

We're near the end of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, and he is fierce and forceful to the end. He began the letter with an appeal to them not to be divided, whether by the person who baptized them or by any other status symbol; he chastised them firmly for failing to value every member of their community, and now at the end he wants to be very, very clear that what brought them together initially is not optional or disposable or ornamental. "I would remind you, brothers and sisters, of the good news that I proclaimed to you, . . . , *through which you are being saved* [it's not a done deal, it could still go sideways], if you hold firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you."

He reminds them of the chain of transmission of the good news, and the multiplicity of possible people they could go to for attestation if they were in doubt: Cephas. The Twelve. More than 500. James. Paul himself. The risen Christ appeared to all of them, and although Paul has his differences with Cephas and the other disciples, he and they are as one on the truth that Jesus died and rose again *and* is the first in what will be a series, because he was human and we are human and his resurrection means that we also will be resurrected. With bodies. In the realest way the Corinthians can imagine.

Do they think this is optional or mere embellishment? Well, says Paul, "if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain *and your faith has been in vain*. . . . Then those also who have died in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied." Do you see any wiggle room here? I don't.

Paul never was a shrinking violet, but this is just a torrent of forceful argument. It raises the question of *why* Paul thinks he has to be so forceful, so insistent. At least part of the

answer is evident in other parts of this letter, where we find out that the more sophisticated and intellectual members of the church have decided that they are already saved and that the way they live from here on out really doesn't matter. This has partly to do with a strain of Gnosticism that was in the air in the ancient world, the notion that physical bodies and anything material is base and degraded and essentially opposed to the spiritual. Gnostics believed that salvation meant being liberated from one's disgusting physical body and reuniting spiritually with the entirely spiritual God who had created them. You might abuse your body, practicing extreme asceticism in order to subdue its hold on you, or you might use your body carelessly, since it was irrelevant to the life of the spirit. To whatever extent some of the Corinthian church members held to these views, it was leading them to certain behaviors that Paul wants them to stop. Some of the men are sleeping with prostitutes and others, correctly understanding that food offered to idols is harmless, are openly eating such food and scandalizing less sophisticated Christians. Paul has spent a lot of time earlier in this letter admonishing them that what they do with their bodies *does* matter, and that they are *not yet saved*. In today's reading he draws out the logical conclusion: if the body doesn't matter, then the resurrection of Jesus, who most assuredly had a body, doesn't matter, and the experiences that you all had that caused you to come together as a church are just one big, ludicrous mistake and don't you feel silly.

[I will say parenthetically that it was commonly believed that *spirit* also had a sort of concreteness to it, the way *pneuma* or breath is physically real. Paul's resurrected bodies will not be flesh and blood, but that kind of spirit.]

Why is this so damned important? Well, obviously, it's important because the

resurrection of Jesus is the emblem of God's promise that we will all be made whole, and that all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well, to quote Julian of Norwich. But it's important in another way as well. Paul is fighting hard to say that bodies matter because the Corinthians—and we—are all too likely to think that ideas and rational thinking are the only things that matter, and that what is physical about us is lesser or can be separated from our minds. There's this sort of illusion that thoughts are always the way, the answer.

For example, I have an old quilt that suffered a mishap and had to be machine washed. Of course the fabric had degraded, and when it came out of the washer there were a number of patches that had simply come apart so that the quilt batting was fluffing up through the holes. It was winter, and I had a lot to do, so I folded it up and told myself I'd mend it when I had time. It took me, oh, about five minutes to figure that out. When the semester ended, I spread the quilt on the floor and looked at it, and thought about how to mend it, and for the last three weeks I've been working on it nearly every day, replacing patches and darning fragile spots. For *hours* a day. The actual process of mending this quilt is a whole different thing than deciding in my head to do it. It's not just that it takes longer, but the experience is different. The enterprise is different. I didn't solve the problem by figuring out how to repair the quilt; I'm solving it by actually, physically, sitting down with needle and thread and repairing it one patch at a time. That's the difference between having ideas and experiencing a process, and Paul **does not want** the Corinthians to elide the two, or subordinate the physical part. Bodies matter, and what we do with our bodies matters.

There is no soul separate from the body; we are unified beings and therefore we have to live that way. Your body is as much a part of who you are as your mind, your spirit, your

heart—whatever you think is your essence. Anybody who’s cared for children knows that. We should love our bodies and those of the people in our communities, and we should make sure that resources are getting to the bodies that need them. And obviously, it is very hard to have hope or to live hopefully when our bodies are short of sustenance or when they are trapped in networks of injustice that frustrate escape. If the God on whom we count has any role, any reality to us, we have to take seriously how the obstacles to hope impede embodied people. The hope to which the Corinthians had given voice was not a hope for self-indulgence, but a hope for righteousness and justice, best defined by what we see in Jesus.

To me it’s futile to try to zero in on specifics about Jesus’ resurrection or our own state of being beyond death. I have a feeling that it eludes all the categories that are set up in my brain. Just reading Paul, and being aware of some of the cultural influences that informed him, like the idea that spirit has a certain physicality, makes me very modest about what I could possibly imagine that isn’t also culturally determined. So I don’t see any point in dwelling on that; I will just say that I share Paul’s confidence that God is greater than death and has more in store for us. But what is not futile is to understand how important it is to stay with our bodies, to not only think of how to mend the quilt but also to mend the quilt. The Baal Shem Tov, an 18th century Jewish mystic who is regarded as the founder of Hasidic Judaism, commented on this verse from Exodus 23: "When you will see the donkey of your enemy collapsing under its burden, and you are inclined to refrain from aiding him, you shall nevertheless aid him". The Baal Shem Tov applied this instruction to the body, the material self, because the word for donkey also means “materiality.” He said that the Torah was saying that initially you may see your body as your enemy, resisting your soul’s objectives, collapsing under the “burden” of the

commandments. You may want to fight your body by denying its needs. But no, says the Torah (according to BST). You must aid your soul's "enemy." Care for it, do not break it.

Well, why would we aid our enemy's donkey? BST or not, why does the Torah tell us to rush to the rescue of our enemy? Because it's ***the way to spend the present moment***. It's not a correct idea; it's action that the present moment demands of us. In the same way, I read the BST as saying that embodied people, and bodies generally, have intrinsic value whether we understand it or not, and that their value doesn't even need to be understood intellectually to matter. The way to live is to act like physicality matters. That means, for instance, taking education equity seriously, at a granular level—physical factors keep children from learning to their fullest potential. It means supporting our food bank as long as people are hungry. It means respecting other people's physical space. It means committing to spend a lot of time mending our broken society. But all of this is integral to our hope in the resurrection, because to give physicality the respect and time it deserves is the Way, the manner of living, that Jesus showed us. Jesus didn't just walk around giving people ideas. He spent time with them. He spent hours walking with them. He touched them, he ate with them, he probably walked along the road with them without saying a damn thing for hours at a time. The testimony that Jesus was alive, after having been confirmed dead, is a testimony that he was still real *and* that embodied human beings can, in the present moment, click into place with the Divine.

Lord of the resurrection, you died and were raised so that ultimately death would not prevail. Remind us daily that sin, and even death, have no power over us. Amen.