



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Easter Day, The Feast of The Resurrection, *Being Sunday, March 27th, 2016*

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

Easter Day, the Feast of the Resurrection of our Lord to give it its proper name, confronts us with Christianity's most controversial claim: That Jesus Christ rose physically from the dead; as well as the claim's its corollary: that we, like Jesus, will also be raised up to life eternal in the flesh.

This isn't easy stuff 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 – rather the contrary. Indeed, the fate of our earthly persons might well be a primary reason why we shudder at the notion of dying.

It should, however, be clear from history that the fate of man's earthly body has obsessed mankind since the dawn of civilization. In fact, we often glean our most accurate impressions of the past through the study of funerary practices.

Ancient Egypt ranks among the few societies that actually believed in a physical resurrection – which explains why they went to such remarkable lengths to preserve the earthly remains not only of great leaders, but those of lesser folks as well. Not only can one gaze upon the face of Pharaoh, but on the faces of laborers who built his tomb.

But while most civilizations have anticipated man's survival in some form after death, relatively few have anticipated such survival

in physical form. The Greeks certainly didn't. They looked forward to a pallid existence as a "shade" on the far side of the River Styx. The Romans believed the same. So, too, did the Philistines and Canaanites who lived in Canaan before the children of Israel arrived.

Some progressive theologians claim that the ancient Israelites didn't believe in a life after death, which, from an anthropological viewpoint, would make them unique. There is, however, no genuine evidence this conceit.

In fact, the psalms express a strong belief in life, after death while the Book of Job (one of the oldest, (if not *the* oldest, books in the Bible) affirms it unshakably. In the midst of all his terrible trials, Job declares: "I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though this body be destroyed, yet in my flesh shall I see God . . ."

Be that as it may, at the time of Christ, Jewish intellectuals, like those today, were just a tad too sophisticated to take all this physical resurrection stuff seriously. It seemed to them wholly unlikely God would want to resurrect all those insanitary dead bodies. And where would he find the space to put them? Belief in the physical resurrection had, thus, been replaced with the rather more logical concept of a spiritual resurrection.

This explains Jesus's actions when he

appeared to the disciples, huddled fearfully in a locked room after the crucifixion. He was deliberately setting out to dispel the notion that his resurrection was a merely a spiritual happening – making it crystal clear that he was present not in the spirit, but in solid flesh, bones and blood.

According to St John, the disciples were scared witless at the sight of him. They thought he was a ghost. But Jesus told them: "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 insisted they examine his wounds and invited them to touch them. He asked consumed a meal, not because he was hungry, but to demonstrate he was not a spirit, but living, breathing flesh.

His purpose was not to convince his disciples he is the Son of God. They would certainly have been no less convinced of his divinity if he had returned as spirit. In fact, it would have made it much easier to preach the Gospel if Jesus had returned as a spirit. Their message would not then have challenged any preconceived notions.

However with his appearance in the flesh, Jesus was demonstrating an extraordinary truth: That we, like him, shall be resurrected in the flesh. We, as the Scriptures put it, shall be raised incorruptible.

We will be recognizably our selves, but our new bodies will be subtly different from the corruptible bodies we have on earth. The Gospels indicate that our new bodies will be flesh, blood and bone. But, even so, they won't be subject to the same laws of physics, space and time as they are on earth. Just like his disciples, we find the concept really cool, but a bit far fetched – which, of course, is why he invited them to touch him and watch him eat.

Our problem today is we live in an age in which folks routinely strain at gnats and no less routinely swallow camels: How else could people question the existence of God – or an intelligence – behind our infinitely logical,

well-ordered creation, yet easily accept assurances like “the check’s in the mail?”

A technically minded friend believes many people have trouble with the concept of God because they can't understand what makes him tick, scientifically speaking. This really doesn't make sense: because it is highly unlikely that our tiny, finite brains could begin to grasp the mind of an almighty and eternal creator of the universe.

We imagine ourselves so much wiser than folks of yesteryear who portrayed God as an old man with white flowing beard. But they were, in one respect at least, far wiser than we are. They knew it is neither possible nor necessary for us to know how God operates in any technical or scientific sense. All we need to know is he is in control at all times.

Sometimes he acts in ways we understand; ways we inadequately describe as “the Laws of Nature.” At other times he acts in a way that is entirely alien to us, entirely outside our realm of understanding. This we call miraculous. And Jesus' resurrection – more than anything else in this world – brings us face to face with the miraculous.

How it works is quite beyond our understanding. One day we shall understand. But, then, we shall understand everything else as well. For the time being, we are, as St. Paul says, like little children trying to puzzle out shapes and shadows in an old and faded mirror. And, for the moment, we shall have to be satisfied with that.

Meanwhile Jesus' death and resurrection confronts us with the greatest of all God's mysteries. It is not the creation of heaven and earth and all that therein is. It isn't the Virgin Birth of Jesus Christ or even the Resurrection. It is a mystery best explained by St. John who wrote: "So God loved the world that he gave his only-begotten son to the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." *AMEN.*