

# The Resurrection and the Life

The sermon given by Rev Sheila Cameron at the St Margaret's Sung Eucharist  
on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, 26 March 2023

The readings were: Ezekiel 37:1–14; Psalm 130; John 11:1–45



“Jesus said to [Martha], ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.’”

These words express the very meaning of the Christian faith, the hope that has sustained Christians from the very beginning. The story of the raising of Lazarus is the climax of that series of signs of the divinity of Jesus that we read about in John’s Gospel; and from now on, his enemies move from simply opposing him to actively plotting to have him killed. There are two things to think about here: first, what Jesus means by resurrection; and second, what his promise of eternal life means for us here and now.

First, what the concept of resurrection means for Jesus. The story of Lazarus shows death to be very real; Lazarus’ body has begun to decay, and Jesus weeps over the death of his friend. It’s just not true that “death is nothing at all,” in the words of that sad attempt to comfort the

bereaved that you hear at many a funeral. Death is not just an illusion in this story. There has been much debate about the meaning of the resurrection of the body, but every time we recite the Creed we declare our faith in this particular promise of God, expressed in the powerful words and action of Jesus.

Some years ago, a sermon was preached in St Giles Cathedral during the Edinburgh Science Festival by a priest colleague of mine who also taught Religion and Science at Edinburgh University. Science, Mark Harris declared, cannot teach us everything, for “there’s a fundamental mystery at the heart of existence that can only be seen by the eye of faith.”<sup>1</sup> He went on to declare a strong faith in bodily resurrection as opposed to the mere immortality of the soul - that “thinking, feeling spark placed inside me by God which, after my death, will hopefully carry my identity into the afterlife.” In reply to those who think of the soul as something detachable from the body, he said: “it’s becoming clear that all of those functions which we used to attribute to the soul – thinking, feeling, rationalising, yearning, loving: all of those innermost things that are me – they all come from the squashy grey stuff between my ears (my physical brain). Change that squashy grey stuff a bit, and you could well change me altogether; I might no longer be the same person, have the same thoughts, feelings and reactions. In short, I am that squashy

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Harris, Edinburgh Science Festival Sermon, St Giles’ Cathedral, Edinburgh, 30 March 2014





grey stuff; there's not something else intangible, detachable from my physical body. If I have a soul, it is my body." Those close to someone suffering from dementia will be only too painfully aware of this through the loss of the personality of the person they love, and their hope can only be for the resurrection of the whole person, body and soul together.

In the Christian tradition, St Augustine was a powerful advocate of the inseparability of body and soul in death. In his writing he is very realistic about the problems associated with physical resurrection and he answers a range of colourful objections, such as: what will happen to people eaten by wild beasts, or even worse, cannibals? Will unborn babies that have miscarried be raised from the dead? We can all add our own examples drawn from the horrors and traumas of our own time. But Christians believe that God is omnipotent, and Augustine argues "that no nook or cranny of creation is so removed from that power, that God cannot retrieve any scattered parts of the body." Fine, you might ask, but what about those people whose bodies in this life are imperfect or deformed from birth and whose owners really don't want to inhabit them for all eternity? Augustine addresses this problem too, teaching that no blemish that detracts from our beauty will appear at the resurrection, for then we will be remade as perfect creatures, as God intended: "If an artist," he says, "has for some reason made a flawed statue, he can recast it and make it beautiful, removing the defect without losing any of the substance".<sup>2</sup> It is of crucial importance that the resurrected body both preserve our unique identity beyond all doubt and at the same time display a beauty befitting

God's kingdom. "Neither the fat nor the thin need fear, says Augustine, for beauty consists in the suitable arrangement of parts, and we may trust that God will finally arrange us rightly. The risen body will have 'no deformity, no infirmity, no heaviness, no corruption - nothing of any kind unfit for that kingdom'".<sup>3</sup>

And secondly, what does Jesus's promise of resurrection mean for us here and now? Whatever our circumstances: whether someone is a young person and still a bit uncertain of their identity, or a so-called 'mature' person advanced in years, whether they're struggling in mid-life with money, career or family issues, or battling with ill health or the loss of physical strength in old age, these words of Jesus, "I am the resurrection and the life," carried in the heart and recited in faith will bring comfort and restoration and enable each one of us to face the future with confidence. These are words that have inspired whole nations to seek freedom and human dignity, as well as being most potent in the lives of individual Christians. The idea that we can overcome the flesh, that is, our limited physical existence in a body subject to sin and decay, and live anew, here and now, inspired the movement to liberate the poor from political and economic oppression in South America in the 1970s and 80s. One of the fathers of that movement in the Catholic Church wrote that Paul's teaching in Romans 8, that setting the mind on the flesh brings "death" while setting the mind on the

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<sup>2</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, 22.19.1148

<sup>3</sup> Augustine, *City*, 22.20.1152

<sup>4</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez, *We Drink From Our Own Wells* (2005), 137





Spirit brings “life and peace”, combined with Paul’s idea of the church as the body of Christ – makes the Church a very powerful agent of transformation in the lives of poor people and enables them to take charge of their own destinies.<sup>4</sup> Whole communities can be reborn and shed their spirit of oppression. This, of course, was revolutionary stuff in the political arena, and the Church in Latin America suffered greatly as a result, as is witnessed in the martyrdom of Archbishop Oscar Romero (who was remembered in our prayer calendar on Friday).

Our reading from Ezekiel tells of an earlier restoration of a nation by the power of the Holy Spirit. The prophet’s vision of dry bones is like the scene of a battle long after the action is over and the dead have been abandoned to the elements, the birds and the beasts of prey. It was written for a people in exile; the city of Jerusalem had been sacked, the magnificent Temple built by Solomon had been destroyed, and the leaders of the nation, including the prophet Ezekiel himself, were deported to Babylon where they were to remain for a generation. They weren’t kept in prison, but were free to build homes and raise families in their exile. But there was a spiritual desolation, one which isn’t entirely foreign to us today in the midst of our materialism and is very familiar to Christians who have lived in aggressively secular countries. We know when we’re far from our spiritual home, and, hearing God’s call within our hearts, we long to hear the word of God and join together in worship. The prophet’s message is that God is not far from us even when all seems to be lost; the breath of God can stir our dry bones back into life.

We are offered astonishing hope in the face of utter hopelessness. As we contemplate that scene in Bethany, as Lazarus emerges from the tomb, we are invited to identify with the one raised from the dead, to let Jesus call us out of our tombs of despair, arrogance, rage, envy and all the other negativities that lurk within us. “I am the resurrection and the life,” says the Lord. “Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” He comes to lead us beyond this place of imperfection into a place of light and joy and love in the presence of God. Amen.

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*The Raising of Lazarus*, painted in Siena by Duccio di Buoninsegna and in the collection of the Kimbell Art Museum in Forth Worth, Texas, is made available by the Web Gallery of Art at [https://www.wga.hu/html/d/duccio/maesta/predel\\_v/pre\\_v\\_9.html](https://www.wga.hu/html/d/duccio/maesta/predel_v/pre_v_9.html)