

## **Homily – The Resurrection of the Body**

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**April 5, 2026 – St. Barnabas' Episcopal Church**

Today is one of those Sunday's when I start the sermon with a joke.

A pastor was presenting a children's sermon. During the sermon, he asked the children if they knew what the resurrection was. Now, asking questions during children's sermons is crucial, but at the same time, asking children questions in front of a congregation can also be very dangerous.

Having asked the children if they knew the meaning of the resurrection, a little boy raised his hand.....

The pastor called on him and the little boy said, "I know that if you have a resurrection that lasts more than four hours you are supposed to call the doctor."

How many of you ever thought you would hear a joke like that in a sermon?

Sermons are supposed to be pious and other-worldly. They are not supposed to be earthy or make allusion to things of the body. Church is where we are supposed to abstain from things of this world. We are supposed to practice heavenly things of the spirit.

Well, I need to set the record straight. Our bodies are good. The world is amazingly wonderful, and God created all things with beauty in mind.

Now, it has often been said that Christianity is more influenced by the ancient Greek philosopher, Plato, than by Jesus. Plato lifted up the spirit as good and pushed down things of matter as bad. For Plato, spirit and matter are at odds with one another.

But for Jesus, there is no animosity between body and soul. In fact, this is the heart of Jesus' healing message and of his incarnation itself. Jesus is the finite representation of the infinite Christ, the second person of the Trinity. Christ is the perfect union of matter and spirit and two thousand years ago, perhaps when humanity was finally ready for it, Jesus came into the world as a baby boy who was the perfect union of God and human.

And, as we celebrate today and on every Sunday, Jesus was resurrected in body and flesh. Even after his death on the Cross, Jesus continues on as the perfect union of God and human. Yes, resurrection is saying something about Jesus, but it is also

saying a lot about us. It is saying that we are also larger than life, and therefore made for something good, united, and beautiful.

For you see, all the Abrahamic religions, including Christianity, believe that human beings are made in the image of God, and as the Book of Genesis shows us when God created the world and all that is in it, he declared each part good. So, why do we place so much emphasis on the bad things associated with the flesh.

Like the rest of the New Testament, the letters from the Apostle Paul were originally written in Greek. And over the centuries traditions have developed over the meaning of the original Greek words. Unfortunately, sometimes those traditions are wrong. For example, when the Apostle Paul writes in his letters about the problems of the flesh this is a misinterpretation. Instead Paul is talking about the problems of the ego. The ego is that part of us that keeps us self-centered. The ego is the part that brings on arrogance, greed, and addictions. The releasing of the ego is a worthy goal for our spiritual journey as we draw outside of self and closer to God. In Paul's letter to the Romans he uses the Greek word "sarx" eighteen times and eighteen times it is misinterpreted as flesh instead of ego. For example, in Romans 8 it is written, "for this reason the mind that is set on the **flesh** is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the **flesh** cannot please God." However, this should be interpreted as "for this reason the mind that is set on the **ego** is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law—indeed it cannot, and those who are in the **ego** cannot please God."

Of all the world religions, Christianity is the one that stresses the Incarnation in which God took on human form. So, it is a little odd that Christianity also vilified the body in ways that led to denigration of the flesh. And, after centuries of body rejection, and the lack of any positive body theology, the West is now trapped in substance addiction, over eating, anorexia, bulimia, plastic surgery, and an obsession with appearance and preserving these bodies. Our poor bodies, which Jesus actually affirmed, have become the receptacles of so much negativity and obsession.

Much of Christianity has been negatively and uselessly trapped in guilt about being "flesh," while the great messages of the Gospel—grace, healing, and restorative justice—have largely gone unheeded. Obsessive guilt about our embodiment has too often kept us "from the greater matters of the law: justice, mercy, and good faith," as Jesus says to the Pharisees.

Now, many do believe in the bodily resurrection, as do I. But, in a way, that asks little except a mere nodding of the head to a religious doctrine. But, we can go much further than that. I choose to believe in some kind of bodily resurrection because it localizes the Christ mystery in this material and earthly world and in our own bodies,

the only world we know and the world that God created and loves. I believe in our bodily resurrection so that after death we, once again, become a union of spirit and matter.

In the Apostles' Creed, which goes back to the second century, we say, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." I want to first point out what it is not saying and yet what most people hear. The creed does not say we believe in the resurrection of the soul or the spirit!

Let me repeat that. The creed does not say we believe in the resurrection of the soul or the spirit! And, do you know why it doesn't? Because the soul cannot die. It is eternal. Like Jesus, we are a union of matter and spirit, though an imperfect one. Still, our human embodiment has an eternal character to it.

Now many of us struggle to wrap our brains around the resurrection of the body because we have so many unanswered questions. When resurrected do you get the body you had when you died? Do you get to pick a certain age and health for your resurrected body? What if you have never liked your body? Do you get to pick another body? And who says we come back as human beings? Do I get to choose which animal I come back as?

Back in the third century Origen of Alexandria, an early Christian theologian, thought the perfect body for a resurrection would be a sphere. Do we all come back as spheres and bounce around like soap bubbles or billiard balls. Back in the fifth century, Augustine of Hippo, another theologian, believed in a literal, physical resurrection of the flesh for all humanity. He taught that bodies would be restored, transformed, and made free from corruption, deformity, or handicap. This helps to explain why the church, for so many centuries, prohibited cremation. I should point out that, in my experience, nineteen out twenty memorials have ashes instead of a casket. But the question is still out there. Can ashes be resurrected into a body? So many questions to think about with the resurrections of the body. And after death, we probably won't care about all these questions anymore. It is not that we finally have the answers, after death, but instead we just won't care about the questions anymore.

And let's be honest, the answers to the questions about bodily resurrection don't change or have much impact on our earthly spiritual journey through life, except in one important way. We must let go of the notion that the flesh, that the body, that our physicality is in any way bad. God created a lot of diversity in our bodies, and sometimes we mistakenly value some bodies over others. Bodies come in various sizes, shapes, and colors. Bodies have varying levels of ability and health. Some

bodies are young and some are old. But all bodies, all bodies are beautifully made, even the ones that don't do the things we want them to do. Flesh is good.

When Christianity is in any way anti-body, it is not authentic Christianity. The incarnation tells us that body and spirit must fully operate and be respected as one. When we remember that each and every one of us is a union of matter and spirit, and we remember that this union is good, then we eject Plato from our Christianity and reinsert Jesus back where he is supposed to be.

And, here is another benefit of re-embracing the goodness of the body and flesh. We need to re-learn kinesthetic, bodily knowing. We need to recognize our physical responses—be they fear, arousal, pleasure, or pain. It's not always as obvious as sweat under the arms. It may take a few minutes of intentional focus to become aware of tension in our shoulders, churning in our gut, a pounding heart, or goose bumps.

Irish poet and priest, John O'Donohue, says it well: "Your mind can deceive you and put all kinds of barriers between you and your nature; but your body does not lie. Your body tells you, if you attend to it, how your life is and if you are living from your soul or from the labyrinths of your negativity. . . . The human body is the most complex, refined, and harmonious totality."

He continues, "Your body is, in essence, a crowd of different members who work in harmony to make your belonging in the world possible. . . . The soul is not simply within the body, hidden somewhere within its recesses. The truth is rather the converse. Your body is in the soul. And the soul suffuses you completely."

Two thousand years ago Jesus had a bodily resurrection that demonstrates the importance that God places on the incarnation and the union of matter and spirit. We also have that same thing to look forward to. The flesh is not bad, it is good and will be eternal.

Let me end with a third century poem by Saint Irenaeus of Lyon called "Capable Flesh". This will be a little different than the resurrection joke I began with today.

The tender flesh itself  
     will be found one day  
 —quite surprisingly—  
     to be capable of receiving,  
 and yes, full  
     capable of embracing  
 the searing energies of God.

Go figure. Fear not.  
For even at its beginning  
the humble clay received  
God's art, whereby  
one part became the eye,  
another the ear, and yet  
another this impetuous hand.  
Therefore, the flesh  
is not to be excluded  
from the wisdom and the power  
that now and ever animates  
all things. His life-giving  
agency is made perfect,  
we are told, in weakness—  
made perfect in the flesh.

*Parts of this homily are based on taken from Richard Rohr's Daily Meditations from the Center for Action and Contemplation.*