

Fr. Curtis Miller     April 17-18, 2021     Homily for the Third Sunday of Easter

What is the resurrection? It sounds like a basic question. It's our belief that Jesus rose from the dead after His crucifixion, and that He promises to raise us to eternal life, too. But how does it work? Is resurrection actually possible? Is it reasonable to believe in it? To answer these questions, we will have to consider some heavy topics in philosophy and science. Bear with me. It's worth thinking about seriously.

Some say that the resurrection is just a metaphor, symbolic of someone's memory living on. Many unbelievers dismiss the resurrection as wishful thinking, a delusion of pre-scientific, ancient people, unable to cope with the awful reality of ceasing to be at death. But historically that was not the case. Ancient people were much more concerned about daily survival, and their religions were focused on the needs of this life: begging the gods for fruitful crops, seeking protection from natural disasters, and victory over their enemies. Even Abraham and Sarah in the Book of Genesis asked God not for eternal life but rather for a son, so that they might live on through their descendants. Later, ancient Jews came to have a vague belief in a place called Sheol, and the Greeks in a similar place called the Elysian Fields, an afterlife where favored souls could live on, in some shadowy form, for at least as long as they were remembered by the living. If forgotten, they might fade away. (This idea came up recently as the plot of the Disney movie, *Coco*).

The first person to forcefully argue that we have immortal souls was not a religious leader appealing to faith, but a philosopher using reason and logic: Socrates. Sentenced to death, Socrates was remarkably unafraid to die, arguing that his soul transcended the limits of his body, and would survive death. (He has a number of arguments to support this idea, but I couldn't explain them clearly in a short time, so mercifully, I will push ahead).

This idea spread to many cultures. Among the Jews, the Pharisees accepted the belief that the soul is immortal, while the Sadducees rejected it (hence, the lame joke: "They were sad, you see, because they didn't believe in eternal life"). It was the Sadducees who tried to trip Jesus up with their question about a woman who successively marries seven brothers after each of them dies: In eternal life, whose wife will she be? The Sadducees are trying to make belief in resurrection seem absurd. Yet Jesus responds by saying that life in heaven is so different from life on earth that their question is pointless. In heaven, people will neither marry nor be given in marriage. It's hard for us to even think about what heaven is like while confined in this limited world. As St. Paul writes, "eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has the human heart conceived" of the wonders that God has prepared for us in eternal life.

Let's take a step back to ask some basic questions. What is death? It is the separation of the body and the soul. The body is the visible, physical part of me, while

the soul is the invisible, spiritual part of me. As we age, our bodies weaken and start to break down. When we die, our bodies break down even more. Many of us are even cremated. Yet our souls endure, and are judged by God, hopefully to be sent to Heaven, or at least Purgatory in preparation for eventually reaching Heaven. But what about our bodies? We Catholics believe in a literal bodily resurrection, that our bodies will be restored in some mysterious way and rejoined to our souls in eternal life. This is important because God created each of us as a union of body and soul. The body is a good thing, part of who we are, and part of the way we reflect the image of God. The body is the vehicle through which the soul expresses itself and acts. That's why it's important that we take care of our bodies and respect the bodies of others as temples of the Holy Spirit. That's why we put such care into performing the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead, and also the spiritual work of mercy of praying for the souls of the deceased.

In the resurrection of the dead, we believe that we will have glorified bodies, reunited with our souls, like the Body of the Risen Christ. As our reading today from Luke's Gospel reminds us, Jesus still had the same Body, bearing the wounds of crucifixion, yet mysteriously it is no longer bound by the rules of time and space. Jesus can appear and disappear, He can enter into rooms through locked doors, yet He still asks for a piece of fish to eat.

All this might seem too hard to believe literally, unless we start to reflect upon how mysterious our bodies and lives are. For instance, science tells us that the cells in our bodies are constantly being renewed with replacement cells. Not only do we clip our nails and cut our hair, but most of the cells in our bodies are replaced every seven to ten years. Think about what you were doing ten years ago, in April 2011. Your body from then is almost completely gone, obliterated, and yet here you are. From the moment of conception, inanimate cells are constantly being arranged to form our living bodies. How does that happen, something not alive (or dead) becoming a living body? Even to scientists, this is mysterious. Yet our faith teaches us that God has the power to orchestrate these complex systems, from the spinning electron to the movement of solar systems, to the beating of our hearts and the breathing of our lungs. Life is mysterious, yet God is the Lord of life and the Lord of love. God has the power to do all things, even to create and restore life. More importantly, He also has the love to want to share with us His eternal life. That is what the resurrection is and why it is reasonable to believe in it.