

## WHAT WE WILL BE

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

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Scripture: I John 3:1-3; Luke 24:36b-48

In the movie **White Noise**, Michael Keaton plays an architect whose wife has been killed in a tragic accident. Much to his surprise, and at first, disbelief, he comes to realize that she is trying to get a message to him through the snowy white noise on the television screen. Using the breaks in the static, she delivers her cryptic messages, so that the movie is given over to the problems that occur when the dead try to communicate with the living.

Hollywood is good at this theme. The movie **Ghost** a few years ago had something of the same premise as Patrick Swayze, the victim of a fatal stabbing uses, of all people, Whoopi Goldberg as a medium to communicate warnings to his widow from the other side.

People are writing books right and left about experiences of the thin places where the separation between heaven and earth is almost like putting a glass to the wall and listening closely to the sounds from the room next door.

It's not quite that sort of thing that's going on in Luke's gospel when the risen Lord appears to the disciples in Jerusalem on Easter night. But to modern ears and eyes who want to believe such things it may sound the same.

Today, the Fourth Sunday of Eastertide, with the lilies gone from the sanctuary yellowing in the rooms of the nursing homes, the crowds down to their usual numbers, and life somewhat back to the dulling, deadening normal, comes this story from Luke about the disciples gathered together and how the risen Lord stood in their midst and spoke to them. The story of this appearance reminds us that for the church, Easter is not just a Sunday, but a season.

Luke takes us to that upper room where Cleopas and a fellow traveler are telling the disciples that they have encountered the risen Lord on the road between Emmaus and Jerusalem. They say their hearts burned with recognition when Jesus opened the scriptures to them and broke bread, as he had that night of his arrest. And just as they were speaking, Jesus stood in the midst of them saying, "Peace be with you."

It was, no doubt, startling for the disciples. Luke tells us they were "terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost." But Jesus asked for something to eat, and they gave him some broiled fish, and "he took it and ate it." Then, just as he had with the travelers on the Emmaus road, he opened the scriptures to them reminding them that he had to suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. Then he commissioned them to be witnesses of all that they had seen and heard.

And while I know we are supposed to be awestruck and inspired by this story, I can't help but say that my first reaction is astonishment. It is a peculiar story, don't you think, with the risen Lord returning on Easter night to make a cameo appearance before his doubtful disciples, who, even at the end of the story have not overcome their disbelief,

hardly knowing what to make of this One who seems like a ghost but who eats fish off the broiler!

What is it that Luke wants us to know about all this, because in my mind the story raises more questions than it provides answers. Three weeks into this Easter season, like everybody else, I have a pretty full dose of the mysterious in the questions left by the resurrection. What I would like to have now would be some answers about all that we have seen and heard.

Ernest Campbell, pastor emeritus at the Riverside Church here in New York, says that a preacher doesn't have to be very good on Easter Sunday. The brass and the handbells, the lilies and the full church are more eloquent than anything that comes from the pulpit. The Sunday you have to be good, he says, is the Sunday after Easter when the lilies are gone and the brass are put away, and the questions linger. And if that is true on the Sunday after Easter, how much more so, *yet three weeks later!*

And certainly one of the questions left unanswered has to do not so much with Jesus' resurrection, but ours. That resurrection we affirm as our belief when we recite the Apostle's Creed. You know, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting."

Ever think about what it is that we are affirming there? Claiming as our own expectation? Well, one thing is for sure, it's not immortality that we are affirming. A lot of us get confused about that. Which is why Luke remembers the part about the fish.

You see the disciples thought that they were encountering something having to do with the dead, something ghost-like. Which is why they were afraid. They thought he was ghost!

But then Jesus asks for something to eat, something that only the living do. It is Luke's odd way of balancing the ledger, keeping open the ambiguity and strangeness of the resurrection body in which Jesus appears.

The Greeks thought that there was something about the body that was indestructible, a soul or spirit, which comes into the body at birth and returns to God at death. Interesting but never proven.

The gospel's affirmation is that Jesus died as he said he must, and that after he died God raised him from the dead. Jesus dies as we do, laying down his life and trusting God with the rest.

He does not rise from force of will or recovery of faculties. He is not resuscitated but resurrected, and his resurrection lies in God's hands alone. The gospel writers are intent on getting that message across. Life is given by God and restored by God, and God alone.

St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians asks a good question about all this, one to which I suppose we'd all like to know the answer. "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?"

Paul answers his own question by saying that in the resurrection, "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. ...

sown in weakness, but raised in power. It is sown a physical body, and raised a spiritual body.” An interesting turn of phrase, *spiritual* body, an apparent contradiction in terms. But whatever it communicates, it communicates that the body in which we have lived is not what it once was. Not any more. And our resurrection bears a tension between the world we see and the world we do not yet see, that realm that we have only glimpsed from afar.

The risen Lord teaches the disciples after his resurrection that he had to suffer and die before he could be raised from the dead. And ever since we know that for Christians, death and resurrection go together, just as Good Friday and Easter, the two are inseparable.

For us this means that we, too, will die. Even Jesus died before he was raised from the dead. This body in which we live must come to an end, and death is not an illusion, it is real. Whatever our own resurrection may be it is not an escape from death, it is bearing with death, and facing its inevitability.

Some of you may remember that a little over a year ago, my sister Andrea died. Lung cancer. A spot appeared on an X-ray, and then another and another. The doctors missed it at first and so it grew. Finally, there was a biopsy and blood studies, an MRI, a PET Scan, the usual work up. Three kinds of cancer in her lungs and it had spread to her liver and her stomach. We had about three months from diagnosis to last breath, and none of it was pretty. Brave; yes. Sad; oh my yes. Painful? It was excruciating, and from the moment she was diagnosed until she died, she spent most of her time in the ICU, getting chemo, on a respirator, the best of medicine, the worst of suffering. It was agonizing to watch.

We went out to the cemetery, stood by the grave, the cold December chill of a Missouri daybreak adding to the shiver in our hearts. What do you say at the graveside with the smell of the open earth coming into your nose, the wind gusting in your face, the cold steel of the casket shining under the morning sun?

There are two preachers at every funeral. The one in the robe who speaks of resurrection. And the one in the distance with the ghoulish face, who laughs at all of us, old Death, who is claiming victory over his spoils, the one who makes fun of our solemn prayers and hopeful scriptures. Death, who does not believe in the resurrection, even though he must admit that there is One he could not claim, One whom God snatched away from his grip, Jesus, the first fruits of those who will put the lie to Death’s false bravado.

He still has his day, old Scratch, let the truth be told, there is no getting around it. But he is not what he used to be, this bully of the background, this braggart of the graveside.

For there is one who has faced him down and found him wanting. Jesus, who has gone this way before us and triumphed over the worst that death could do.

Because he lives, we live, too. And we believe that as God has raised him from the dead, God will raise us too, in spiritual bodies, whatever they are, like him.

John, the beloved disciple, writing to that community that bore his name touched on these same issues in his letters to the church.

“Beloved, we are God’s children now,” he said in the reassuring words of a pastor comforting his congregation, “what we will be,” he goes on, “what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when *he* is revealed, *we* will be like *him*, for we will see him as he is.”

Over the years I have asked a lot of people what they think the resurrection of the body will be like. Some years ago I asked Dr. Herb Oettgen, a Presbyterian and a cancer researcher at Memorial Sloan Kettering what he thinks of that. He tells me that he does not know, but that whatever our resurrection is, it must be a change. I think about the people over the years that he has treated, the suffering that he has seen, the indignity that cancer brings. And I understand his spare but eloquent comparison. Whatever the resurrection is, it is a change from that.

For more than fifteen years, I’ve been a member of a group of ministers called the Moveable Feast that goes away for a week each January. We study the Bible together and work on sermon ideas for the year. We hire a scholar from one of our seminaries to lead us in our work. And every year one of the resurrection stories is on our list of assigned texts. I have asked every New Testament and Old Testament scholar who has worked with us, representing a dozen seminaries or more how they understand the resurrection of the body. And for all of the wisdom I have consulted, the best minds of our theological seminaries, I have yet to hear a more cogent statement of what it is that lies at the center of our faith than John’s words to his congregation, “...what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when *he* is revealed, *we* will be like *him*, for we will see him as he is.”

Personally, I’m not too big on the specifics John offers us when he writes in the book of Revelation about the streets of gold and the gates of pearl and the walls of ruby and jasper. Too gaudy for me. Too much Tiffany and Cartier for my taste. Too much like the Trump Tower. And I can do without those many mansions that God is building for all of us in the heavenly house. Too much dusting and vacuuming for my sensibilities.

Most of all, I have no time for all this fantasy about the rapture and unmanned cars and airplanes with empty seats and clothes left behind. Rapture is a word that isn’t even in the Bible, and far too many people are living with a nervous expectation based on fear rather than hope, the worst motivation for faith that I can imagine.

No, it’s John’s minimalism that appeals to me: “what we will be has not yet been revealed. ...[but] when *he* is revealed, *we* will be like *him*, for we will see him as he is.”

You probably know Marilynne Robinson’s fictional book, *Gilead*, ostensibly a letter written by an aging Rev. John Ames, who reflects on his life for the sake of his springtime son. Early in the book, Ames thinks about his ministry and what he has said to his parishioners to comfort them as they neared death. Ames writes:

I don’t know how many times people have asked me what death is like, sometimes when they were only an hour or two from finding out for themselves. Even when I was a very young man, people as old as I am now would ask me, hold on to my hands and look into my eyes with their old milky eyes, as if they knew I knew and they were going to *make* me tell them. I used to say it was like going

home. We have no home in this world, I used to say, and then I'd walk back up the road to this old place and make myself a pot of coffee and a fried egg sandwich and listen to the radio, when I got one, in the dark as often as not.<sup>1</sup>

In the dark, at home, in this place where we have no home, we reach into the darkness of the unknown for our heavenly home and try to describe it. And what do we say about what we touch from this distance? "What we will be has not yet been revealed. [But] what we do know is this: when *he* is revealed, *we* will be like *him*, for we will see him as he is."

The details are finally not ours to know. The molecular structure of the spiritual body remains a mystery. The questions we may have will have to wait for the first hand experience that we will not be able to report.

But not knowing the details can be all right if we let go of our worry about *what* and *how*, and focus instead on *who*. The one with whom we shall be. The same God who gave us breath in the first place, who has sustained our every step, in whose arms we have nestled and been protected each night, and whose love for us exceeds our understanding. If it is to God that we are entrusted in our living and in our dying, then the rest will be all right.

St. Paul put it this way, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord, neither death nor life.

Daniel Day Williams, who taught at Union Seminary, a process theologian and something of a minimalist himself, once said of his own faith in the face of death, "I believe God will do with my life and with every life what an infinitely wise and caring God can and will do with it. And that is enough to live by and by which to die."<sup>2</sup>

The real question then is not whether *we* believe in God or whether God can do such marvelous things. But whether *God* believes in *us*, in which case all things are possible.

Good news today. God does believe in us. In God, all things are possible; even death has become life. And that knowledge is enough to live by, and by which to die.

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<sup>1</sup> Marilynne Robinson, **Gilead**. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2004. 3-4.

<sup>2</sup> <http://allthingswilliam.com/god.html>