

Immortal Soul or New Body??

Not so long ago I got an invite to listen to a Baptist minister from Texas talk about his horrific auto accident, during which time, he says in his best selling book, he took a trip to heaven.

Months after that talk, a neurosurgeon published his best selling book describing his adventures in the after life when he had an illness that caused his brain to stop functioning.

And then, out comes Hollywood weighing in on the story of a young boy who also had a near death experience and comes back to tell us all that "Heaven is for Real."

Now I'll tell you, I've found these stories to be fascinating for years.

Dr. Raymond Moody, way back in the prehistoric 1970s, sort of pioneered the modern fascination with Near Death Experiences as he interviewed hundreds of folks whose heart or brain had stopped, yet came back, describing very often very similar scenes of a bright tunnel, a feeling of overwhelming love, the appearance of long dead loved ones, and then a sudden return to earth and their bodies.

So don't get me wrong, I'm not dismissing these experiences or poo-pooing them - and yet, these kinds of disembodied experiences have very little to do with the Christian faith.

The notion that we have, inherently within us, an immortal soul that exists independently of the body, that exists in some ways even independently of God, well, that's a lot of Plato and not very much Jesus.

When we come to Jesus, what we get is not an immortal soul, a disembodied spirit, going off into the heavens, what we get in Jesus is a resurrected body - the same body that was killed and dead, yet a body that is also somehow completely new, completely different, transformed.

It's true, of course, that the resurrection of Jesus is without a doubt something that is impossible to get your head around.

And because we human beings, especially we post-modern, post-enlightenment human beings, love to pretend that we are on the verge of figuring everything out, sitting down with the resurrected Jesus really is just too much!

How do you understand this strange and inexplicable Jesus who somehow looks the same so that the apostles know instantly it is him, yet who also looks so completely

different that Mary Magdalene mistakes him for the gardener; who is as solid as you and I, yet suddenly appears to them on the road to Emmaus or in the locked upper room; then, just as quickly, disappears.

And so we tend to fall in love with the idea of the immortal soul that zooms into heaven while the dead body rots in the grave; not only because it's easier to understand, but for a more fundamentally human reason, which might be this: if we can rid ourselves of what actually happens in the resurrection of Jesus, of his fusing together of heaven and earth, of his actual, constant, totally real presence and activity here and now, if we can get rid of all that, well then, we can get back to a life where God is in his heaven and we are on our earth; where God's in control up there but, by God, we are in charge down here.

And that's just how we like it, isn't it?

This is why some high mucky mucks in the church can build multi-million dollar homes, and why so many who call themselves religious are more caught up with rules and regulations rather than with love and mercy, and how the richest one-percenters can kneel in church without a thought for the folks at the bottom.

With immortal souls and rotting bodies, we have an earth run by human rules with only the slightest nod to the rules of heaven.

And that is not our faith.

Take a moment and consider the implications.

If a soul simply floats off into heaven, who cares about the earth?

If a soul simply floats off to heaven, who cares for anyone else, except maybe our closest family members, our closest friends?

For us, the revolution that Jesus sets in motion, the revolution of the Kingdom of God invading our world, like the ravenous mustard weed invading the garden, like yeast exploding the dough, the revolution that Jesus sets in motion says that God's way is replacing our ways, that our best thinking has been exposed for the shallow sham that it is; and that in the resurrection of Jesus, raised bodily from the grave, old and new are fused, heaven and earth are joined, and the promise is made that one day we ourselves shall likewise be bodily raised from our graves, made new as well, transformed just as Jesus is transformed.

For if heaven and earth are joined into one, then our concerns are not just for our private derrieres but for every person, for all the earth, for all of humanity, and

what makes us holy is not so much our private moments with God but all that we are and all that we do in the never ending messiness that is the human life.

Nadia Bolz Weber recalls a song about a young woman who shows up in church with her hair done up in splintered glass: the title of the song being:

“Father, Let Me Show You What A Resurrection Looks Like.”

While disembodied souls fly up and off into the ether with nary a scar nor a bruise, when it comes to resurrection, well, resurrection takes all of our scars, all of our bruises, the physical, the mental, the spiritual, and somehow in ways we cannot grasp, changes them, redeems them, even heals them, but never ever discards them.

If our destiny is simply to be a disembodied soul forever and ever, why bother taking care of each other, or the planet, or the wider creation?

But resurrection starts with what is and then goes to great lengths to make it not nice, or cute or sweet, but new.

Hence the young woman with shards of glass in her hair:

“Father, let me show you what a resurrection looks like.”

Resurrection looks like the addict recovering from addiction, and the widow emerging from deep grief after the love of her life dies: resurrection looks like holes still there in his hands, holes still there in his feet.

Resurrection looks like the redeeming of God’s very good creation, because the entire aim of scripture, from Genesis to Revelation, is God making all things new!

We often point to the caterpillar as a friendly example of resurrection.

A furry worm crawls into a sleeping bag and emerges later a brightly colored beauty with wings to fly on.

But the metamorphosis that the caterpillar goes through is not like lounging in the sleeping bag while sweet little wing shoots emerge.

If you cut open a caterpillar’s cocoon during the transformation, what you will find is mush, black mush - and those of you who have experienced a taste of resurrection in this life know exactly what I’m talking about, don’t you? Barbara Brown Taylor.

It is from the mush that something new is created, something new that carries with it what came before.

I think that this is why, when the disciples ask Jesus to teach them to pray, he gives them The Lord's Prayer.

We pray it so often that sometimes I wonder if we really hear what we are praying.

There's not a word about getting our fanny's safely into heaven.

There's not a word about an eternal afterlife.

Instead, the prayer begins by recognizing the sovereignty of God.

Because, in a creation where God is sovereign, where God is in control, there is no death.

You see it whenever Jesus goes wandering around the countryside.

Every time he comes across a dead person, that person springs back to life.

You see it happen to the 12 year old daughter of Jairus ("Talitha cum, little girl, I say to you, arise!"), you see it happen as the widow of Nain accompanies her only son's funeral procession out of the town ("Young man, I say to you, rise!"), you see it most famously with 4 day dead Lazarus.

Where there is Jesus, there is life: where there is God, there is life.

That's why Jesus is having none of it when the Sadducees try out the trick question on him; about the gal married to 7 brothers: whose wife will she be at the resurrection, they sneer?

And the reply of Jesus is the reply we need to hear and embrace and sit with today:

"God is the God of the living, not the dead."

God is sovereign is the opening sentence of the Lord's prayer.

Meaning, our lives are safe, we are assured that the God who is faithful in our life is also faithful in our death.

Knowing that, we need not spend our time fantasizing or fretting or fabricating what comes after we close our eyes for the last time; that is for the faithful God to deal with; but instead, let's get back to living the faith we have!

And so the prayer continues, asking that God's kingdom to be made real and complete and present here on earth, asking for bread just for today; for the mutual forgiveness of debts, ours and those who owe us; for protection from the enemy here and now.

The Lord's prayer is the prayer of resurrection because the resurrected life is precisely the life that lets go, utterly, completely, without reservation, into the trustworthy hands of God, not only on death's bed, but in our awakening every morning.

The resurrected life is able to see the unity between heaven and earth, a unity made real by Jesus, and to grasp that that unity is the very ground on which we stand: it is that on which we live and move and have our being.

Every week when we pray the Lord's prayer-- we connect heaven and earth as this prayer challenges us to live our lives as if the kingdom of God were already fully here.

And I think this is the great gift that Thomas gives us this morning.

In Thomas we get a picture of the melding together of heaven and earth.

Remember when they are told that Lazarus is dying and Jesus waits two days before going to see him?

When he finally decides to go, the disciples beg him not to, for fear that the Jewish leaders will kill Jesus.

It is Thomas, brave Thomas, who says "let's go with him and we will die with him."

When Jesus gives his goodbyes and is telling his friends that he is leaving them, and assures them that they know where he is going, it is Thomas, practical Thomas, who speaks up and says:

"Lord, we don't know where you're going, we don't know the way." I

Leading Jesus to remind them all that "indeed you do know the way, because you know me, and I am the way."

And today, skeptical Thomas won't believe a word of the good news that Jesus is raised from the dead unless he can see it for himself.

And when he is given the great grace of seeing for himself, with Jesus offering him to touch the nail holes, to feel his pierced side, insightful Thomas joins heaven and earth by becoming the first person in all of Scripture to recognize Jesus for who he really is.

The slain carpenter from Galilee is, as Thomas comes to see, "my Lord and my God!"

Thomas is a terrific role model for all of us.

We all have days when we are brave or practical or skeptical and sometimes even full of insight.

And because of that, we have a friend in Thomas, who himself lived out all of these emotions in his journey of faith.

And we learn something else from Thomas this morning.

We learn that Jesus, the resurrected Jesus, is not a disembodied spirit.

We learn that, no matter what may happen to us immediately after our physical death, that our destiny is not to be a disembodied soul for all of eternity, but rather, our destiny is to be like Jesus -- with a mind, a body and a soul; the same, yet somehow transformed.

Happy Easter!

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