



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

May I speak to you in the name of the living God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

If you've been paying attention to the scripture readings over the last few weeks since Easter, including today, you'll perhaps have noticed something about them that some people find rather odd. It's that they don't just proclaim that death was not the end of Jesus or that He appeared to his disciples, perhaps in a vision or a dream, as angels still often in both Old and New Testaments.

That in itself, of course, would be something wonderful to believe, but our texts go much further than that. They declare that God raised Jesus physically from the dead, that when the women went to His tomb on the first day of the week, they found the tomb empty. Indeed, they don't just say that. They seem almost to go out of their way to rub our faces in it. So when Jesus is with the disciples, He eats with them. And Luke even gives us the menu. They had broiled fish for entree and then something with honey for the dessert.

And again, earlier in her joy at meeting with Jesus in the Garden, after the crucifixion, the Garden on the first Easter morning, Mary of Magdala, John tells us was so overjoyed that she embraces our Lord crying, Rabboni, my teacher. And Jesus indeed has to say, and I always somehow imagine Him laughing as He says this. You can't go on clinging to me like this Mary, for I'm not yet ascended to my Father. And as great theologian archbishop, Michael Ramsey used to point out. It sounds like our Lord is saying that when He is ascended to His Father, then indeed she'll be able to cling to Him as much as she likes.

And so even today, as we remember His exaltation to the Father, at the end of the great 40 days of His being with the disciples and teaching after the resurrection, the picture of that exaltation that Luke gives us is that he's still with them as a human being, as their teachers, the one who blesses them, even as He is exalted to the right hand of the Father.

Now, there are certainly some people for whom this kind of an account is the breaking point. It's a step too far that I've certainly had people say to me. I don't have any difficulty believing in a spiritual resurrection of Jesus. We can certainly believe that His soul lives on, that His teaching lives, that His spirit is safe in the hands of God, that sort of thing. But the notion of a physical resurrection is sort of ridiculous. Perhaps it was all right in the early days of the church when people were much more gullible, but in the 21st century, we know that rising from the

dead is something that doesn't happen, which may lead us to ask, well, should we abandon this part of our narratives as something that's just a conformity to a more primitive culture?

Well, as you may guess I'm going to say, I don't think we should. And first of all, I'd have to say that those who say that the ancients were more gullible than we are in these matters are actually quite simply wrong. Our forebears when the gospel was first preached, were perfectly well aware, just as well aware as we are, that the dead normally stay dead. And those early Christians preaching would actually have had an easier time of it if they proclaimed a purely interior or sort of spiritual resurrection of Jesus. Everyone would've understood what they meant and they wouldn't have encountered the kind of scoffing, for example, that St. Paul encountered at Athens, according to Luke, when the smart, up to the moment, intellectual philosophers scoffed at him, jeered at him for presuming to talk about the resurrection, which they regarded as nonsense.

Yet, still the early Christians persisted in it. So were they wrong to do so? I think not. And in fact, I regard the efforts of some people then and indeed now to correct them in this respect. I actually think they're grossly mistaken. Not just because to do that is to get the history wrong and the text wrong, ignore the text, although those are not small sins in my eyes. But more importantly because I think to make the resurrection of Jesus simply something spiritual and interior is actually to teach a view of it, which finally fails to honor the justice of God.

What am I saying? I think I'm saying this: that if there's one thing we can be sure about, it is in this world, this physical world, that much evil, perhaps most human evil is done. Think about it. It was in their bodies that Jews and others were enslaved and murdered at Auschwitz and Buchenwald. It's the bodies of Japanese men and women and children that were incinerated at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It's in their bodies that African American men and women were humiliated for generations in America and in Europe. It's in their bodies that living animals are still farmed as if they were products of a conveyor belt. It's in its body that the good earth is strip-mined and left in desolation.

And again, what are the evils of sexism or racism or homophobia about if they're not about bodies? What do they involve, if not the claim that because my body is different from yours then somehow that makes me a better person than you, or maybe you a better person than me, or gives me the right to oppress or abuse you, or you may be the right to oppress or abuse me. And all this just because our bodies are different or work in a different kind of way.

And again, what about martyrs? About all those lovely men and women throughout history who have died for the faith, who have died to honor God and God's law as they understood it? Their souls, we say, are in the hand of God. Yes, yes, but it was in their bodies that they suffered. What then of that? And it seems

to me very important that the stories of Jesus' resurrection and ascension affirm that in Him, God's victory over death did indeed involve the totality of our lives. It involved things. Spiritual, yes, indeed. But also the redemption of the body. The body that had been tortured to death upon the Cross.

And yet I think even to state this in this way is to state it purely negative as the putting right of a wrong, but actually I think there is also here a positive joy that we should affirm if we are going to hold the faith of the Bible. After all, the scriptures say that in the beginning, God looked at everything that God had made. Everything in its flagrant materiality, all the fantastic variety of creation, the birds and the trees, and the insects, and the beasts, and saw all that he had made, and behold, it was very good.

In the movie Chariots of Fire, which I hope some of you still remember, and I'm not just dating myself. In that movie, there's a moment, which I think is a moment of deep theological insight, and it is also a moment of great drama. It's when the Scottish runner, Eric Little, now I should say Little's family were missionaries in China, deeply committed to the faith of Christ and to the work of His church. But he was also a runner, and he's talking with his sister Jenny, who's begun to fear that his running is taking over his life. It's no longer fun, but it's actually leading him away from his work as a missionary in China and away from God.

And Eric takes Jenny aside and, first of all, he says, simply, I've decided I'm going back to China. The missionary service has accepted me. And Jenny says, oh, I'm so pleased. And Eric then says, but I've got a lot of running to do first, Jenny. Jenny, you've got to understand, I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China, but God also made me fast and when I run, I feel his pleasure. To give up now would be to hold Him in contempt. You're right. I don't just run for fun. To win is to honor God.

Exactly. I think we honor God when we are true to ourselves. And God made us, among other things, to be physical and has honored that physicality not only by pronouncing it very good, but also of course by becoming it. The fourth evangelist says that the word became flesh. He doesn't say the word put on flesh or dressed up in it like an actor dressing up in a costume, or like a chocolate Father Christmas covered with silver paper to make it look like Father Christmas. The evangelist says the word of God became flesh.

And experiences of God's pleasure in our physicality are, I believe, experiences, glimpses when we have for a moment, a glimpse, and it's so easily missed, especially by me, of what the physical life that God has given us is meant to be for us. Another person who is very dear to me long ago told me, and has told me again occasionally, that when she was a teenager, it was simply looking into a flower that for some reason she looked into this flower and became aware of the grace and majesty of God.

I hope perhaps we all have our own stories, something like that, of moments when we are reminded that life even in its physicality is more than we think of it most of the time. So we are then able to see the resurrection stories as stories which point us to a transformed and transfigured life, which is our destiny. Not merely that we shall be spiritually fuller than we are now, but in our actual physicality, we shall for the first time, know what it is to be truly human and to be ourselves.

And while we're at it, while we're talking about this, let's remember that this promise of redemption and fulfillment from God is not limited merely to humanity. It is finally cosmic at several key points, including one we heard this morning, writers in the scripture say that it is God's will to fulfill all things, [carpanta 0:14:19], all things in Christ. Never forget that the first covenant, which God makes according to Holy Scripture, is not with the Christian Church. It is not with Israel. It is not even with humanity. It is in Genesis when God declares God's eternal covenant, Berit Olam, with every living creature of all flesh.

And it's in that spirit that the letter to the Ephesians, again, which we heard this morning, declares it's God's will to sum up all things in Jesus Christ, the things in Heaven and the things on Earth. Or again, Paul, in his letter to the Romans, he says, it's God's will that the creation itself, the whole creation will be set free from the bondage to decay and obtain the liberty of the glory of God. And incidentally, yes, and in case some people worry, and people do worry from time to times, yes, if you are going to be a biblical Christian, then certainly you may believe that there will be a place in the age to come for your beloved cats and dogs and ponies and what other pets you have. And no doubt for a good many other delightful and interesting creatures too. The psalmist says, thou Lord shall save both man, humankind. The psalmist didn't know about inclusive language. Thou Lord shall save both humankind and beast.

And that's why one of the reasons, there's a wonderful painting that the artist, Titian did. Of the greeting between our Lord and Mary Magdalene in the Garden on that first Easter morning. And the painting of them in itself is wonderful, but in the background, there's a kind of halo of redemptive life that surrounds our Lord. And it's very much in the spirit of the New Testament that Titian puts into that halo, some very ordinary things, a village, and trees and sheep, and I am glad to say someone walking with their dog.

As my friend Julia Gata says, to see Jesus as Son of the living God is not just to see Him as my Savior, although He is certainly that. But to see Him as the Savior of all the past, the present and the future, the human and the non-human, Jesus Christ is Lord of all, whether He is known by name or not. So how will God do all this? Well, I'm happy to tell you that neither Paul nor any other biblical writer ever tells us. And I dare say that was because they didn't think they knew.

Perhaps they were like Lady Julian of Norwich, content simply to have been told what is impossible to you is not impossible to me. I shall preserve my word in everything. And I shall make all things well.

So if St. Paul and Lady Julian didn't know, perhaps we don't need to know either. According to the fourth evangelist, when Peter asked about the future of just one other disciple, what's going to happen to him, Lord? Let alone all humanity or the whole creation, the reply that Peter got was simply, what is that to you? You follow me. The true life of faith and grace is, of course, just that, to follow Jesus, which means to live in hope of this, let's be frank, for most of us, most of the time, quite unimaginable redemption. And to live as those who are actively preparing for it.

And that means that our every little effort, or big effort, if we can, to promote justice and compassion and decency, our effort to protect the weak, the poor, the oppressed, the planet, all those things, great or small, make us participants in the preparation for the kingdom, the reign to come. And however small or defeated our efforts may seem to be, they're never for nothing or in vain, for God's own self is on our side. And as Elisha on one occasion had to point out to his servant who was terrified by the forces facing them, they that are with us are more than they that are with them. And if you remember, Elisha prayed and the servant's eyes were opened and he suddenly saw the hosts of God stretched in time and eternity, dreadful as an army with banners.

Sooner or later we all stand on the precipice of death. And what then? Well, a hopeful response to that question, and to the promise that the entire created order shall have a share in its unfolding. That appears to me to be the ultimate meaning of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God. That's what they're really about. And now to that same God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we ascribe as is most justly due all might, majesty, dominion and power, now, henceforth, and forever.

Amen.