

**“THE THINGS WE DON’T TALK ABOUT PART II:  
I BELIEVE IN THE RESURRECTION OF THE BODY”**

**1 Corinthians 15:12-14, 35-49**

**July 12, 2009**

**The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger**

I remember, several years ago here, as part of worship the whole congregation participated in an exercise. We read together the Apostles Creed, and people either stood up or raised their hands on the lines to which they could truly assent, and they sat down or lowered their hands for the parts of the creed they couldn’t understand, or were shaky about, or didn’t believe. When we got to the line: “I believe in the resurrection of the body,” there were only a few brave souls who remained standing.

Bodily resurrection: it’s such a strange, unimaginable concept. Did you notice how much trouble Paul was having with it in this morning’s reading? Resurrection itself stretches our theological muscles close to the limit. Throw in embodied resurrection and most people just shake their heads or give up. Yet the church has clung to this bizarre doctrine for 2000 years, and I, for one, am glad it has. Unfortunately, the Church or the various churches have done a poor job explaining why this line in the ancient creed appears as it does, and why it matters.

So let me start this morning with a historical theology lesson to try to do better: to explain to you, as best I can, why in the canon of Christian beliefs, this one was so important as to make it into our most ancient creed. Then, you get Liz’s opinion about why we should fight, and fight hard, not to let it go. So first, history.

We start at the very beginning of the Bible with the creation story in Genesis 2 where God creates human beings out of the dust of the ground and breathes into them the Spirit of life. Our bodies came first and then were enlivened. Out of this passage, Judaism, from very far back in time, developed a concept of personhood that insists we humans were created deliberately and primarily as embodied beings. That is to say that our bodies are not somehow secondary or accidental to some primary spiritual self that is us, like, say, Greco-Roman philosophy and many other ancient cultures taught. Judaism had and has a unitive concept of the self. We are not body and soul; we are instead, self, the Hebrew word is *nefesh*, and our selves exist in our bodies and through our bodies, and cannot be separated from our bodies.

This idea of a unified self is, as far as we know, unique to the literature and theology of Judaism, and later Christianity. However, this concept came under attack at the time of the early church, a time where philosophical conversation was highly valued, and the prevailing canon of philosophical thought was Greco-Roman which had a well developed understanding of the human person as body and soul, two separate entities. In the latter part of the first century, there arose a group called the Gnostics—whose influence permeated Christianity at many levels. There’s a lot to say about Gnosticism, but the belief that is important here is that the Gnostics claimed that Jesus was not really human. It was unthinkable to them that the divine would leave the realm of pure spirit—which is good—and truly become flesh—by its nature, corruptible and corrupt. They believed absolutely in the divinity of Jesus. So they proposed that Jesus’s humanity was an insubstantial shell. Jesus didn’t really know emotion. Jesus didn’t really feel bodily things: hunger or thirst, or fatigue or pain. The crucifixion was all a teaching illusion.

A conversation about the nature of the self began, and the great minds of the infant church went to war with their minds, their hearts, their experience of both the historical Jesus and the Risen Christ, and their pens. Letters were written, councils called, and when the dust settled some 200 years later—the news cycle moved considerably slower in those days—the old creed of the Apostles was affirmed, which included that Jesus’ humanity was real, that his suffering and death were real, that his self was of the same substance as ours, so if he was resurrected—yes, and if resurrection is to be also our lot—yes again; well, then, being that our bodies are inseparable from our selves, if we are going to go to God, then all of us must go to God, and all of us includes our bodies—somehow, some way.

Now you have to understand that this is a statement of pure theology, not science. If we say we believe in the resurrection of the body, we are not talking about what happens scientifically to flesh and bone after death. What we are insisting is that we believe in the integrity of our embodied selves, an integrity that can not and should not ever be severed, not even by death. Try not to think about the science of it, because that’s what really confounds us. But the question of what happens to the self after death is not a question that science can answer. Though theologians through the ages have certainly tried. Through a series of calculations unintelligible to me, Thomas Aquinas in the 11<sup>th</sup> century determined scientifically that men would be resurrected in their 21 year old bodies and women in their 18 year old bodies. Do you find that reassuring?

In a couple of weeks, I will be talking about Christian concepts of heaven, so hold your questions about resurrection in general until then. For today, we’re only focusing on the body part. Why would I affirm absolutely that I believe in the resurrection of the Body? It’s certainly not because I have any notion about what it is after our death. I care about what it means in terms of our lives here and now. I touched on this subject two months ago when I preached on the Ascension, but I don’t think it’s a subject we can talk about too much. Who are we in our bodies? How do we think about this flesh of our embodied humanity that can give us both such pleasure and such pain. Our bodies are God’s deliberate intention for us. They are gift. They are good. Think for a moment about the wonder of our senses—to see, to touch and be touched, to taste, to hear, to smell. Think of all we experience through our bodies—the joy of mastery, the physicality of labor, the wonder of laughter, the wholeness of intimacy. When we wake up each morning, someplace between that first stretch and when our feet hit the floor, we should give thanks to God that we are made fleshly beings. My favorite preacher and theologian, Barbara Brown Taylor, says that we should pray naked in front of a mirror at least once a week. And in the church, we should talk more and more openly about our embodied lives. If our bodies are holy, a gift of God, then in our church school curriculum, when we teach young children, we shouldn’t just teach that God loves them, but specifically that God’s loves embodied them and teach them to love and respect and take care of their bodies as they grow. For our adolescents, what would it mean to speak freely and honestly about sexuality as gift of God, and the implications of that for approaching relationship, treating both themselves and others as whole beings, with respect and responsibility. And as these bodies age, and don’t look the way they used to look or do the things they used to do, it impacts us on so many levels because what happens to our bodies happens to us. Where in the church is the place to talk about that, about how aging impacts our sense of ourselves, and the world, and God? Wouldn’t it be freeing if we could talk about all that in church, live our lives in this place more whole? Wouldn’t it be good if we reflected more often and more directly on what the experience of our bodies is teaching us about God?

The early church, up until the 4<sup>th</sup> century, affirmed strongly an embodied faith and a unified self. But once Constantine Christianized the Roman empire, two things happened: first, the church veered away from unitive personhood to a more culturally acceptable statement of self as spirit and body: Spirit good, body bad; Spirit leads us to God, body leads us away from God. Second, the imperial church became primarily concerned with forcing compliance with doctrine as article of faith, a far cry from the early church practice of theological debate within the body of believers. This historical circumstance allowed the church, at the same time, both to insist that people believe in the resurrection of the body and to pull that now doctrine completely away from its undergirding meaning. It became one of God's holy mysteries, something to believe just as a test of our believing. It's one of the great tragedies on the church that so much of church theology grew into distant and rigid doctrine in those days. In terms of our topic, it resulted in centuries of wrong theology, insisting on bodily resurrection while telling us that our bodies are either unimportant or just plain bad. For myself, I would gladly return embodied resurrection to where it belongs: grounded in the theology of Genesis, the theology of Jesus, the theology of Paul—it's always a celebration when I find myself in agreement with Paul. I believe in the resurrection of the body. I believe in the wholeness of the self. I believe that God intends us to learn important, life-affirming, transforming, holy things through the experience of our bodies, and the church needs to take that seriously in our teaching and reflection. I believe all this is well worth fighting for. Thanks be to God. Amen.