

A Sermon for Low Sunday

Herbert McCabe OP

Given at Blackfriars, Oxford, on 2nd April.

You can take the reports of the resurrection of Christ as literally as you like; you can take them as simple accounts of the historical facts. There are some slight difficulties here because there seem to be some inconsistencies between the different stories, but one thing they all have most certainly in common. None of them says or implies or hints that Jesus simply woke up from death, as from a sleep, and got up and strolled out of the tomb back to ordinary life. There have been people who have said that Jesus did wake up in this way but that was because they thought he had not died, so there wasn't a real resurrection anyway. Nothing whatever in the New Testament suggests this.

If you take the scriptures, the earliest creeds, the writings of the early Fathers, the whole mainstream Christian tradition through the Middle Ages to our own time—you find no one has ever suggested that the resurrection meant the resuscitation of a corpse. For this reason I get a little tired of modern clergymen telling me that this is not what the resurrection is. I never thought it was; my Church never thought it was; nobody has ever thought it was.

What we have believed is that Jesus, because of his loving obedience to his Father's mission, obedience even unto death on the cross, was raised up by his Father through the work of the Spirit, and became transformed, transfigured and is now with us as the living risen Christ. Of course he is with us in the body—that is how human beings are with each other. Our bodies just are the ways in which we are with the rest of the material world and the rest of the human animals.

Of course the transformation of Jesus was a transformation of his body; for his body was not some temporary, disposable disguise such as a visiting god might wear in one of the classical myths; his living body was him. He was a real human being and that means a living body or, as the Old Testament sometimes says, 'a living soul'. For in Hebrew thinking (as, for that matter, in Aristotle) in a living creature, soul and body are one. It is only in death that the body becomes a corpse, separate from the ghost or 'dead soul' that flutters down to hades, Sheol, the underworld, where its fate depends in part on the proper burial of its

body. For the New Testament writers, if Jesus had left his body behind in the tomb he would simply be still dead, an absence, a ghost—a ghost that might well haunt you if you had not treated the body with due reverence in burial. That may be why, in the Gospels, when Jesus appears to his disciples he has to assure them that he is not a ghost haunting them. (For, after all, his body has not been found; it could have been desecrated by enemies, taken from the tomb and thrown on the hillside; and in that case his ghost might well appear.) Jesus reassures them that he really is alive; he himself and not a phantom; this is his body, the real bodily presence of Jesus.

You have to be careful here about the word ‘spiritual’—especially nowadays when it is often opposed to ‘material’, as in ‘Jesus rose from the dead not materially but in a spiritual sense’. Here ‘in a spiritual sense’ is like ‘in the deepest and truest sense’ or ‘at a profound level’, and, like them, it means much the same as ‘not really’. Quite often when people say that Jesus spiritually rose from the dead, they mean he didn’t rise from the dead but something else happened instead: something less vulgar and easier to swallow, something private and conveniently invisible, like the disciples acquiring a new or deeper faith.

But in the New Testament, spirit and spiritual are *never* opposed to the material and vulgar and bodily. What the spirit is contrasted with is death, with mortality, with desolation and meaninglessness and sin, with all that Paul (but not John) implies by ‘flesh’. ‘If Christ be with you’, says Paul, ‘the body is dying (mortal) because of sin; but the Spirit is life’ (he means the Holy Spirit) ... ‘He that raised up Jesus from the dead shall also quicken your dying bodies by his Spirit that dwells in you.’ In this particular passage Paul is not referring to our own resurrection but to the life of grace, the life in the Spirit, that our bodies already enjoy. You, your bodies, he is saying, are no longer doomed to death by sin but are bodies for living, alive with the Holy Spirit, the giver of life who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Like Jesus in John’s Gospel, Paul compares resurrection to the planting of a seed which seems dried up and dead but is buried in the earth and is transformed into a growing plant full of life. ‘What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable ... it is sown as a natural body, it is raised as a spiritual body’. Just as the plant has come from, and is, the astonishing continuation of that seed, so the living spiritual body is the astonishing continuation of that mortal, perishable body. The risen body of Christ is the mortal, perishable body that was Jesus, raised, transformed, miraculously transfigured and filled now fully and manifestly with the life of God: filled so to overflowing that this life, this Spirit of God, pours out from his body to those of his fellow men and women.

It is because we, our bodies, are united with that risen body of Christ that we have eternal life, the life of God. Already by the mysteries

of baptism and the eucharist our bodies belong to Christ's body but we have still to follow Christ in our bodies through death, to die in him and to be raised up in him. So John has Jesus saying: 'He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life *and* I will raise him up on the last day.' And Paul says: 'If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.'

But what was 'a resurrection like his' like? Of course we have no idea at all. Paul says we would be foolish even to ask. After all, we know hardly anything about what death is like, so how could we know what resurrection is like? We know enough about death to say that Jesus, like other people, died, but we do not know what death meant for him; we know enough about resurrection to know that he rose from the dead, but we do not know what that meant for him. We know what would count as Jesus not dying—if he carried on talking or moving or sleeping or whatever; and we know what would count as his not rising from the dead—if his body had simply rotted away in the tomb like anyone else's: but that is as far as it goes.

We express the meaning of his death by saying that he descended into hell, into Sheol, the land of shades; and we express the meaning of his resurrection by saying that he ascended into heaven, the court of God. But neither of these tell us much; they are images of going down and going up, but they do help to remind us that the resurrection does not mean that Jesus just moved up from the tomb to the surface of the earth like Lazarus; it means he moved from hell to heaven—because of the cross Jesus encompassed the whole cosmos from the depths to the heights. As it says in Ephesians: 'He who descended is he who ascended far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.'

It is because the body of Christ risen is no longer simply an item in the universe, but 'fills all things', that the appearances of the risen Christ are always reported as being peculiar. In particular, he is not easy to recognise. There is always a phase of doubt or questioning about who he is; and this is followed by a recognition which is an act of faith. The appearances of the risen Christ were like our sacraments. Christ, the real bodily Christ, was really present to Mary Magdalen, to the disciples at Emmaus, to Thomas (in our story tonight), just as Christ, the real bodily Christ, is really present to us in the eucharist; but in both cases he is recognised only by faith. Indeed, the Emmaus story combines both resurrection appearance and eucharist: 'They knew him in the breaking of bread'.

I am not, repeat *not*, saying that the presence of Christ either in the resurrection appearances or in the eucharist simply means that the disciples had faith or that we have faith. He, his body, is really there and those who think he is not—those who thought they were merely seeing a vision, a bodiless ghost, and those who think that what we are sharing in communion is bread and wine—are just mistaken. But to recognise that

he is truly there we have to be living, as he is, by the Holy Spirit, for that is what faith is. *Our* bodies must be spiritual, our bodies must be, in Paul's phrase, 'quicken'd by the Spirit that dwells in us' if we are to recognise the presence of the spiritual body of the risen Christ.

So when the disciples encounter the risen Christ, the appearance he presents is plainly not the appearance of the risen Christ (whatever that may be): whatever the transfiguration of Christ's mortal body may be (which 'fills all things') he is surely not about six feet high with blue eyes or whatever. These appearances no more show us what the risen Christ looks like than the appearances of bread and wine in the eucharist show us what the risen Christ looks like. In both cases we are dealing not with phenomena but with signs, with sacramental signs: not unveiling something but saying something.

Surely killing fish and eating them is no part of the risen life, but Jesus eats fish with his disciples as a sign: a sign of the messianic banquet, and as a sign that they are not seeing a ghost. As in the eucharist so with these appearances, these signs are there to be an expression of faith. In the stories it is never plainly evident who it is that is there: Mary thinks at first it is the gardener, the disciples going to Emmaus don't recognise Jesus while talking with him all afternoon; in all cases the recognition is a *credo*, an act of faith. In faith, and only by faith, we recognise that what we have here is the word of God, the Word of God made flesh; we have God revealing in these signs what is beyond our world, the world of the future, the kingdom of God.

And so it is with our story this evening. Thomas begins by laying down the empirical conditions under which he will admit that this is Jesus. Such evidence will be proof that it really is Jesus risen from the dead. Then he will be rationally satisfied—when he has placed his finger in the mark of the nails and put his hand in his side. But when it comes to the point, when Jesus challenges him, he does none of these things. He simply says: 'My Lord and my God.' And with this great act of faith John brings his Gospel to a close. (There is another chapter but it was added later.) Thomas, like the other apostles, was a witness to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and, like them, because he was a witness he believed; not in the sense that what they had seen was compelling, overwhelming evidence, but that they had seen the signs which were the life of Jesus and had been able to read them, to interpret them in faith. But John's Gospel is written for us, for those who came after, who were not apostolic witnesses, who had not seen and yet believe—who believe through other signs, who recognise Christ when they encounter him in the scriptures, in the sacraments of the Church, and, of course, in the poor and all who need us. These signs, says John, are written that you who have not seen may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.