

EASTER 3 – YEAR B

In the name of the Father +, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I hear some very interesting things when I travel to a funeral with the family in the front of the car. I never fail to be amazed at the strange ideas that people have about what happens to somebody after they die.

Sometimes they say that their loved one has become an angel or a star, or that they're sitting on a cloud doing the same things that they always did.

Even though so many people seem to have little or no faith, the belief in some sort of life after death, whatever form it might take, is widespread.

But what do we, and should we, as Christians believe about our bodies and our souls, and what happens to them after we die?

The clue for us is in the resurrection appearances of Jesus, such as the one we heard about in this morning's Gospel reading. Jesus appears among his disciples, in his risen body, and they touch him, and he talks and eats with them. The disciples were, obviously, frightened, startled, confused, dumbfounded: it's no wonder they thought they had seen a ghost. But what they saw and talked and ate with was not a ghost, but the real, fleshy, risen body of the Lord, whose crucifixion and burial they had witnessed. Jesus' body still bore the marks of the nails and the spear; it was clearly

identifiable as his body, the flesh that he had taken from the Virgin Mary, the body that the disciples recognised as being Jesus' own, but it was different. Jesus' resurrection body was the body that he had before he died: but this authentic body now possessed new characteristics: it was no longer subject to the limits of earth; it was no longer limited by space and time, hence Jesus could appear in a locked room to his disciples. His body, and his humanity, no longer belonged to the earth and the earthly realm: they now belonged to the life of the Trinity and the heavenly realm. Jesus appeared to his doubting, dejected, frightened disciples, to prove his resurrection. The empty tomb proved nothing: it was only the appearance of Jesus to his followers that proved that he had been raised from the dead. Jesus is able to appear in different guises after his resurrection, such as a gardener, so that when he revealed his true identity to his disciples, it would awaken their faith, helping them to understand that the Scriptures had been fulfilled by the resurrection of the Lord.

So, Jesus' resurrection body was not limited by earthly confines, and it was not able to die again. Christ's resurrection was not a return to an earthly life, as had happened in the miracles he performed when he raised people such as Lazarus from the dead. They were indeed raised from death, but

they returned to their earthly lives, in their earthly bodies, which would have to undergo death again. Jesus' resurrection body would never undergo death again, because he had broken the chains of death and hell by dying and rising to new life: his new body was filled with the Holy Spirit, and had passed beyond the boundaries of time and space into another life. S. Paul says, 'Christ being dead, dies no more: death has no more dominion over him,' and, 'Christ is risen from the dead, the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep.'

So, what does all this mean for us? Well, Christ's appearances to his disciples proved the resurrection, in which we have come to believe. The resurrection body of Christ that the disciples saw, and touched, and talked with and watched eat, was the type of body that we will receive when 'the dead are raised in Christ' at the end of time. We say in the creed that we believe in the resurrection of the body, and, if we truly believe that, then we must believe that after we died, we will receive our bodies once again. And they will be exactly that: our bodies. They will be recognisably ours, but they will no longer be mortal, frail, perishable and subject to decay as they are in this life: they will be transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit, into incorruptible, imperishable, glorious bodies that will last, and we

shall possess, forever. The resurrection body of Jesus is the first-fruits of what we, and all who die in Christ, shall receive. This is what S. Paul means when he says that 'Christ is the first-fruits of all who have fallen asleep.' So, that is the Christian hope of what will happen to our bodies. Yes, at death, to which we are subject because of our mortal human condition, our bodies decay, and return to the dust from which they came.

But we Christians believe that when we die, even though our mortal bodies die and decay, our souls live on. When we die, we pass to judgement, a particular judgement for each one of us that refers our lives to Christ, and from that point the soul passes through purgatory, and into everlasting life with God, if that person dies in the grace of God. So, to rise with Christ, we must also die with him, and that means uniting our own death to his death on the Cross. We must, for a while, as S. Paul puts it, 'Be away from the body and at home with the Lord'. The soul and the body will then be reunited on the day of the resurrection of all the dead, when those who have died in Christ will rise to enter eternal life in their own bodies, glorified, transformed, renewed, as was his after his resurrection.

In our baptism, we have already died and risen with Christ: we are born again of water and the Spirit; we are a new creation, no longer our own,

but the Lord's. This gives humanity a great dignity, a dignity which we must respect, and teach a respect for. Each one of us has been given life by God, and the bodies that we inhabit, whether we like them or not, in order to serve God and glorify him on this earth. Our bodies are 'temples of the Holy Spirit', as S. Paul teaches, and they must therefore be treated with respect, not only as God's living temples, but as gifts from him that we know we will one day receive again on the day when we are raised from the sleep of death and called into eternal life.

All this talk of death in Eastertide may seem miserable when we are supposed to be rejoicing. But this is precisely what the resurrection of Christ means: it not only means that Christ has broken the power of sin, Satan, death and hell, but that also that the disciples saw, and we believe in, the truly resurrected, alive, fleshy body of Christ, the foretaste of what we shall be at the end of time. For the Christian, then, death is ultimately good news: it is a cause for hope, that our souls and bodies will one day be united and made like the glorious body of Christ, 'who shall transform our lowly bodies that they may be like unto his glorious body, according to the mighty working by which he is able to subdue all things to himself'.

Jesus appeared to his disciples, proved his resurrection and gave them hope. We believe in his resurrection from the dead, and we also believe in our own. We shall follow where Christ has gone before: this is a cause for great rejoicing, and this is what we must tell the world. Let's not believe in or collude with this nonsense that some believe about people becoming angels or stars after they die: rather, let's tell the world the truth, that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and where he has gone we hope to follow, where our souls and bodies will be reunited in and for eternity, where with the angels and the saints we will praise Christ forever for his resurrection and for ours.

Amen.