



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The First Sunday After Easter, May 1st, 2011

**✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠**

Today's Gospel reading tells us that when we come to be raised from the dead, our resurrection will be like Jesus' – we will be raised physically, in the flesh. This isn't easy stuff for us to swallow. After all, we know what happens to bodies after folks die. They get buried in the ground where they certainly don't glorify.

The ultimate fate of our physical earthly persons is, perhaps, one of the reasons we find the contemplation of death so unpleasant. Indeed, history shows that the fate of man's earthly body has fascinated every human civilization. It is often through funerary practices we are able to glean our most accurate impressions of the past..

But while most past civilizations have anticipated some sort of life after death, very few have expected physical post death existence. The Greeks looked forward to life as a pallid "shade" on beyond the River Stix. The Romans believed much the same thing. So, too, did the Philistines and Canaanites who inhabited Canaan, or the Promised Land, before the children of Israel turned up.

A theory taught as fact in progressive seminaries is that the ancient Israelites didn't believe in any sort of after life – making them unique from the anthropological point of view. However, there is no evidence whatsoever for this, The psalms, for instance, indicate a strong belief in an after life, and the Book of Job -- the oldest book in the Bible -- proclaims an unshakable faith in a physical resurrection.

In the midst of all his terrible trials, Job triumphantly proclaims (*Job 19:25-27*): "I

know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though my body be destroyed, yet in my flesh shall I see God: Whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold."

Even so, at the time of Christ, the Jewish people, like ourselves, were simply too sophisticated to take this physical resurrection stuff entirely seriously. It seemed to them wholly unlikely God would want to resurrect all those rather unsanitary dead bodies. Where would he find space to put them? Belief in a physical resurrection thus was supplanted by the far more satisfactory concept of a spiritual resurrection.

Jesus' arrival in that locked room where the disciples had gathered dispelled that comfortable notion entirely. Very deliberately, Jesus set out to demolish any and all contentions that his resurrection was a merely a spiritual happening. He made it crystal clear, he was present not in the spirit, but in solid flesh, bones and blood.

The disciples were scared witless at the sight of Him and thought they were seeing a ghost. But Jesus said: "Behold my hands and feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have."

He made a point of showing them the wounds in his hands and his side and invited them to touch them. He asked for food and ate it, not because he was hungry, but to demonstrate he was not a spirit, but living breathing flesh. Indeed, the whole purpose of the exercise was to demonstrate that he was present in the flesh.

He didn't do so to convince his disciples he was the Son of God. They would have been no less convinced if he had returned as a Spirit. Indeed, had he returned as a spirit rather than in the flesh their task of preaching the Gospel would have been much easier. Their message would have challenged no preconceived notions.

Jesus' purpose in appearing in the flesh was to demonstrate that, like him, we will be raised in the flesh incorruptible as the King James Bible puts it. In other words, we will not be raised in the bodies we have on earth. Like Jesus, we will still be recognizable in our new bodies, but we will be changed. Our new bodies will be flesh, blood and bone, but they won't be subject to the laws of physics, space and

time. Sounds so cool, but just a bit far fetched. And that's why the disciples had difficulty believing him. That's why he told them to touch him and watch him eat.

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the physical nature of the resurrection has remained a stumbling block for the Christian faith. Even at the time of the Apostles, when one could hear first hand testimony from people who had met the risen Jesus face-to-face people had trouble believing it.

St. Paul, for example, told the Corinthians – many of whom believed in a spiritual resurrection – without the physical Resurrection there is no faith: "How say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? If there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised."

It might be hard – even a tad disappointing -- to accept God's plans to resurrect us in the flesh. Being a spirit sounds like fun: walking through walls and scaring the neighbors, and all that, But it is highly presumptuous to imagine God – the Creator of this vast, unknowable universe – thinks and acts like us.: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord."

St Paul told the Corinthians: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known."

Today, we are children compared with what we shall be when we are risen from the dead. Then all will be revealed, but until then the Bible, St, Paul's old mirror, will have to suffice. This may not be very satisfactory, but as Jesus told doubting Thomas: "Because thou hast seen me, thou hast believed: blessed are they that have not seen, and yet have believed." . *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.