



**“A Blessed Body of Truth”**

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***Luke 24:36b-48 (NRSV)***

**ENTERING THE SCRIPTURE**

Cheryl Fields Tyler

Resurrection was a very familiar theme in first century Judaism, and in fact was a recurrent theological theme throughout Jewish history. Indeed the first passage where the vision of resurrection is vividly portrayed is in the familiar passage in Ezekiel, chapter 37, where the prophet recounts his vision of the valley of the dry bones. While the prophet watches, bones, lying askew in a desert parched and bleached white, reassemble themselves and come back to life, acquiring flesh, sinews, and ultimately breath. It is a surreal and haunting image. This image of bodily resurrection reoccurs regularly, whether in very direct language like in Isaiah’s proclamation that the dead shall rise in chapter 26 or in more lyrical and metaphorical language in the Psalms as David pleads with God again and again to raise him up from the depth of his despair and doubt.

In the rabbinic tradition that shaped Jesus’ contemporary world, resurrection was not of the individual per se, but a vision of regeneration and restoration of Israel. It is return from exile. It is the re-establishment of Jewish self-rule. It is the renewal of the covenant. It is the restoration of community, of righteousness as a norm, not a struggle. It is spiritual wholeness made manifest in a place, in a people.

Now in Jesus’ day, there were two dominant camps in the Jewish community—the Sadducees and the Pharisees. One of the things we know that distinguished the two religious factions was their beliefs about resurrection. One camp viewed resurrection as literally true—that quite literally the coming restoration of Jewish rule would involve the resurrection of the Jewish people throughout time to dwell together in God’s true kingdom on earth. The other camp saw physical resurrection as more metaphorical than literal, believing that the reinstatement of Jewish self-rule would be the means of God’s renewal of the covenant.

We see this play out in the gospel of Mark chapter 12, where it’s reported that Sadducees come to Jesus with a trick question about seven brothers, all of whom marry

the same woman one after one, after each brother dies leaving the woman widowed. The Sadducees ask him “who would her husband be in the resurrection?” The writer of Mark clues us in on the manipulative joke by telling us that the Sadducees don’t even believe in the resurrection. The whole thing was a setup to try to get Jesus to pick sides in the theological and political battle that waged between the Sadducees and Pharisees during Roman rule. I think a corollary in our current context might be something like the argument between Christians who believe in a literal 7-day creation and those who view the creation stories in the Bible as myths and metaphors.

So, as you listen this morning to Michael read the passage we are about to consider, I invite you to put yourself in this context—where the idea of “resurrection” is clearly present as an ongoing theological argument, a socio-political vision, a promise of restoration of a downtrodden and occupied people, a renewal of God’s covenant with the people.

### **SCRIPTURE READING**

Luke 24:36b–48

Michael Stuber

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." And when he had said this, he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering, he said to them, "Have you anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate in their presence. Then he said to them, "These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled." Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

### **SERMON**

“A Blessed Body of Truth”

Cheryl Fields Tyler

I found myself wondering as I thought about this sermon this morning, how far back in human history would you have to go to find the first time humans became entranced with the possibility and promise of the resurrection of the dead. Even a cursory look through the religious lore in other times and cultures recounts other resurrections:

- Osiris, one of the key gods in Egyptian culture, who died and was raised repeatedly until made immortal
- Bodhidharma, the Buddhist monk traditionally credited as the transmitter of Zen to China, who reportedly died, was resurrected, and caught up into heaven
- Lazarus, who was raised by Jesus

- Dorcas, who was raised by Peter
- In the first few hundred years of the Christian church, many resurrections were reported. I found a couple of sources which said that well over 300 resurrections were reported in the early centuries of church.
- Many other indigenous religions and belief systems have resurrection or resurrection-like stories. From Asia to Africa, from the Americas to the Norse tribes, there are many accounts of human/god figures which live and appear after death.

Now, I'm not on the face of it discounting the notion that resurrection may have happened—perhaps Jesus is one such case. But, given the billions of human lives that have spent some time on this planet, even if we count up all these occurrences across time and place, it is still an exceedingly rare event. In fact, the overwhelming evidence is that death is it—that the dead are gone.

So why in the face of such overwhelming evidence to the contrary, do people—and specifically us, as Christians—continue to talk about resurrection as a core foundation of our faith? Why, in the intervening centuries since the disciples sat in the room depicted in this passage in Luke, haven't we done away with such fanciful notions? Why do we cling to resurrection hope?

Now as I ask these questions, I'm well aware that just like in Jesus' time, there is a wide spectrum of beliefs about just how literally we should hold our "resurrection hope." In the Christian community, there is one end of the spectrum that believes as the Pharisees did, that resurrection will be literal—that the dead shall be made whole and live again. I remember as a child, several times hearing about this literal resurrection in sermons about the second coming of Christ. My Assembly of God grandparents had a wide selection of books, articles, and even religious "art" (if you could call it that), that depicted this literal resurrection in surreal and vivid detail. And I'll admit that quite a few of my childhood nightmares involved images that I got from hearing and seeing these depictions.

But the other end of the Christian continuum is more like the Sadducees, viewing resurrection not as literal, but as a powerful metaphor for renewal, restoration, a return to right relationship between God and the people, and to the reign of righteousness. It's this arc of the resurrection hope that we find in Martin Luther King's sermons, as he exhorts the people to hope in the promise of a new order, a promised land of equality and justice.

It doesn't take a Masters of Divinity to guess that most of us here this morning might see ourselves firmly rooted in the latter tradition.

And yet, as I thought about and researched this passage for the sermon this morning, I found myself coming back again and again to this room with the disciples, overwhelmed in their grief, missing their loved one, traumatized by his martyrdom and death, fearing

for their own lives, knowing all had been lost, questioning how they could possibly go on in the face of this loss. And in the midst of this pain—in the midst of this grief, in the midst of knowing that in the battle of life and death, death had won once again, as it ultimately, always does—the best friends and companions of Jesus have a transformative experience that leaves them incredulous, terrified, comforted, and joyful all at the same time. They both saw him and didn't see him. They both knew it was him and thought they were imagining things. They both trusted and doubted their experience. They knew—they knew—what the vast preponderance of human experience tells us no one can know, that this man, Jesus, who they loved and worshiped, who they followed and befriended, this man they breathed with, ate with, danced with, slept with, argued with, prayed with, feared with, and saw die a bloody, gruesome death—they knew, in a way that encompassed and went beyond rationality, beyond what could possibly “be”, they knew he lived. They knew that he lived beyond death. They knew it was him. He was there. It was real. He was really there.

So I'm in that room with the disciples. We all are. We all will know the loss of those we love, and we all will die. We all live in fear, resignation, and reality of that. And yet we are here this morning, too, bearing witness once again to the empty tomb, to the persistence of life, to victory of hope over fear.

Why is that? How can both the aching certainty of death and deeper knowing of the life that goes beyond death be true at the same time?

### III

My friend Annie related a story to me recently that reminded me of this paradoxical truth. A very close friend of hers recently died suddenly after a long, full, wonderful life of visionary service to others. For many years he and his wife—who is still living—shared an enduring, very special, friendship with Annie. This couple had served many roles in her life—friend, mentor, surrogate parent, spiritual midwife, travel companion, work colleague—in short, his death was a deep and sudden loss to her and she found herself in a persistent, debilitating depression as she worked through her grief. Some months after his death, she shared with me that something quite miraculous had happened, something that had brought deep healing to his surviving wife and to Annie. Annie shared with me that in the early morning hours, the departed one came to his wife in a visitation, and had told her of his joy and release in death, and reassured her of the purpose of her continued life. The experience was transformative for his wife and for Annie. Of course, they still acutely feel his loss—this couple was married for upward of 60 years, and Annie was friends with them for over 25—so of course, they miss him and grieve his death. But now their grief is buoyed in a certainty beyond rationality, that he in some way beyond our understanding lives on in joy, in completeness, in peace, and in wholeness.

Now, I don't know what “really happened” with my friend's friend. And I don't know what “really happened” at the tomb, and on the walk to Emmaus, and in the room that Luke

gives us a portal into in the passage we read today. Like the gospel account says, I'm left to hold both joy and wonder together with disbelief and skepticism. I am a witness but I'm not entirely sure what I've seen or what it means.

But I can tell you what rings true for me in this story, what resonates beyond fact, beyond rationality, what I feel in my deepest knowing. See, I wasn't in that room, but I, too, can bear witness to what feels true in this story because of my own experience, what I've heard others witness to, and what I know like a parent knows a child, like we know who we love, like we know ourselves.

Divine love comes to us in human form but is not constrained by it. Life goes on beyond the death of our physical bodies. God knows our pain and suffering and joins us there. God knows our joy and skepticism and joins us there. God knows the seemingly mundane necessities of human life—eating, drinking, sickness, health, youth, age, ecstatically dancing and whimpering crumpled in a heap of despair—and joins us there. And Divine love beseeches us to bear witness—to not keep our experience a secret, to share what we have seen and heard, and know beyond understanding.

Remember there was a time before telescopes where humans looked at the sky and thought they saw truth. Now we turn our lenses to the dark night and look into deep space and see the mystery of creation.

This morning look again at the empty tomb, look again at the room with the disciples and the risen Christ. Look again at your own experiences of looking into the dark and finding a deeper mystery. And bear witness to others of what you know, that others may know the Divine Love of God made manifest in all creation and indeed in every human life.

Praise be to God, praise be to the mystery of divine in each of us. Praise be to the mystery of the risen Christ who lives with us, and in us, now and forever. Amen.