

The resurrection of Christ

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Reverend Rebecca Newland

11 April 2010

Deciding what to preach on is often a difficult decision. My reflections today are really some further thoughts on the resurrection and particular what that may mean for those of us this week who are remembering the recent death of our dear sister in Christ Rose Anchell. For the scriptures contain this confronting notion – that those who die in Christ rise with him. The resurrection is our resurrection as well and this is not some ethereal, ghostly rising. It is a fully fleshed resurrection of the body. The temptation is to skirt around this issue and preach on things we are all much more comfortable about – you know: love, compassion, forgiveness, tolerance, even God's will. Yet, the resurrection of the body is intrinsically linked to the central aspect of our faith – the resurrection of Jesus. So in this sermon I want to delve into the most perplexing, strange, disturbing, misunderstood part of our faith – resurrection – Jesus resurrection and ours. I am not saying I have the answers or that I am right and I will quite possibly say some challenging things – things that disturb our modern minds. When I preached a version of this sermon a few years ago I think I left my liberal thinking, well-educated and oh so very rational listeners both shocked and a little disappointed in me. But I thought then and I still think now that we need to courageously and faithfully take a closer look at this idea.

Now there is one point that needs to be stated right up front because the rest of what I say depends on it – that is, I believe that the resurrection of Jesus did actually happen – full bodied, real, material, wounds and all resurrection. It has become fashionable, even politically correct and socially acceptable, in church circles no less, to believe that the resurrection of Jesus was a figment of the grieving disciples imagination. That somehow Jesus teaching and example were so strong that he lived on in the corporate memory of his followers and the resurrection stories were simply that, stories that the apostles made up to explain the strong presence of Jesus they felt.

We prefer that explanation because the bodily resurrection of Jesus strains our credulity and seems frankly outrageous in our enlightened, modern, scientific age. This is not new. It has always been outrageous. It has always been the stumbling stone. When Paul preached the doctrine of the resurrection to the Athenian philosophers, most of them mocked him (Acts 17:32). To the Greeks, *being rid of the body* was their great hope. Why would any person want to have their body resurrected? Furthermore, *how* could the body be resurrected, when the elements of the body would decay and become a part of the earth? To them the doctrine of resurrection was foolish and impossible.

I once tended towards this view until I began to read the work of James Allison and Rene Girard on their theory and theology of mimetic violence. What they emphasize is that it was only when the disciples came face to face with the resurrected Christ that they began to understand themselves and their society. It was only through the liberating encounter with the risen Lord that they finally got what Jesus had been trying to teach. They finally began to understand love, peace and forgiveness and they saw that Jesus was calling them into a radically new way of life – I mean radical.

Perhaps the most radical thing Jesus says in the entirety of John's Gospel is when he stands in the midst of the disciples and after all he had suffered – betrayal, torture and death he says those words – peace be with you. With those words he breaks the pattern of human relating, the cycle of scapegoating, violence, blame, them and us. As the eternal innocent victim he offers a new way and those first witnesses actually, miraculously understood what he was

offering. What he offered does indeed change the way the communities hold together. In this view the resurrection is the most important part of our faith. On it hinge all the other things we say about God's plan and providence. On it hinges our hope, our vision and our mission. It is the one thing that makes sense of everything that came before and everything that the church has taught and worked for since. It is the one thing that gives real hope.

Let me try and explain why.

Scripture tells us a story, the great cosmic story if you like. You have all heard this story. The story tells us that by and through love God created the universe including the earth. Humans were created to be loving partners and companions in this good and beautiful creation and we are still in the process of co-creating with God. We were created to love and worship God and care for creation. But patently we haven't and we don't and we do not embrace what we can become. We haven't from almost the very beginning. Evil and it's many manifestations - rebellion, rejecting God, idolatry, oppression and violence to name a few became part of our world. However God had a plan to redeem, bring everything back into order again, where his kingdom, his vision of love and co-creation, would be the ultimate reality. That plan culminated in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The resurrection of Jesus ushered in a new creation that is still being created.

Jesus is the 'first fruit' of this new creation as Romans puts it. The story of Jesus does not end with the ascension. It is an ongoing story that involves the whole of creation not just some divine actors and us humans. In the story the old is redeemed, sin is dealt with, evil is disempowered and death is vanquished, the Kingdom has come and will continue to come, and Christ will come to judge the living and the dead...and as Thessalonians puts it "*the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangels call and with the sound of God's trumpet will descend from heaven and the dead in Christ will rise*".

Now whoa there I hear you say. The dead rising? Bodies coming up out of graves? Sounds like a bad horror movie. Hands up if when you get to the part in the creed where it talks about the resurrection of the dead you cross your fingers or do some deft mental gymnastics? There is so much confusing and weird stuff in this idea. What about people who are cremated? How is that going to work?

All this puzzled and concerned the early church teachers as well. Tertullian who lived in the second century had this question posed to him. Suppose a cannibal eats a Christian, and suppose the cannibal then himself becomes a Christian. The Christians body has become part of the cannibal's body; who will have which bits at the resurrection? Tertullian gives a brusque answer – it's God's business, he's the creator, so he can and he will sort it out.

Origen, faced with similar questions replies in a more nuanced way. Our bodies he states are in a state of flux. It isn't just that our hair and fingernails grow and are cut off, our entire physical substance is slowly changing. What we today call atoms and molecules pass through us, leaving us with continuity of form but transience of matter. C.S Lewis would say we are like a curve in a wave. These arguments hold true today as well. We now know that we change our entire physical kit, every atom and molecule, over a period of seven years or so. I am physically a totally different person now from the person I was ten years ago. And yet I am still me. Think curve in a wave.

Scripture in fact teaches that our resurrection bodies will be like Christ's – material and physical but transformed. We will not rise from the grave looking like zombies. We will be re-born in bodies that are more solid, more real, more substantial than our present ones - bodies that have the weight of glory.

This body will be immortal in the sense that it will no longer be subject to sickness, injury,

decay and death itself. This may explain the strangeness of the risen body of Jesus. The disciples were looking at the first, and so far, the only, piece of incorruptible, completely transformed flesh. My favourite piece of argument about the resurrection of the body comes from Hugh of St. Victor who lived in the 12th century. He taught that the resurrection body will be identical with our earthly body but transfigured. He says:

“The resurrected body will be immune from death and sorrow; it will be at the height of it’s powers, free from disease and deformity, and around thirty years old, the age at which Christ began his ministry. It will surpass anything we can imagine”.

When I think of my Father who died of cancer over 15 years ago I find this vision infinitely more acceptable and heartening than one of him either as a decaying corpse, a disembodied soul or an angel like figure in white robes, or indeed a pile of ashes buried in a pot with a gardenia, which is where his physical remains currently reside. The Hugh of St. Victor idea has my father real, at his physical best, 30 years young, beautiful and there for me to embrace and enjoy. Now I stress that this is of course just an idea but an idea that is worth exploring if we are going to take the resurrection and new creation seriously. N.T. Wright says that an immortal body is something most people find so strange that they don’t even pause to wonder if that’s what Jesus, Paul and the other early Christians were talking about. But it is. Questions about how this is possible, and what actually happens, including silly ones about widows with seven husbands, were cleared up by Jesus 2000 years ago.

So what about heaven? Well the bible has next to nothing to say about heaven. It has even less to say about hell. When the New Testament refers to heaven it is the same as the kingdom – it is the place where God dwells. This place is not up there in the sky or on a cloud, although the language of up and down is used to describe the transition from one place to another. Heaven, the kingdom, is, as Jesus said, close at hand, within us, nearby, it is a seed already growing, it is coming. There is a veil between heaven and us that will one day be gone and then we will see clearly.

When we pray the Lords prayer we are praying that the Kingdom or heaven will come and be present on earth. Earth and heaven meet and join as Revelation states - Jesus comes to us, we don’t ascend to heaven. The whole notion of a soul going up to heaven and leaving this wicked, suffering and painful world is a case of platonic dualism and Gnostic wishful thinking that is just not there in scripture.

There is a time of ‘sleep in Christ’ before the resurrection of the body but there is no eternity as a disembodied soul. Besides being unscriptural it is also a convenient way to justify not caring for creation or the earth or for the poor. If the whole point of salvation is to get souls safely to heaven, why worry about the earth? Fundamentalist Christians justify eco genocide in just this way. But the point of salvation is not the future well being of our souls. It is not about us. I’ll say that again – it is not about us. Salvation is for the whole of creation. Those that accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and follow him take on the task of helping to make the Kingdom more and more real. It is about working for peace and justice in all parts of our life right now.

What we do in this life matters. What you do in the present – by painting, preaching, singing, sewing, praying, teaching, building hospitals, digging wells, campaigning for justice, writing poems, caring or the needy, loving your neighbour as yourself – will last into God’s future. These activities are not simply ways of making the present life a little less beastly, a little more bearable, until the day when we leave it all behind altogether. They are part of what we may call building for God’s Kingdom. Christians are workers and servants of God’s vision and plan for a new heaven and a new earth. We are co-workers in God’s great plan.

There is so much more to be said about all of this and we have only just touched the surface. But now I will leave you with some thoughts about the Eucharist. As you listen to the Eucharistic prayer notice the threads that runs through it – the goodness of the material world, God’s loving plan, resurrection and the second coming of Christ – when God’s heaven and earth come together and all is fulfilled. Pray the words with me and let the hope in them comfort you and stir you to action. Amen