

Third Sunday of Easter (Easter 3B) – April 19, 2015
Acts 3:12-19; Psalm 4; I John 3:1-7; Luke 24:36b-48
By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean

No Mere Metaphor: The Utterly Strange Good News of Resurrection

We have become accustomed to Easter (and the Easter season). The historical event of Jesus' Resurrection—because it is built right into our calendar each year—has become so predictable and culturally integrated that it has become harder and harder to really encounter the depth and mystery of its strangeness. Instead, it has become as automatic as daffodils popping up at the first spring-like weather.

Yet, there is something very strange about the Resurrection in every account found in the New Testament. As I said last week, in each account, no matter the difference in persons or places involved, the disciples and friends of Jesus are surprised utterly by the Resurrection of Jesus. In spite of his earlier promises that he would be raised from the dead, that seems to escape them. Instead, they either cower behind closed doors or, resigned to the cruel fate of his death, they head back disappointed to Galilee, to their families and their former jobs. The Resurrection is neither awaited nor expected, it seems, and it catches them entirely off guard.

But another reason the Resurrection is so strange is because for all the New Testament eyewitnesses and witnesses the Resurrection is *no mere metaphor*. When they speak of their encounters with Jesus of Nazareth raised from the dead, they mean an actual encounter with Jesus alive and at large in the world, alive to the touch; so alive that in today's gospel account, Luke even records that Risen Jesus could eat broiled fish right in their presence—a truth stranger than any fiction or metaphor. Their witness was not some otherwise poetic way of saying, "let's pretend he was raised from the dead." Theirs was not just some figurative proclamation of some lasting shimmering ideal of human goodness living on in their hearts, or of the resilient power of hopeful thought in the midst of tragedy, or of the timelessness of the truth of Jesus' teachings which they remembered. No, and nor was their proclamation one of celebrating the invincible immortal soul or spirit of an otherwise dead and buried Jesus, somehow marching on. No, their proclamation of Jesus as raised from the dead is much stranger, indeed. With help from Frederick Buechnerⁱ we can see better how Luke and the other gospel writers meant what they said regarding the fact of Jesus' Resurrection, as distinct from metaphoric reinterpretations which seek to avoid or deny the Resurrection through some form or another of a wish for immortality—which is what most people believe in, it seems.

Buechner states that "Immortal" means death-proof, somehow never dying. And to believe in the immortality of the soul, for example, is to believe, as the old song goes, that though John Brown's body lies a moldering in the grave, his soul goes marching on—simply because marching on is the nature of souls. Bodies die, but souls don't—that's what most people believe. Whether that's true or false, I sure don't claim to know. But what we do know is that the Bible does not share that view. The Biblical view is much

stranger—and yet, to me, more compelling, and differs in several ways from the belief in immortality.

First, the Biblical understanding of humanity is not that one has a body, but that one is a body. The body and soul which make up a person are inextricably part and parcel of each other, as the sticks and flames that make up a fire. The Hebrew word for body and soul is one word, *nephesh*. When we die, we die one hundred percent, all of us. God's breath of life returns to God. Otherwise, there is nothing to marching on with.

A second thing the Bible speaks of, as Buechner reminds us, is that the body is something good, not something gross or embarrassing. The body is a good and glorious creation. How could it be otherwise, since it was created by a good and glorious God? Sure, our bodies do feel like a big hindrance and embarrassment sometimes; and we know all too well how some come broken, and how they *all* eventually break down. But the body is a good thing nonetheless. So when we die, something good dies. So, for example, when Jesus heard that his friend Lazarus had died, he didn't speak some pious clichés about the will of God or Lazarus' soul or spirit living on. Instead, he wept.

Now, a third thing the Bible speaks of is God, and therefore it speaks of God's action in resurrection, rather than some timeless, invincible spirit of humanity that is immortal, that can't die. Those who believe in the immortality of the soul believe that life after death is as natural and familiar a function of a person as digestion after a meal. But the Bible, instead, speaks of resurrection. It is entirely unnatural and utterly strange. Buechner's insight is that humanity does not go on living beyond the grave because that is how we are made. Rather, we go to the grave as dead as doornails, and are given life back again by God in resurrection, just as we were given it by God in the first place; because that is the way God is "made," as it were.

And what good news that is! If it were up to us to work out the details of our afterlife—or afterlives—we would probably make as many mistakes as we have in our present life, only on an eternal scale.

Jesus Risen from the dead is the proclamation of Easter—Jesus who is called "the firstborn from the dead."ⁱⁱ Even Jesus did not raise himself from death, invincible as his spirit was. No, it was God who raised him, and did so in his whole body/soul.

From this Biblical witness, the early Church created its Creeds, all of which affirm belief and hope in the Resurrection of the Body. In other words, they affirm the belief that what God prizes enough to bring back to life is not just some disembodied echo of a human being, but a new and revised version of all the things which make us the particular human beings that we are, and which we need something like a body to express—things such as our personality, the way we look, the sound of our voice, our particular capacity for creating and loving—a "spiritual body" as St. Paul called itⁱⁱⁱ—spiritual yet nonetheless a body, which can even eat a piece of broiled fish, as Luke's gospel testifies today.

And so, the idea of the immortality of the soul is based on the view of humanity's indomitable and invincible spirit. The idea of the resurrection of the body, on the other hand, is based on the experience of God's unspeakable Love and Power once the human spirit is snuffed out.

So, today we proclaim again Jesus Christ risen from the dead—"the firstborn from the dead"—and because of this fact, we too will experience the same. In the meantime, we can participate in Christ's Resurrected life here and now as we are empowered to join the ongoing mission of the Risen Jesus who is loose in the world and in our hearts. For Jesus, who raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, and who himself was raised from the dead, and is the one who will raise us from the dead—is the same one without whom we would not have life to begin with. Jesus' saying, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25) is stated in the present tense; and he enables transformation to occur in the here and now.^{iv} Jesus' Resurrection for us, and in us, is about how life can be lived here and now in resolute hope and faith and love, in Christ's presence and purpose, which are often hidden in plain sight. And so, our lives are not just dress rehearsals for our afterlife as much as they are about being and acting in the play itself, in the present moment, which of course is the only moment this side of death that we are truly alive. The poet Wendell Berry suggests that a life marked by the Resurrection is a life led against the grain, almost as unnatural as the resurrection of the body. In his poem, "Manifesto," Berry writes, "...every day do something that won't compute. Love the Lord. Love the world...Love someone who does not deserve it [or who seems unlovable]...Practice resurrection."^v Amen

ⁱ Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC (London: Collins, 1973), pp. 41-43.

ⁱⁱ Colossians 1:18; see also Revelation 1:5

ⁱⁱⁱ 1 Corinthians 15:44

^{iv} Jesus, who is the resurrection and the life, doesn't just make that reality apparent only in the afterlife, but rather in the midst of living and life itself. The greatest tragedy is not death itself, but what dies in us while we are still alive.

^v MANIFESTO: THE MAD FARMER LIBERATION FRONT by Wendell Berry

Love the quick profit, the annual raise, vacation with pay.
 Want more of everything made.
 Be afraid to know you neighbors and to die.
 And you will have a window in your head.
 Not even your future will be a mystery any more.
 Your mind will be punched in a card and shut away in a little drawer.
 When they want you to buy something they will call you.
 When they want you to die for profit they will let you know.
 So, friends, every day do something that won't compute.
 Love the Lord. Love the world. Work for nothing.
 Take all that you have and be poor.
 Love someone who does not deserve it.
 Denounce the government and embrace the flag.
 Hope to live in that free republic for which it stands.
 Give your approval to all you cannot understand.
 Praise ignorance,

for what man has not encountered he has not destroyed.
Ask the questions that have no answers.
Invest in the millennium.
Plant sequoias.
Say that your main crop is the forest that you did not plant,
that you will not live to harvest.
Say that the leaves are harvested when they have rotted into the mold.
Call that profit. Prophecy such returns.
Put your faith in the two inches of humus that will build under the trees
every thousand years.
Listen to carrion—put your ear close,
and hear the faint chattering of the songs that are to come.
Expect the end of the world.
Laugh. Laughter is immeasurable.
Be joyful though you have considered all the facts.
So long as women do not go cheap for power,
please women more than men.
Ask yourself: Will this satisfy a woman satisfied to bear a child?
Will this disturb the sleep of a woman near to giving birth?
Go with your love to the fields.
Lie easy in the shade. Rest your head in her lap.
Swear allegiance to what is highest your thoughts.
As soon as the generals and politicians can predict the motions
of your mind, lose it.
Leave it as a sign to mark the false trail, the way you didn't go.
Be like the fox who makes more tracks than necessary,
some in the wrong direction.
Practice resurrection.