

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Jesus says in our Gospel, “*I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live.*” But what is resurrection?

Maybe you’ve seen them, the news stories reporting the reopening of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre after major renovations. A March 20th story about it in the Associated Press said this about the church’s shrine: “that tradition says [it] houses the cave where Jesus was buried and rose to heaven.” Huh? That’s not resurrection, because we all know that Jesus didn’t rise to heaven from His grave. That original story has been corrected; nevertheless, because news outlets all over pick up these stories and publish them in their local papers, you can still go out to the internet and “Google” “cave where Jesus was buried and rose to heaven” and find it on news websites.

Some suggest that in the original story the author was conflating Jesus’ resurrection with His ascension, which we know happened 40 days later. Indeed, we’re not even to Easter, but I encourage you not to forget our celebration of the Ascension of our Lord — I know, it’s on a Thursday evening, but it’s worth making the distinction between Jesus’ resurrection and His ascension.

But I think the problem is even worse than that confusion. I think, as Carl Olsen of *The Catholic World Report*, suggests, that the problem is a misunderstanding of resurrection, *per se*. Olsen writes, “a deeper issue, I suspect, is the implicit assumption that the Resurrection is an entirely spiritual event, having little or nothing to do with the material realm. This general approach to the Resurrection can be described as the Spiritual Resurrection Theory” (http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Blog/5511/did_jesus_rise_from_the_dead_and_go_directly_to_heaven.aspx).

You can understand why reporters make this kind of mistake when Christians, even Christian leaders, talk this way — that the physical, the material, in this case, the body of the dead is insignificant, that the really important thing is the soul, the spirit, that survives. It happens too often. Consider what a former LCMS leader wrote this week about “Death and Life”: “the most easily understandable explanation of life and death is that everyone has a body in which that person’s soul or spirit, that person’s real being, resides as long as he or she is living on this earth” (Dr. Jerry Kieschnick Perspectives, Volume VIII Number 36 – March 30, 2017, “Death and Life”). Did you hear it? The “real being” of a person is simply a “person’s soul or spirit,” not including the body!

This is simply wrong! When God formed man in the Garden, He made him body and soul. And Jesus, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, was made fully man, with both a body and a soul, as we confess it in the Athanasian Creed: Jesus is “perfect man, composed of a rational soul and human flesh.”

Now it is true that when death occurs, the soul departs the body. The body sleeps, and eventually returns to dust. As Moses teaches, speaking of the Lord: *“You return man to dust”* (Psalm 90:3). The soul, on the other hand, returns to God, as Solomon teaches, *“the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it”* (Eccl. 12:7).

But this is no obstacle for Jesus, not even for someone four days in the grave and already in decay. Jesus said of Lazarus when he died: *“Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him”* (John 11:11), and He was talking of Lazarus’ death and his raising. That the soul had departed the body did not stop our Lord from raising him back up, reuniting soul with body. That the stench of Lazarus’ decaying body was so great that the people warned Jesus when He ordered the stone to be rolled away was no obstacle for Jesus. He told Lazarus to *“come out,”* and he did—in his body.

There was the “real person” of Lazarus, body and soul, for neither a soulless body nor a disembodied soul is a person as God created man, but God formed the man from the dust of the earth and breathed the breath of life into him, and he became a living creature (Genesis 2:7).

This is important for us now, too, for death still assails us. Therefore, Jesus’ words in our Gospel figure prominently in our funeral liturgy as the body of the loved one lies there dead, but really, sleeping, one day to be awakened. In the liturgy, we come down to that body and we recite Jesus’ words of triumph heard in our Gospel lesson: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.”*

And we are comforted. We are comforted that He who called forth Lazarus from the grave can also raise this body up from death and the grave. We are comforted that He, who Himself laid down His life unto death, but took it back up again in resurrection victory, has authority to give glorious, immortal, imperishable life to this body lying there asleep. We are comforted remembering that since *“Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, [that is, through faith in Him,] God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. ... the dead in Christ will rise”* (1 Thess. 4:14, 16). We are comforted confessing with Martha, *“I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.”*

That is our Christian hope. In the shadow of death, we comfort one another with the hope of everlasting life in Him who demonstrated His authority over death by raising the dead, who proclaimed His victory over death by passing Himself from death to life, rising Himself bodily from the grave on the third day and demonstrating that He had flesh and bone — not by rising just with His spirit from the grave into heaven. And we confess that our resurrection will likewise be in our own flesh, seeing God with our own eyes (Job 19:26-27).

Thus, when a Christian leader states, “the real being (remember, that’s just the soul to this writer) that resides in a person’s body for the duration of his or her lifetime on earth goes through physical death to eternal life,” (Kieschnick) and yet makes no reference to “the resurrection of the dead” that precedes the “life of the world to come” as we confessed it in the Nicene creed this morning, he does a disservice to his readers, to unsuspecting Christians, and, no doubt to journalists who do not understand what the Bible teaches about Jesus, resurrection, and the Christian hope.

The death of loved ones are times of grief, for believers and non-believers alike. Certainly Mary and Martha were in the throes of grief as Jesus arrived at their home. Jesus did not scold them, and we even heard how Jesus Himself wept. So be not troubled that you are grieving your own loved ones. Certainly Christians grieve. But because of Jesus we don’t grieve as others do who have no hope. We have hope in Jesus, the Resurrection and the Life; we have hope in Jesus, Risen from the Dead; we have hope in Jesus, who has united us by Baptism not only to a death like His, but to a resurrection like His; we have hope in Jesus who comes to take us to the place He prepared for us, and who will come again in glory to raise up our lowly bodies and transform them *“to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself”* (Phil. 3:21).

And because of that, in the committal rite, we pray confidently, “May God the Father, who created this body; may God the Son, who by His blood redeemed this body; may God the Holy Spirit, who by Holy Baptism sanctified this body to be His temple, keep these remains to the day of the resurrection of all flesh.”

And sometimes, at the gravesite, if the body is lowered into the grave as the family watches, I’ll sing this little hymn (LSB759), a hymn that confesses our belief in the resurrection: the resurrection of the body. I leave you with it:

1. Now lay we calmly in the grave This form whereof no doubt we have
That it shall rise again that day In glorious triumph o’er decay.
2. And so to earth again we trust What came from dust and turns to dust,
And from the dust shall surely rise, When the last trumpet fills the skies.
3. His soul forever lives in God, Whose grace his pardon hath bestowed,
Who through His Son redeemed him here From bondage unto sin and fear.
5. He lives where none do mourn and weep, and calmly shall his body sleep,
'Tis God shall death Himself destroy, And raise it into glorious joy.
8. So help us, Christ, our Hope in loss; Thou hast redeemed us by Thy cross
From endless death and misery; We praise, we bless, we worship Thee.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.