

“Mystical Bodies”

A quote from the Muslim Sufi tradition: “God has made nonexistence appear existent and respectable; He has made Existence appear in the guise of nonexistence. He has hidden the Sea and made the foam visible, He has concealed the Wind and shown you the dust.” (Rumi MV 1026-27)

The Biblical creation story reminds us, ‘we were created out of the dust of the ground and to dust we return.’ Luke, telling the story of resurrection, perhaps fifty years after the death of Jesus, would have been very conscious of this reality. If there was a body of Jesus, a corpse, it now would have been simply dust and yet Luke tells stories that say something very different, very strange.

It will come as a surprise to many what the church believes about life after death. First, we do not believe in reincarnation, we believe in resurrection. Second, we do not believe in the immortality of the soul. We believe in the resurrection of the body.

First then—the immortality of the soul. If this is what you believe, then you are in good company for this is what most people believe. The following poem might capture that image for you.

When we have done all the work
we were sent to earth to do,
we are allowed to shed our body,
which imprisons our soul
like a cocoon encloses the butterfly.
And when the time is right,
we can let go of it
and we will be free of pain,
free of fears and worries,
free as a very beautiful butterfly,
returning home to God...

That was written by Elizabeth Kuebler-Ross, who had this to say about her beliefs. “When we have passed the tests we were sent to Earth to learn, we are

allowed to graduate. We are allowed to shed our body, which imprisons our soul the way a cocoon encloses the future butterfly, and when the time is right we can let go of it.

Then we will be free of pain, free of fears and free of worries—free as a beautiful butterfly returning home to God... which is a place where we are never alone, where we continue to grow and to sing and to dance, where we are with those we loved, and where we are surrounded with more love that we can ever imagine.”

The church has always said that we believe in the resurrection of the body, which means the whole person. Not some little part of us that has finally got it right and the rest is garbage, just dust. It is not just that perfect part of you that will be with God, it will be all of you.

Now what we believe about our destiny informs our present. If we believe in the immortality of the soul, we could live a life whereby we work on our souls and let our bodies go to hell.

We do believe that bodies are important. Hospitals have always been a vital ministry of the church; we still have United Church hospitals. Our whole Medicare system in Canada is the result of a prairie Christian preacher. The YMCA and the YWCA began for the care and maintenance of the human body.

And we should notice that in Luke’s resurrection stories it’s always about eating. In the Road to Emmaus story, Jesus is made know in the sharing of bread. In today’s story, Jesus asks for something to eat. Food for the body, the individual body and the corporate body is part of living the resurrection.

Resurrection means that God loves all of us. Every hair on our head is numbered and cherished. God loves all of you, not just some nebulous thing called a soul.

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That is at once really good news and really frightening. The frightening part is addressed by the reincarnation belief.

At the risk of oversimplifying the differences, reincarnation is the belief that in life you have the opportunity to live a good life and if it is good enough we come back to a better life. You get in the next life what you lived in the previous life. Life is for learning, learning to grow into harmony and affinity with God.

Reincarnation would believe that life is like a journey up a mountain to where God abides. There are many paths, many different ways to get there and many lives may be needed to make that journey, for it is a journey that is longer than our span of life.

Those who believe in resurrection note that it is rare for our lives, even within one life, to keep on getting better and better. In fact, within one's life along the path, one is apt to stumble and fall and indeed stumble and fall more than once. Resurrection claims that we cannot make it all the way up the mountain, instead there is one, like a shepherd, who comes and carries us the last stretch. There is one who raises us up out of the dust when we cannot raise ourselves.

We can never be perfect. We cannot know God perfectly, we cannot love perfectly, and we cannot even forgive one another perfectly. But God can and does and will. Resurrection is not so much a belief about life after death, but a statement that we need God to help us live in this world, because we will never learn enough to pass the final exams—we would be left in the dust.

But what about the dust? Last week an international team of astronomers “searching for the building blocks of life in a giant dust cloud at the heart of the Milky Way have concluded that it tastes vaguely of raspberries...”. The dust of the universe, our God who breathes life into dust, resurrection... all more mysterious than we can imagine.