activity will increase. This in turn serves as a sign to the faithful that the end is indeed drawing near. It encourages us to remain steadfast – to place our full trust in Christ the Lord, and to look for him for the strength to endure. And in this way the difficult times act as a means to keep the people of God

faithful. Hardship and persecution separate the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. False doctrines are exposed, and false believers fall away when the heat and pressure are on, leaving the true Church with its true faith purified and hardened like tempered steel taken from the forge.

And to ensure that we do endure, we are promised the Lord's own protection during these times of crisis. Daniel speaks of Michael, the great prince who protects God's people. And whether this is a reference to the archangel who goes by that name (which means "he who is as God"), or if it's Daniel's prophetic way of referring to Christ, as some scholars believe – either way, the upshot is that the Lord will ensure that none of his people is lost. Everyone whose name is written in the Lamb's Book of Life, that is, everyone who trusts in the atonement that the Lord Jesus made for sin when he died on the cross will be delivered. Now, that's not to say that that some won't be killed in these persecutions against the Church. We know that many have been martyred for their faith; but that's the point: they aren't lost. Those who die in faith and trust in Jesus, whether by persecution or any other means, have been delivered from sin and therefore ultimately from death.

But at last the times of hardship and persecution for the faithful will end. The earth's hard labor will one day be over. The trumpet of God will sound, and the earth will give up its dead. Daniel says that the multitudes sleeping in the dust of the earth will awaken, some to everlasting life and others to shame and eternal contempt. The thing to see here is that it's not only the righteous who will rise again in their bodies, but all people. The resurrection will be a universal phenomenon, and the bodies that come forth from the grave will no longer be subject to physical death. So, both the saved and the damned will continue forever in their respective states of blessedness or disgrace, and they will inhabit eternally the very physical places the Lord has prepared for them, for better or for worse.

What Daniel gives us very little of are details concerning either the joys that await the faithful or the unspeakable horrors in store for those who will be condemned. For those descriptions we have to turn to other Scriptures; though it's clear from what he does say that the difference will be night and day. The one thing he does say is that those who are wise will shine with the brightness of heaven's glory. The wise, of course, are those who know God's wisdom: The Lord Jesus Christ and the power of his Gospel by which sinners are declared righteous in God's sight through faith in him. And among those who thus shine, the people who helped lead others to this righteousness in Christ are singled out for special recognition. In the resurrection, they will shine like the stars. This makes perfect sense, because of all the things we can possibly do in this world that is passing away, the one thing that matters most and that will matter forever, is bringing others to salvation in the Lord Jesus.

And the mistake here would be to think of that as exclusively the work of a few mass evangelists, missionaries, and preachers. No, this is a work we can all engage in. Parents who bring their children to be baptized, and who bring them to the church to hear the story of God's love in Jesus, and who reinforce it in their homes and by their own examples are doing this work of leading people to righteousness; as are Sunday school teachers, and those who work in Christian schools, preschools, and daycare centers. People who share the Gospel with their friends and neighbors, who invite them to church and to Bible studies are doing this work, as are those who support missions in many other ways – through their prayers and financial contributions. The Lord gives us all plenty of opportunities to be among those who will shine like the stars in the world to come. And it's important that we take these opportunities now while we can, because we know the time is short. Once the end comes, eternal destinies will be sealed. So may our Father in heaven give us the will and the means to be about this important work of leading others to Christ and his righteousness, because by his grace we believe in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. And we know that it is available to everyone just as it is ours through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!