



WE BELIEVE IN THE *Resurrection of the Body*

by Jeffery Ries

“That’s not really her anymore. It’s just a shell. She’s safe in heaven now.”

A well-meaning person (I no longer remember who) spoke these words to me in July 2000 as I looked upon the body of my grandmother one last time before the casket was closed for the funeral service. Knowing that this person meant to comfort me allowed me to bite my tongue rather than reply in the swell of anger I felt. Nonetheless, the words gave no comfort but stung me deeply. That is my grandmother in that casket! Her body was not created as a mere shell from which her soul would one day be free. Those are the eyes that were once open and gleaming with pride and joy every time she looked upon me and my siblings and cousins. Those are the lips that kissed me on the cheek at every greeting and parting and that spoke

both words of love and admonishment as only a grandmother can speak. Those are the arms that held and hugged me in both times of joy and sorrow. More to the point is Luther’s teaching concerning our confession of the First Article of the Apostles’ Creed. My grandmother was created body **and** soul, every member lovingly created out of divine goodness and mercy by God our Father who took care of them (CF. JER. 1:5, PS. 139:13-14). The separation of her soul from her body is not good news. It is a big part of why death is our enemy.

Please don’t misread me here. It is good that my grandmother is at rest from her labors. It is good that she is free of temptation, out of harm’s way and her soul safe with Christ. But that doesn’t make her death good. The frailties of her fallen body and her death are a result of her sinfulness that is a result of humanity’s fall into sin. We

were created body **and** soul, and we were created not for death but life! Death is not a natural part of life (except as part of our fallen nature). Death is the wages of sin. While there is some comfort that my grandmother's death freed her from the suffering of bodily frailties, the news of the Gospel is **way** more and better than that. It is good news that we confess in the Third Article of the Creed. We "believe in the resurrection of the body." This good news is intimately tied in with Easter. Christ's resurrection is **our** resurrection. "For if we have been united with Him in a death like His, we shall certainly be united with Him in a resurrection like His" (**ROM. 6:5**).

This good news is also intimately tied in with Christ's two natures. Before Christ died and rose, He became **incarnate** in human flesh when He was "conceived by the Holy Spirit" in the womb of Mary. His incarnation remains. Christ was and is fully God and fully man. He ascended bodily into heaven.

There were a number of folks in the fourth and following centuries (who are now infamous characters in church history) who argued variously that Jesus was not fully human. (There are still pastors today who teach some form of this unfortunate falsehood.) Some taught that Jesus didn't have a real human body but simply came in the appearance of a human. They simply could not believe that God could enter a human. Because, well, God is just so big and awesome and mighty, and we humans are just so lowly and puny. But that's all part of the miracle of God's work of salvation. In his Gospel, John does **not** say that Jesus came among us and had the **appearance** of being in the flesh, but that, "The Word **became** Flesh and made His dwelling among us" (**JOHN 1:14**).

Some way cool and way smart theologians who would become known in history as the Cappadocian Fathers came on the scene in the latter part of the fourth century and provided the Church with some great wisdom and help concerning this issue. One of them, Gregory of Nazianzus, is credited with the statement: "That which was not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved." This critically important teaching reminds us that any part of humanity (body, soul, will/mind) that would not have been joined to God in Christ via the incarnation would not have been redeemed at Christ's cross. Humanity was fallen into sin; the corruption so great that the only recourse was its complete condemnation and destruction. Except that Christ Jesus, "who, though he was by very nature God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the nature of a servant, being born in the image of a man. And being found in **human form** he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (**PHIL. 2:6-8**).

Jesus Christ became incarnate in our flesh, a body just like ours. Thus in Christ not just my soul, but my body – my "eyes, ears and all my members" – have been redeemed by His death on the cross. So the good news of Christ's death and resurrection goes far beyond our

souls going to heaven. The resurrection is an event equally as important to our salvation as the crucifixion. "For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And **if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins**. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished" (**1 COR. 15:16-18**).

When Jesus rose again, He rose **bodily**. "Put your finger here, and see my hands; **and** put out your hand, and place it in my side" (**JOHN 20:27**). When Jesus ascended into heaven, He ascended with His full humanity intact. And so the fullness of humanity in Christ is drawn up with Christ into the glory of God in His kingdom that has no end. Because God in Christ has so intimately joined Himself to humanity, we who are in Christ have certainty in His words, "that where I am there you also will be" (**JOHN 14:3**).

So it is that on the last day when Christ returns, my grandmother will rise body and soul. It will be as Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 15: What was sown in weakness will rise in power. The perishable will put on the imperishable. "Then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (**1 COR. 15:54B-57**). This is true comfort for anyone suffering in body or soul and for those who mourn the death and miss the touch of someone deeply loved. ☞

.....
The Rev. Jeffrey Ries is pastor of Zion Lutheran Church, Tacoma, Wash.