

Ascension 2008, Acts 1:1-:11

Today we're going to have to use our brains a little bit. That's because we're celebrating the Feast of the Ascension which is probably one of the hardest aspects of our faith to understand, and probably the hardest Sunday of the year for me as a preacher. To keep our understanding of the Ascension from being deeply incorrect there are a number of pretty complicated things that we need to understand first. To understand the Ascension, we need to understand the relationship between the physical and the spiritual in Jesus himself.

When it comes to Christ's physical body we can see three stages. And all of us will one day follow him in going through all three of these stages.

The first stage started when Jesus was conceived in the womb of the Virgin Mary. At this stage Jesus had an ordinary, physical, human body.

He grew in his mother's womb.

He was born, he grew up, he learned to walk and talk.

He lived an ordinary, real physical life where he ate, slept, drank...

...he farted and went to the bathroom.

And in this real, ordinary human body he experienced the real pains of the beatings and other punishments that were inflicted on him in his final hours.

On the cross he faced death...

...as all of us will one day...

...and then he really and truly died...

...just like all of us will one day.

This began the second phase I want to talk about when it come's to Christ's body.

When Jesus was taken off the cross and buried he was dead.

What had been the living Son of God was now just a lifeless corpse.

A broken, useless, beginning to decay body was placed in the tomb.

Jesus's soul was separated from his body and what was left behind was a lifeless piece of flesh and bone.

Right now all of us are experiencing ordinary physical reality, just as Jesus did from the moment of his conception until the moment of his death.

One day we will all experience the second stage Jesus went through.

We will die.

Our souls will be separated from our bodies.

Our souls will enter into either into Purgatory as a preparation for Heaven...

...or into Hell...

...or...

...for those perfectly united to God...

...directly into Heaven.

But this situation, the separation of our souls from our bodies, is a temporary one.

Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, as they now exist are not permanent realities.

To understand this we need to look at the third phase when it comes to Jesus's physical reality.

Jesus's soul did not stay separated from his body.

His soul was reunited with his body and he rose from the dead.

But he did not merely return to physical life as we know it.

Jesus did have a real physical body after his resurrection.

In the Gospel of Luke he made it clear to his disciples that they weren't just seeing a ghost, as he told them in Luke 24:39 "See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have."

We know the passage in the Gospel of John where Jesus invited the doubt filled St. Thomas to feel the wounds in Christ's own hands and side. (John 20:27)

So Jesus had a real human body, but this was no ordinary human body. The Gospel of Luke, in two more passages from the 24<sup>th</sup> chapter of that book, tells us that Jesus could appear and disappear from sight. (Luke 24:31, :36)

Twice in the Gospel of John Jesus suddenly appears in the middle of a locked room. (John 20:19, :26)

So Christ clearly clearly had a real physical body...

...and just as clearly this body while truly real and truly physical was no ordinary body.

NT Wright, an English biblical scholar and probably one of the smartest men to ever live says that trying to describe Christ's resurrected body is so hard because we don't have a precise vocabulary for trying to describe this. Nothing like Christ's glorified body had been seen before, and nothing like it has been seen since.<sup>1</sup>

When Christ rose he did so in a glorified and wondrously transformed body. We can't fully understand what this is like because it is so far beyond anything we have experienced up to this point. But one day we will follow Jesus in experiencing what it is like to have this kind of body.

Just as we are united with Christ in the experience of ordinary physical life...

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<sup>1</sup> See page 113 of Wright's book "Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense."

...and just as we will be united with him in the experience of death and the separation of the soul from the body...

...we will also be united with him in experiencing the reunion of body and soul in a transformed body.

This is the final resurrection of the dead that will occur at the end of history as we know it.

The final two lines of the Nicene Creed...

...which we say at every Sunday mass...

...are “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

This reference to the resurrection of the dead isn't referring to Christ.

The Creed takes care of that earlier when we say “On the third day he rose again in fulfillment of the scriptures.”

And the reference to “the life of the world to come” doesn't just refer to Heaven as it is now...

...a place where souls are separated from their bodies but united to God...

...but to the new creation that will come into being at the end of the world as we know it...

...when those united to God will be reunited with their bodies...

...glorified bodies like the one Christ has possessed since his resurrection.

In the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of his 1<sup>st</sup> letter to the Corinthians St. Paul compares the bodies we have now to the bodies we will have at the final resurrection. What we have now is perishable, dishonorable, and weak. What we will have at the final resurrection will be imperishable, glorified, and powerful. (see 1 Cor 15:42-43)

Jesus assures us of the reality of this resurrection in the Gospel of John, this is chapter 5 verses 28 and 29, when he says “The hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment.”

Right now all the dead are separated from their bodies, as Jesus was when his body lay in the tomb. But as Jesus makes clear one day all the dead will be reunited with their bodies, just as Jesus himself was.

This reunion of body and soul will be very good news for those united with God...

...very bad news for those separated from him.

This doctrine of the final resurrection of the dead might be a new teaching for a lot of people here today.

It might be a confusing teaching for a lot of people here today.

But it's an essential and basic Christian belief.

Jesus hands this teaching on to us.

St. Paul explains it to us.

The creeds written by the Church affirm this belief.

And it's only when we see Christ's Ascension as part of this teaching about Christ's resurrection and our own resurrection that we can understand the Feast we are celebrating today.

The Ascension isn't about Jesus rising into the sky like someone with a jet pack on until he rises so high that we can't see him anymore.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is not intended to deny that the bible provides us with an accurate description of what the Ascension looked like to those who witnessed it. Today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles tells us that “When he

What happened at the Ascension is this. During the period following his resurrection Jesus at times chose to reveal himself to his disciples by appearing in his glorified body.

At other times he would suddenly and instantly withdraw himself from their presence in a way that is only possible for someone whose physical body had been transformed in ways that we can not yet fully understand.

This is what occurred at the Ascension.

Jesus didn't disappear into outer space.

He didn't cease to have a physical body.

At the Ascension Jesus withdrew from being physically present to his disciples in such a way that after the Ascension they could no longer see him, speak to him, and so on.

During this time of withdrawal we wait for what is promised to us in the Creed...

...that Jesus "will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."

The Ascension marks the beginning of one age in Church history. A period when we wait for the return of the physically glorified Christ.

When that day comes and we receive transformed bodies.....may we do so united in Christ.....as we rise.....to the resurrection of life.

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had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight." (Acts 1:9) I firmly believe in the reliability of this account. But we need to understand that more was going on than just Jesus rising above the earth. It's not as if someone in a helicopter on the other side of the cloud would have been able to see Jesus, "Oh look, I see where he's hiding!" Jesus did rise up from the earth, but there were also much more powerful and mysterious things that Jesus was doing in his resurrected body at this time.