

Take A Body...Add A Community
Easter Vigil
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For tidy minded rationalists the resurrection appearances of Jesus are a source of puzzlement and of frustration. Differing in details from gospel to gospel, with no actual eye witness accounts of the raising of Jesus, and most appearances having an elusive will o' the wisp quality about them, these tail end vignettes of the gospels can be a struggle for those who like everything cut and dried. What is more the resurrection scenes on offer in the Easter Sunday gospel readings are all of bewildered witnesses who saw the after effects of the resurrection, not of the event itself, and who are left wondering what to make of them. So in a way tidy minded rationalists are in good company. And wanting to take their concerns on board, I am going to spell out some of the common elements in the resurrection appearances.

Jesus appears only to those who knew him, the close-knit band of his immediate followers, and not to a wider audience, who in any case might have struggled to recognise him. Paul is of course a later exception, but it could be argued that he had become so obsessed with Jesus that he knew him well. Jesus is recognisably the same person the disciples previously knew, but in his conversation he gives no indication that he intends to resume his former ministry. Nor does he give any information about the heavenly realms, or any sign that he is with the Father and the Holy Spirit in the future world of the Kingdom. He is apparently a figure in transition between the what was and the what is to be of his state of existence. There is however a different quality of being about him in this transitional state. For instance, sometimes his followers don't recognise him at first. And always he turns up unexpectedly, and doesn't stay long.

Of course his followers are in transition too, and it could be argued that the business of Jesus in these appearances is to help and guide them through the transition. The content of what he has to say to them pursues two themes. They are to go out and proclaim his message, and to continue his mission. They are to become a community whose way of life will speak volumes about who inspired it, and what he was on about.

So those who are looking to the resurrection appearances of Jesus for a definitive take on the Christian message about eternal life are in a way, looking in the wrong place. These appearances have been called a ray of sunlight from heaven, but they don't actually reveal anything much about heaven at all. Their agenda is more about the mission imperatives of the newly forming Jesus community.

But as we listen to those gospel resurrection accounts we are very interested to know what they have to say about eternal life, and indeed they do shed light on the subject. However, it is in a sense a developed theme away from this transition time for Jesus and the disciples. We have to look at what Jesus was ultimately driving at, his vision of the completed destiny of humankind. I have called this sermon "Take a body...add a community." This slogan sums up the content of eternal life.

When Jesus presents himself to his startled followers he has a body that is recognisably the same as the physical presence they formerly knew him as. Indeed, as Thomas is about to find out, it even has the scars of crucifixion. As we shall be hearing at the Ascension, Jesus took this body in to the Godhead at the end of his season of resurrection appearances.

When the Christian faith talks about eternal life it does so by saying it believes in the resurrection of the body. After our death our soul must take a body, must become an embodied presence if we are to become fully who we are. For the body, our body, is the medium by which we relate to others, are available to others, connect with others. And it is the medium by which we are aware of ourselves. That sense of the shape of what we are relates also to our sense of who we are.

Of course not all of us are happy with the present state or shape of our bodies – we would prefer something more sleek and beautiful. So it is good to hear that Paul has assured us that we will be raised a spiritual body - that this present physical body is a kind of prototype, a seed, for a more glorious framework of connective existence. Our destiny is not to become some kind of disembodied spirit. That would be contrary to the very nature and structure of the kind of creatures that God has made us to be. There is something about our embodied status that God delights in, and he wants it to continue in a heightened and transformed mode of being in the life of the world to come.

I have called our risen body a glorious framework of connective existence. All the images of our risen life with God that are put before us in the Scriptures, and by the generality of saints, mystics and theologians, are those of community. We are to find our joy in one another. Indeed these are images of close connection with many people.

One wit has said that the Bible starts in a garden and ends in a city. Indeed a city is an often-repeated motif for talking about the style and site of the life of the redeemed. So if you don't like other people, and just want to be radically alone, then you may find heaven to be a hell.

And that relates back to the community engendering nature of Jesus' resurrection appearances. Even when he appears to just individuals,

which is an exception to the groups he most usually comes into the presence of, they are intended to deepen and widen the mutually belonging nature of the fellowship, which now carries his reputation with it. The church is to be, in Henri de Lubac's wonderful phrase, "the corporate destiny of mankind." De Lubac in his teaching ministry waged war on what he saw as the individualism that had sapped Christian's sense of collective belonging, that he makes clear is the very essence of our life together in the church. When the church is at its best it is a consortium of many different mentalities, outlooks, abilities and personalities. And this unusual unity in diversity, and diversity in unity, he saw as the great gift that the church had to hand on to the rest of humanity. Here was a model of what God intended the rest of the human race to share in. What is more this is the way things will be in the life of the world to come. As he put it: "There the saints dwell in fellowship and rejoice in common – *socialiter gaudentes*; their joy is derived from their community."

If I had to sum up the resurrection appearances of Jesus in one word, surprise is the one I would settle on. And that applies also to what he indicates as the shape of things to come for us in our ultimate Christian hope. What is on offer is surprisingly different to the consumer fantasies of individual self-fulfilment that surround us on every side. We are to be transformed, embodied, connectional people, who are delighted to be part of the throng of the redeemed.