

During Lent this year, we have been studying the Apostles' Creed. The Apostles' Creed is a statement of faith that sums up our beliefs as Christians. It was originally used by the early Christians as part of the preparation for baptism which usually occurred on Easter. Over the past five Sundays we have discussed our belief in God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, and the forgiveness of sins. Now we saved the best for last: "I believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." In other words, I believe in the Resurrection; that's what Easter is all about. The Creed ends where Easter begins with the Resurrection and the promise of life everlasting.

Because of our belief in the Resurrection, we can shout: "He is risen, He is risen indeed!" I definitely miss all of us being together this morning singing the traditional Easter hymns such as *Up from the Grave He Arose*, *He Lives*, and *Christ the Lord Is Risen Today*. These songs just stir your soul; so take some time today to either sing or listen to these wonderful hymns. Get in the spirit of Easter!

On Easter morning Jesus arose from the grave conquering death forever more, and opening the way to eternal life for all who will believe in Him. While Christmas is the most celebrated Christian holiday, in my opinion Easter is by far the most important because it defines who we are, what we believe and what is promised to us. While we should celebrate Easter every day, today especially we remember and worship the Risen Lord.

The Resurrection is at the heart of our belief as Christians. It is so important that it is recorded in all four Gospels. Listen to how the Gospel of Luke records it in the twenty-fourth chapter, the first twelve verses.

Read Luke 24:1-12

On this Easter morning let's consider the following questions: what is the Resurrection and do we truly believe in it? Our word resurrection comes from a Latin word meaning "rising from the dead or returning to life." In Acts 2:32, it is defined as God raising Jesus from the dead. 1 Corinthians 15 indicates that the resurrection is the future rising from the dead of all those who believe in Jesus Christ. In other words, it means that the grave is not our final resting place; there is life after death. It means that death was defeated by Jesus when He came out of that cold, dark tomb on that first Easter morning. As the Apostle Paul states at the end of the 15th chapter of 1 Corinthians, death has been swallowed up in victory. Then Paul makes that famous statement: "Where, o death, is your victory? Where, o death, is your sting?"

Do you believe that Jesus rose from the grave? Have you ever given this essential belief of the Christian faith serious thought? Now if you still have or have had any doubt about this, you are

not alone. Take the disciples for example. Jesus told them over and over again that the Son of God would suffer, be crucified and be raised from the grave on the third day. In the third chapter of John, in His conversation with the Pharisee Nicodemus Jesus stated that just as Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, so must the Son of God be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life. Later in the 12th chapter of John Jesus tells His disciples that when He is lifted up from the earth, He will draw all people unto Himself. In John 11:25, Jesus said: "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."

As you can see, over and over Jesus told His disciples that He would rise from the grave. One of the last things that He told them on the night that He was arrested was "after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." But there is not one single passage in the Bible that tells us that the disciples or the other followers had any expectation of His resurrection. However, in an ironic twist, it appears that the Jewish religious leaders who condemned Jesus had more faith than the disciples. When Jesus' body was laid in the tomb, the Jewish leaders asked Pilate to seal and guard the tomb because they remembered Jesus saying that He would rise again in three days.

Now the disciples heard this and much more, but they did not believe it, at least right away. Look what happened on Easter morning. Did they run to the tomb at daybreak with anticipation of finding it empty? No way, they were at home sound asleep like a lot of people on Sunday morning. The only ones who made the trip to the tomb that morning were the women, and they were just going to finish anointing Jesus' body for burial. We have no indication that they went with any anticipation of meeting the Risen Lord.

And when they find the empty tomb, their first thought is that someone had stolen Jesus' body. After the angels tell them that Jesus has risen, the women rush back and tell the disciples. Of course, they don't believe the women, but out of curiosity Peter and John run to the tomb. Our text this morning tells us that Peter went in first, saw the strips of burial cloths lying by themselves, and went away wondering what had happened. In the Gospel of John we are told that John saw and believed. We don't know the reactions of the other disciples, except doubting Thomas who had to see to believe. But when the Risen Lord later appeared to all of them, the disciples believed.

If you seek Jesus, don't go to the tomb; you will not find Him there. Isn't it interesting that after the disciples had seen the Risen Lord that they never visited the tomb again? At least there is no record of it in the Bible. Why should they? It was only a temporary resting place for the Lord. After that first Sunday evening, the disciples were done with the tomb. Why should they waste their time worshipping a place when they had the living Savior with them?

Someone has said that perhaps one of the greatest proofs of the Resurrection is the transformation of Jesus' disciples. It was the Resurrection which transformed Peter's fear into courage at Pentecost and Thomas' doubt into true faith. It was the Resurrection that changed the Jewish Sabbath into Sunday, and a small group of Jewish followers into the Christian Church. It was the Resurrection which changed Saul the Pharisee into Paul the apostle and turned him from persecuting Jesus' church into becoming one of its greatest missionaries.

Do you believe in the resurrection? Can you state without any doubt that: "I believe in the Resurrection of the body and life everlasting?" Now I think that most of us believe that Jesus rose from the grave and that the tomb was empty that Easter morning or we wouldn't be involved in church. But now that word "body" in the phrase "the resurrection of the body" can raise some serious questions. Does this phrase mean that this body we have will be resurrected? How is that possible given that our bodies start to decompose right after our death? And what about people buried at sea or those who are cremated? These are thought provoking questions.

This question came up in a class I was teaching on the Book of Revelation at St. Stephen's a few years ago. Arlo, who always provided insightful comments, said that he believed that when we get to heaven we will have the body of a 33 year old; the age Jesus was when He died. I don't know about you, but I can't remember what my body was like at 33, but had to be a lot better than the one I have now. But this just goes to show that we all have different opinions of what our bodies will be like and that no one knows for sure.

Now the appearances of Jesus following the Resurrection may give us some insight into what our heavenly bodies may look like. There were definitely changes in His body. Mary Magdalene did not recognize Him at first thinking that He was the gardener until He called her by name. The disciples walking to Emmaus thought He was a stranger. Others did not recognize Him at first. He had the scars from the crucifixion on His hands and side; flesh that the disciples could touch and was hungry. Yet He also could walk through walls, and appear out of nowhere.

So what kind of body will we have? The Apostle Paul tries to address this question in 1 Corinthians 15, verses 35 through 58. He states that it is God who will ultimately determine what kind of body we will have. Paul compares our bodies to seed being buried in the ground and emerging in new life. The natural body is buried and a spiritual body is raised. Thus, according to Paul there is a natural body that we currently have, and then there is a spiritual body that we will someday have. You can be sure that the resurrection of the body is not like some bad zombie movie.

Think about this: God, who wrote the software that makes up life, has our DNA “on file” and can use it to create whatever kind of “heavenly body” He intends. He does not need our mortal body to raise us from the dead. In the Book of Revelation we read that in heaven there will be no more death, mourning, crying or pain. If Jesus’ appearances after the resurrection are any guide, we’ll be able to touch, feel, eat, drink, see and be. One thing we can be sure of, our bodies will be totally different from anything we have experienced on this side of eternity. Unfortunately, I don’t have the answer to what our bodies will actually look like; I just believe that there is life after death; the grave is not the end. These are just some thoughts for your consideration; we will not know the answer until we get there.

As we celebrate Easter during this difficult time in our homes, I hope that you will remember that the Resurrection gives us hope for living each day; that we can face tomorrow without any fear. Let me close with a story. One Easter Sunday a preacher brought an old beat-up bird cage and sat it next to the pulpit. During the sermon he held the cage up and said: “You might be wondering why I have this old bird cage up here; you don’t normally associate a bird cage with Easter.”

But let me tell you the story of this cage. Several days ago I noticed a little boy in tattered and torn blue jeans walking down an alley, swinging this bird cage. Clinging to the bottom of the cage were several small field sparrows that he had caught. So I stopped him and asked: “Say, Sonny, what do you have there?” He said: “Oh, I got some old birds.” “What are you going to do with them?” I asked. “Oh, I’m going to mess around with them; tease them, something like that.” “Well,” I asked, “when you get tired of them, what are you gonna to do with them?” He thought for a moment and then said: “Well, I got a couple of cats at home and they really like birds. So I think I’ll just let them have the birds.”

The preacher said that his heart went out for those little birds so he made the boy an offer. “How much do you want for those birds?” Surprised, the boy said: “Mister, these birds ain’t no good.” “Well,” the preacher replied, “regardless, how much would you take for them?” The little boy said: “How about two dollars?” “Sold,” said the preacher as he reached into his pocket for the two dollars. The little boy handed the cage over and walked away pleased with his stroke of good luck.

After the boy left, the pastor lifted the cage door and shoved the birds out the door, and they flew away, free at last. The empty bird cage is a perfect illustration of how the devil has messed with the human race keeping it trapped in sin and fear. But then out of love for us, God sent His Son Jesus Christ to pay the price for our freedom on the cross; He set us free; free from the bondage of sin and death. And if that wasn’t enough, then God raised Jesus from the dead offering the promise of eternal life to all who will believe in Him.

So what do you believe? Do you believe in the Resurrection? Are you willing to shout “He is risen?” It’s a personal choice; one that we must make for ourselves; no one else can make it for us. C. S. Lewis said that what we believe about death and the afterlife fundamentally changes how we live this life. As for me, I believe with all my heart what we recite in the Apostles’ Creed: that Jesus Christ was crucified, dead and buried and that on the third day He rose from the grave defeating the devil and death forever for His faithful followers. I believe that the tomb was empty that Easter morning and because of that, I as a believer, have been freed through the amazing grace of God from the grip of sin in my life, and have the opportunity to have a personal relationship with my Lord and Savior. I have no fear of the grave because it is not my final resting place because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and the empty tomb; I will spend eternity with God and my loved ones who have gone on before me. That’s the meaning of the Resurrection; the meaning of Easter! Hear the Good News: He is risen! He is risen indeed. Thanks be to God. Amen