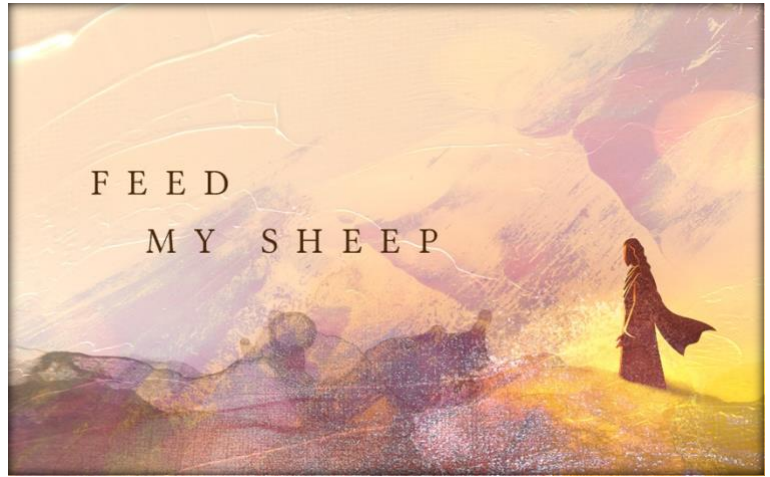


“Appeared—Feed My Sheep”

John 21:15-25; 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

The true story

Can anyone place themselves outside the power of God's grace? Peter denies Jesus three times as Jesus stands on trial before Caiaphas. Yet even that does mean all is lost for Peter. Jesus loves him and will still entrust his sheep to Peter's care, but only after a powerful encounter in which Peter can learn the true power of grace.



Three times Peter has denied Jesus in the early morning hours before the crucifixion. First to a servant girl. Then to a small group huddled around a fire. Then to a servant of the high priest. “Aren’t you one this man’s disciples,” they asked him. “No, I am not,” he replied. His denials are understandable; he is scared, as simple as that. But how those three moments must have haunted him in the days afterward. To deny Jesus, the one you had come to know as Messiah and Lord. Just try to imagine yourself as Peter. Would the despair not have been overwhelming?

And then the resurrection. Jesus lives! Alleluia! But the memory of Peter’s denial lives too. Perhaps nothing had been said between the two of them until the breakfast John describes. But now, as they finish their meal on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus turns to Peter and asks him, “Do you love me?” Not once, not twice, but three times. Peter gets it. He must. Three times, “Do you love me.” Each time, Peter replies, “Lord, you know that I love you.” Does Jesus know this to be true? Does Peter mean it, truly now, for better and for worse?

Each of Peter’s professions of love is met by Jesus with a similar command: “Feed my lambs...take care of my sheep...feed my sheep.” Professing love is one thing; doing love is another. True love is grounded in doing, not saying. Thus, Peter is pledging not merely his love, he is pledging his life to Jesus. It is the life of “serving one another humbly in love,” to use a phrase from Paul (Gal. 5:13), that will be the evidence of Peter’s love of Jesus.

Jesus warns Peter too. The road ahead will be difficult and, for Peter, will end in a martyr’s death. Then, Jesus closes this exchange with a simple, “Follow me,” ending where Jesus began (John 1:39,43). In truth, though, it is far from simple. Every single bit of Peter is to be committed to the love and life he has pledged to Jesus. Nothing can be held back.

John closes his gospel by clearing up one mistaken rumor about himself, that Jesus said John would never die, and then reminds the reader that his lengthy testimony of over 15,000 words is still only a tiny portion of what he could have passed on to us. If he tried to say everything that could be said about Jesus all the libraries on the planet couldn’t hold the writings. A bit hyperbolic, but we get the point. And it is an important point for us to remember. Most of what Jesus said and did is not in the four gospels. Each of the gospel writers paints their own complementary portrait of Jesus, portraits that are true – truly true. Thomas Troeger writes:

Finally, hearing Christ ask Peter three times if Peter loves him, we recall Christ’s prediction that Peter would deny him three times (13:38) and the sad scenes in which the prediction is fulfilled (18:15–17, 25–27). If we have carried away from the Gospel the idea that the final thing to remember about Peter is his unfaithfulness, the epilogue reminds us that far more important than Peter’s denials is the grace of Christ: the divine willingness to engage and entrust the ministry, even to someone whose life so far has been marked by impetuosity and denial.

In short, the epilogue is a dramatic appeal to us not to reduce Christ and the wonders of his ministry to a story in the past, not to leave the gospel in a time and place long ago and far away. The epilogue returns us to the dynamism of the prologue, to the resilience and vitality of God’s word. The epilogue affirms, through its story of the risen Christ on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias, what the prologue affirms as the story of Christ’s earthly ministry begins: “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it” (1:5).

The epilogue tells us: the curtain may have come down on John's narrative, but the real-life drama of Christ is continuing. Everything John has shown you continues past the last scene into the present moment and beyond.¹

True truth

So, we have finished John's resurrection story, a story he tells so that we might know that this man, Jesus of Nazareth, is the Messiah and the Son of God. John believes that by placing our faith in Jesus, we will have life -- true, full, everlasting life -- in his name.

But that isn't all John and his fellow New Testament writers want us to believe to be true, i.e., to reflect genuine reality. Not merely "true for you" or "true for me" but truly true. They offer us what they proclaim to be the true truth about Jesus.

One piece of this true truth that the apostles proclaim seems particularly odd and strange to us. Yet, there it is in the most basic and oldest of all the Christian creeds: we believe in the "the resurrection of the body." This is not about Jesus' resurrection, which we affirmed earlier in the Apostles Creed, it is about our own bodies. As Jesus was raised so shall we all be raised. Paul puts it this way in his letter to the Romans, "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom. 8:11).

The Jews of Jesus' day believed that when the Last Days arrived, all the dead would be resurrected. Paul is agreeing with that. Jesus is the first and the rest of us will follow; there just happens to be 2,000 years, so far, between the first person to be resurrected, Jesus, and the rest of the us. To use Paul's agricultural metaphor of Jesus as the "first fruits," God's harvest is underway, it just seems to be taking a long time, by our measure of time at least.

If this all seems just a bit too fantastical and even weird to you, consider our affirmation of Jesus' resurrection. That doesn't seem so fantastical only because we've gotten used to the idea. But once you've accepted as true the claim that Jesus was resurrected and walked out of the tomb after having died . . . well, then everything is on the table. Being a Christian actually takes a big imagination, a mind and heart that refuses to try and shrink God and his creation into a small box that seems "reasonable" to us.

Our belief in the resurrection of the body is the promise that I will one day again see my grandfather – solid, material, tactile, *real*. What sort of bodies will my Granddady and I have? Most of the questions I have the Bible doesn't answer. Will he have hair? Beats me. Paul can't answer such questions and considers them even a bit beside the point. In 1 Corinthians 15:35-58, he lays out what he does know about our resurrection bodies. I hope you'll take the time to read the whole passage, for there is a problem here that we need to talk about.

Whenever readers come to 1 Cor. 15, they are nearly always confused by, and often misled by, the regrettable translation of v. 44: "It [our body] is sown a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (NRSV). Understandably, we assume that Paul is contrasting our current physical, (i.e., material) body, with a resurrected spiritual, (i.e., non-material) body. This is how we are used to understanding words like "physical" and "spiritual." But this translation leads us to exactly the wrong conclusion about Paul's meaning. Indeed, it is the very mistake that the Corinthians have made and Paul is trying to correct! So here is a deep dive into v.44.

Richard Hays at Duke Divinity School is widely recognized as one of the foremost Pauline scholars of our day. In the following passage from his 1 Corinthians commentary in the *Interpretation* series, he helps us to see what Paul is actually saying in the Greek about our resurrected bodies. He writes:

Whereas our present bodies are "sown" (in this life) perishable, dishonorable, and weak, the resurrection body will be raised (in the next life) imperishable, glorious, and powerful (vv. 42–43). Paul thus produces an impressive piece of visionary preaching, extolling the glories that await us. He is seeking to make the resurrection of the dead seem appealing rather than appalling to the Corinthians.

Yet the last item in this sequence is the one that he is driving toward: "It is sown a natural body [*psychikon sōma*], it is raised a spiritual body [*pneumatikon sōma*]" (v. 44, NIV). This is the nub of his argument. This last contrast, however, presents a vexing problem for translators (cf. 2:14, where the same contrast occurs). The

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, "Homiletical Perspective on John 21:1–19," in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year C*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 425.

phrase *psychikon sōma* is notoriously difficult to translate into English. The NRSV's translation ("physical body") is especially unfortunate, for it reinstates precisely the dualistic dichotomy between physical and spiritual that Paul is struggling to overcome. In any case, *psychikon* certainly does not mean "physical." Furthermore, although *pneumatikon sōma* is easier to translate, "spiritual body" sounds like an oxymoron. What sense are we to make of this?

By far the most graceful translation of verse 44, and the one that best conveys the meaning of Paul's sentence, is found in the *Jerusalem Bible*: "When it is sown it embodies the soul, when it is raised it embodies the spirit. If the soul has its own embodiment, so does the spirit have its own embodiment." That is Paul's point: our mortal bodies embody the *psychē* ("soul"), the animating force of our present existence, but the resurrection body will embody the divinely given *pneuma* ("spirit"). It is to be a "spiritual body" not in the sense that it is somehow made out of spirit and vapors, but in the sense that it is determined by the spirit and gives the spirit form and local habitation.

All of this is a bit hard to follow in translation, but the drift of Paul's argument is clear in the Greek, where his use of *psychikon* in verse 44 is explained by the key reference to *psychē* in the story of the creation of Adam (v. 45). Paul's use of the difficult term *psychikon sōma* is determined by the fact that he wants to cite Genesis 2:7 (LXX) in support of his position: "The first *man*, Adam, as scripture says, *became a living soul* [*psychē*]; but the last Adam has become a life-giving Spirit" (v. 45, JB). The *psychē* is linked with Adam, the initiator of decay and death, but Christ, by his resurrection, becomes "life-giving Spirit" (cf. v. 22), the initiator of a new order of humanity. The body associated with Adam (which Paul therefore calls *psychikon*) is mortal and bound to the earth from which it came; on the other hand, the body associated with the risen Christ (which Paul therefore calls *pneumatikon*) will be immortal and stamped by the image of "the man of heaven" (vv. 48–49). . . . A similar point is made somewhat more clearly in Philippians 3:20–21:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control [cf. 1 Cor. 15:23–28], *will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*

(Phil. 3:20–21, Richard Hays's translation)

What I do know to be true truth, is that what is true of Jesus' resurrection will be true of my granddaddy and my dad and of me. So, at least I know the answer to the most important question: I will see my grandfather and dad again, I will know my grandfather and dad, and I will hug them. We will talk and we will laugh and we will live basking in the love of God and the light of Christ. Perhaps, we will even talk some baseball. That is good news indeed!