

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Third Sunday of Easter - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Acts 3:12-19

Psalm 4

1 John 3:1-7

Luke 24:36b-48

04/15/2018

### **Gospel**

The Holy Gospel according to St. Luke:

36b Jesus himself stood among [the disciples] 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. 48You are witnesses of these things.”

The Gospel of our Lord.

### **Prayer**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

### **Resurrected Bodies**

Good morning! First, if you don't enjoy this sermon, blame Sue. She sent me down a rabbit hole this week, one that has resulted in the sermon you will hear today. But we begin with a question: what happens after we die? It's a common question to hear, we all wonder what awaits us after death. The answer we usually hear is that after we die our souls go to heaven until the end of time when we rejoice with all of heaven and earth. Right?

Wrong... you, my friends, just committed heresy.

Now before I explain why that is, let me tell you how we got here. I was reading the text for this Sunday and didn't really have much to go on, nothing was really jumping out for me this week. Most biblical scholars agree that the doubting Thomas text from last week in the Gospel of John and this story in the Gospel of Luke are from the same source. So, as I was thinking about how not to create the same sermon for you again, I stumbled upon this statement in a

commentary on today's reading regarding verse 37. *"In our language, we might say that the disciples thought they were encountering the dead, not the living. Jesus offering his body for examination and eating fish in their presence constitute a dramatic double insistence. First, the Christian faith does not embrace the Greek notion of the immortality of the soul, that is to say, that there is an indestructible element of human life, the soul or spirit, which comes into the body at birth and returns to God at death. Rather the gospel teaches that Jesus died and God raised him from the dead, and the hope of believers takes its shape from that central affirmation."*<sup>1</sup>

There it is. A brief statement about the bodily resurrection and suddenly I was off down the rabbit hole. It's not that I disagreed or didn't know, it was the fact that there, right in front of me, was something I had been unable to put into words over the last few months. I think that the bulk of Christianity, at least in the West, doesn't believe or doesn't understand that we claim a bodily resurrection occurred for Jesus Christ, and will occur for us.

In order to understand how we got here, you are going to have to bear with me. As I was preparing for this sermon it became abundantly clear that the rabbit hole had no end, and that for every rule, there was an exception. I'm going to have to make some generalizations if I'm going to get us to a place where we can make some sense of it all. This sermon is mostly about the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and the Christian hope in a bodily resurrection at some future time. But so much is connected to those ideas! I was reading about resurrection in general, the afterlife, Greek philosophy, the English words spirit, soul, and body, and the corresponding Greek and Hebrew words for those words, too. So much is connected that it was quite a challenge just to decide where to begin.

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<sup>1</sup>Craddock, Fred B. *Luke*. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. pp. 289.

So we'll start with the Apostles' Creed, specifically the third article: "*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen.*" The resurrection of the body we say, right there in the creed. σαρκὸς ἀνάστασιν, resurrection of the flesh, might be a more direct translation. The Apostle's Creed is from roughly the 4th Century. By this point in time the church formally accepts the creed as a true and faithful expression and explanation of our faith. But it wasn't always so clear, and the water got a little murkier in the 17th century.

The idea of a resurrection is something we don't really find in early Jewish writing. One scholar writes that "*It appears as though the dominant understanding of afterlife in First Temple times was that the dead went to Sheol. This was a place of darkness where all the dead went, regardless of their moral or immoral life on earth. It was not a reward or a punishment for anything.*"<sup>2</sup> The three main places in the Old Testament where we see reference to a resurrection are Isaiah 26, Ezekiel 37, and Daniel 12. The dry bones in Ezekiel is more of a metaphor for prophecy and the Isaiah reference tends to be a little confusing. Which leaves us with Daniel chapter 12. The book of Daniel is one of the later additions to the Old Testament canon, showing up roughly 150 years before the birth of Christ.

What's interesting for Christianity is that pretty much everyone who did believe that there would be a resurrection, and not everyone did, thought that it would be something that happened to everyone as a whole, at the end of time, all at once. This made it important for early Christians

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<sup>2</sup>*The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol. IV. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006. pp. 770

to figure out what they thought when it came to the resurrection of Jesus Christ, which didn't fit the commonly understood models.

What separated Judaism and Christianity from some of the other religions of the time was the influence of Greek philosophy, particularly the work of Plato. For the most part, the hellenized world believed in the immortality of the soul. This stood against the faith of the Jews and early Christians. It eventually led to an early church argument over something called Gnosticism, which separated the body and the soul, an idea that was condemned as heresy. Now this was a big deal, it was a major issue for the early church and it shows back up in the 17th century in the works of philosophers like Rene Descartes. He was a major part of what would become Rationalism and is probably most famous for his statement "I think, therefore I am." Now, Descartes was a believer in dualism, of which Gnosticism was an off-branch. Dualism was expressed in several different ways but for Descartes this played out as the body and the soul being two different entities. Because of the resurgence of Greek thought at this time it ends up bleeding back into Christianity, and we start speaking of the body and the soul as different things. The biblical witness tells us just the opposite, arguing "*...that the human person does not possess a 'soul' but is a soul...*"<sup>3</sup>

When it comes to the New Testament the writings of Paul are our earliest sources for what the early church was thinking regarding our resurrected bodies. In his first letter to the church in Corinth he deals with this exact issue. When someone asks the obvious question on all of our minds: What is this resurrection body like? What can we expect? Paul's response is interesting... in 1 Corinthians 15:36 he writes "Fools!" It's not how I would have started, but I'm

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<sup>3</sup>*The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*. Vol.V. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2006.

not Paul. His point is that we're grasping at straws, it's almost impossible to understand what we're dealing with. He does go on to try and explain in some terms that we can understand, but his point is an important reminder that we really are trying to understand something we just don't have the ability to fully understand. Words often end up being confusing as we try to categorize what we believe and the exceptions to the rules make things murky. We see dimly, as if in a mirror.

So where does that leave us and why have I decided to subject you all to this sermon this morning? I think that our belief in a resurrection of the body has huge implications for the rest of our theology. It shapes how we understand heaven and our time here on earth. It also challenges us to think through what a resurrected body would mean for how we treat our own bodies here and now. William P. Loewe writes the following: *"So what is it like to be raised from the dead? Cancel that experience of mortality. Remove the shadow that hangs over all our moments, sweep away its uncertainty, anxiety, and fear: "this mortal body puts on immortality."*<sup>4</sup>

We are restored, made whole again. Actually we're made whole in a way that we've never been before. We become our best selves, able to live in ways that God had always intended. And how do I know? Just look back at the Gospel. *39Look 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.*" The season of Easter is a celebration that this isn't our final form, that God has wonderful plans for us and that creation will continue, that we will all fully reflect God's glory,

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<sup>4</sup>Loewe, William P. *The College Student's Introduction to Christology*. Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1996. pp. 103.

the glory that brought a man back from the dead, the glory that shines on us all in our baptism,  
and that gives us that wonderful hope. Amen.