

## What will our post-resurrection bodies be like?

(These are notes taken of what the Rev. Dr. Katherine (Kate) Sonderegger had to say at the March 20, 2013, Region IV Lenten Series presentation.)

Modern minds may bracket Christ's Resurrection, and our own coming resurrection, when we say the creeds. This reluctance to claim the Resurrection is not modern, but is expressed in particularly modern ways. Yet Resurrection is the central promise in Christian life. Paul points out in his letter to the Corinthians that, if the Resurrection is false, then we as Christians are most to be pitied. These are not questions about the Passion of Christ. These are not questions about the teachings or life events of Christ. Instead, these are questions that we have about the doctrine of Resurrection that would make our belief pitiable. So, the significance of the Resurrection is as verdict, completion, and glory of the cross.

The Resurrection is central to the major prayer of the Eucharist service: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." From our vantage point, the Resurrection occurred in the historical past, but we proclaim that the Resurrection is present now. We cannot have our future resurrection, if Christ is not risen now. So, we would expect that Christians would have no reservations about the Resurrection. But, as modern Christians, we often find that the resurrection is one of the most difficult doctrines to affirm.

Many of us harbor a secret word that makes the doctrine of the Resurrection seem incredible. Many of us harbor suspicions, given our scientific world view, that puts a deep wall of separation between the Resurrection and the creeds and our scientific worldview.

Rudolf Boltmann, a 20<sup>th</sup> century German theologian who argued that those of us who live with electric lights and live in our ordered scientific world (who rely on laws of physics, etc.) have certain religious ideas that are no longer credible to us. We can use the words of faith, but what governs our lives is the scientific worldview. The religious view is a kind of mythology (symbol) that, in fact, doesn't govern our lives.

The doctrines that we think of as the "last things," that all the faithful or perhaps all humans will rise to meet Christ, and heaven/hell/life after death, these all have become much more difficult for us.

### Church's teaching about Resurrection

The central elements of the church's teaching about the Resurrection are these:

- The Resurrection is different from "returning from the dead." In other words, Lazarus, who Jesus raised from the dead, was not resurrection like Christ was resurrected. The difference is that Lazarus returned to a life like ours, whereas Christ returned different in many ways than before. Lazarus will die again to rise with Jesus. Jesus having raised Lazarus from the dead is a sign of Christ's Resurrection, but not an example of Resurrection. Lazarus died again.
- Resurrection is when death is no longer in front of us, but behind us.
- Resurrection actually is inconceivable to us. We cannot imagine what Resurrection is, or a Resurrected life is. We can look upon death, but we cannot experience what a post-Resurrection life will be, and we cannot see that post-Resurrection life direct. YET, there are Resurrection stories in the gospels. Jesus is hard to recognize. God has to open the people's eyes to comprehend who the Resurrected Jesus is. Jesus comes and goes suddenly. He eats (so is not a ghost), but he also goes through closed doors.
- The Resurrection has features of this world that we recognize. Corporeal features, but also spirit.
- Our church teaches that Christ's own rising includes our own. Not simply that Christ's was raised, then we, one by one, will rise. Instead, the letters of Paul and the gospel stories of judgment teach that in

rising we begin corporately. We die with Christ so that we may rise with Christ. There is a corporate nature of our resurrection, as well as a singular one in Christ.

### Three scientific views related to Resurrection

The first position that we might take about relating science to the Resurrection is that science helps us not one whit in this regard. This is one position to offer. Science looks for and organizes principles in a general way. We want from science the general physical category, the species, the laws. Science examines the universal, the repeatable events. However, as far as we know, there has only been one Resurrection. This makes Resurrection is unique, singular event. In both science and philosophy, a singular event is unknowable, scientifically because science derives knowledge only by comparison of one occurrence or event with others. The only way for us to comprehend an utterly singular event is for God to make it possible for us to believe this event. Pannenberg is one philosopher (and scientist) who thought this. He said that we can't even know about an utter singularity in an ordinary sense; we can only know one by comparing it to another (and there aren't others).

The second possible view that we might take is that science forbids belief in the doctrine of the Resurrection. Many of us take this view, although often quietly. This view requires a particular understanding of what bodies and matter are. Descartes famously said that bodies can be defined by requiring that they be in one place at one time. In other words, there is an organic basis to our existence that anchors us in our perceived reality in a particular way. Some examples: How do we know it's the same body after we have been resurrected? We can intuit that Jesus had the same body because the tomb was empty and no one discovered his body or bones elsewhere. What about us? What if we are created or lost at sea or destroyed by disease? Will we have the same body, post-resurrection? Historically, the doctrine of souls was used as a way around this difficulty. The idea was that our souls would be reunited with the matter of their physical body only later (i.e., when we die our souls would go to wherever they would ultimately go, and only when Jesus returned to earth would our physical bodies be reunited with our souls). However, this is a dualistic approach, one that separates our spirit and our physical beings.

The third possible view that we might take is that science actually teaches us a way to view the Resurrection and could give us a language and scenario to think of what a corporate-spiritual body could be like, post-resurrection. One example, to return to Pannenberg's thinking, is that we could use the Law of Thermodynamics (or at least a post-Newtonian worldview) to view the world as one of energy. Per physicists, matter is a "necessary illusion," one we need to function, but matter is really a collection of energy in a particular way, stacked up in recognizable ways. In this scientific understanding, matter is really a collection of atoms tied together by and pulsating with energy. If bodies are collection of energy, then what we call material reality is really more like a field of force. When this energy meets in a particularly dense way, then we have, for example, bodies, or nodes of existence. In this way we can use science to understand that there are invisible forces in the world, forces such as electricity, gravity, magnetism, for example, which makes us all much more interconnected that we recognize in everyday life. Space appears empty to us, but we are all really energy and interconnected through fields of force. If we accept this view, earlier objections aren't serious. If we are a body that is a collection of forces held together by a field of force, then after death we could be held together by a different field of force. That is, matter and spirit really are quite similar.

God has a special spiritual presence in our world by which God receives us and interacts with us. [Dr. Sonderegger didn't actually say this, but what she implied is that God, per Pannenberg, uses energy and forces to operate in our world, which works because we are, at root, energy.] In this view, death is when we become pure energy, or pure spirit. We see this in Christ. (Physicists say that we could all walk through walls, but very rarely.) Aquinas said that our minds will control our bodies in such a way that we become like light that can be controlled by thought. In this view music, for example, is a foretaste of truly spiritual energy.