

Easter Day Evensong Luke 24:36-48

So I was sat with a widow, planning the memorial service for her husband, and the question came up of which readings they should have at the service. It had been pretty clear from the outset that this wasn't an especially religious family. They wanted the context of a church building, they wanted a vicar and some beautiful church music – but not too much actual belief. 'I don't really know much about the Bible,' she said, 'but anyway, it is all just metaphor, isn't it?'

'It's all just metaphor, isn't it.' Well, I resisted the temptation to give an instant supervision in biblical interpretation – but unsurprisingly, the picture is a bit more complicated than that. First of all, theologians and philosophers have written entire books discussing what exactly a metaphor is, and sharply criticising the notion that it represents an inferior level of truth – as if one has 'real truth' and then 'just metaphor'. To call Jesus the Son of God, for instance, is to use a metaphor – to speak of one thing in terms of another, of the divine life in terms of human relationships – but most theologians would want to deny pretty sternly that it's **just** a metaphor, something that could be easily replaced with another, better image. But even before you get into that kind of debate, it's pretty clear that in fact not all of the Bible is metaphor – some of it is intended as pretty straightforward statement of fact. Jesus got into the boat – there's no metaphor, he just did. But I suspect – although I didn't press too hard – that what my widow really meant was things like what we've just read – like the story of Jesus appearing to his disciples after death in bodily form, eating a fish, stories of bodily resurrection – well, **that's** just metaphor.

It is hardly a new thing in history that people find the resurrection stories hard to believe as straightforward history. As early as the second century, Christian belief in bodily resurrection attracted the scorn of pagan critics such as Celsus, who wrote this:

'Who saw this (bodily resurrection)? A hysterical female, as you say, and perhaps some other one of those who were deluded by the same sorcery, who either dreamt in a certain state of mind and through wishful thinking had a hallucination due to some mistaken notion (an experience which has happened to thousands), or, which is more likely, wanted to impress the others by telling this fantastic tale, and so by this cock and bull story to provide a chance for other beggars.' (109)

Celsus – you will have gathered – didn't really like Christianity. But even Christians have sometimes wanted to get away from the sheer crudity of resurrection according to Luke – the kind of resurrection that involves flesh and bone and eating fish. Some theologians have suggested that such stories only emerged relatively late in Christian tradition, as symbolic embellishments of a primitive resurrection experience which was very different. What resurrection really means, such theologians suggest, is something like what happened to St. Paul on the Damascus Road – a spiritual encounter with a glorified Jesus, which can only be described in terms of blinding light, vision, voices, and changed lives. Such a resurrection belief really has rather little to do with an empty tomb – and indeed it is worth noting that Paul, - our earliest Christian writer – doesn't even mention that there was one.

Which suggests, actually, that the sceptics might be half-right: that whatever resurrection means, it can't be reduced to the discovery of an empty tomb and the restoration of Jesus' body to life. It is about a great deal more than that – it is about the changed life of Saul from murderer to apostle, it is about the crashing down of division between Jew and Gentile which he then spearheaded, and the end of all that cuts us from each other. Resurrection means that Love is stronger than death. If the empty tomb is a metaphor, that's what it points to. 'Meta-phor' – something that *carries with* -Love's

victory is the truth carried with the story of the empty tomb and the risen body.

But the sharp question to the sceptics has to be: can you really have the bigger meaning without the story that carries it? If Jesus' body rots in the tomb, then in what real sense *is* Love victorious over death, in what real sense is the power that destroys all friendship and communion ended? Christianity always claimed that Jesus was more than a good example: he was the one who not only pointed the way to the Kingdom, but in whom the Kingdom came. If death devoured him, the Kingdom is gone, and we are lost.

But isn't there another option? Mightn't we say – as many do – that there was a spiritual resurrection, that whilst the body of Jesus might have rotted away, his spirit or soul lived on, and that this is resurrection? Several things need to be said in response to this very popular move.

Firstly, it is clearly not what the biblical authors were testifying to. Even St. Paul, for all his lack of interest in the empty tomb, is in no doubt that whatever the risen Jesus is, he is bodily. For first century Jewish writers to use the language of resurrection simply meant that the body had to be involved – on a purely semantic level, that is what the word 'resurrection' meant. They had other ways of imagining life after death – as the mention of ghosts in Luke's account suggests – and they deliberately chose not to use them. The only way of being faithful to what they had seen and heard was to say that Jesus' body was no longer in a tomb.

Secondly, this was not only a matter of trying to be accurate witnesses. Even more significant is the fact that for all the New Testament authors, the idea that one could have a victory over death which did not involve the body would have been profoundly strange. There might be bodiless survival after death – but such existence was a sad, attenuated, ghostly thing, a ghostly existence – it was not victory, not the Kingdom. In the Hebrew Scriptures, to be a person is to be a unity of body and spirit: to have one without the other is not to be a real person. If Jesus is not risen in the body, then he isn't really risen: Death has reduced him to a shadow of his former self.

Thirdly, that biblical notion of a person being a unity of spirit and body actually makes good sense, it's something our minds should welcome and embrace. After all, what bit of you isn't in some way wrapped up with your physicality? Your inmost thoughts and feelings, your most spiritual moments, could not happen without connections in your brain firing up. No-one else could know anything about you were it not for the muscles and nerves that allow you to speak, that give your body language. Persons are bodies – so if bodies are left out of the resurrection, so are we.

And that 'we' brings us to the last point: the New Testament is always concerned about the 'we': what happens to us, what we can hope for in the light of Jesus' resurrection. And its answer is, because he is risen, so will we. Because his body is glorified – amazingly transformed, stupendously different as some resurrection stories emphasise, but still really a body, really his, as this morning's Gospel makes clear – so will we be. Amazingly transformed, stupendously different, sharing in the glory of God – but still us. If you believe in Jesus, says Bishop Tom Wright, you are a but a shadow of your future self. Or, more poetically, Gerard Manley Hopkins:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash, I am all at once what Christ is, ' since he was what I am, and This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, ' patch, matchwood, immortal diamond, is immortal diamond.

Peter Waddell