

Where is the Body?

Is there anyone here this morning without a body? Of course this is a daft question, but it goes to the heart of Christian faith because in the Easter story a key question is, where is the body? Having spent two years caring for those who were dying, and looking after a mortuary, I know how precious bodies are and how those who are bereaved bodily ache for those who have died.

The physicality of the Easter stories is striking. We often think of John's Gospel as the spiritual Gospel, but actually the physicality is very strong: Peter and John running, the bending down to enter the tomb, and the details of the linen wrappings around Jesus' head. Yet this is just the warm-up for the big encounter between Mary and Jesus, where the sensory tension is electric.

Mary is very distressed, having already been to the tomb earlier, and not found the body. And she's not comforted, even by the angels: they are where Jesus' body should have been, but he's gone. Desperate, she sees the gardener and pleads with him to give her the body: "Tell me where you have laid him, and I will take him away." Then the unbelievable happens: Jesus, the supposed gardener, calls her by her name. She recognises him and reaches out to touch him. He asks her not to hold him but to go to the disciples. There she says, "I have seen the Lord."

Our Body: Nobody, Everybody and Somebody

The Christian faith depends on the resurrection above everything else. No resurrection, no Christianity. And however challenging it is, the resurrection is about the risen *body* of Jesus. Let me explore this by reflecting on how we use the word 'body' in the way we talk about ourselves.

Nobody: Of course, no body was the Easter question. Before I return to that, let's reconnect with our bodily selves. You can do this simply by asking the question, "Do I have a body, or am I body?" No body, no person. We have been confused by our Western culture into thinking that a soul exists independently. However as people are living longer we are learning, painfully, that the deterioration of the brain is the deterioration of the person. We are our bodily memories. One of the interesting things about the post-resurrection stories is Jesus reminding his disciples what they'd done and what he had taught them. The Gospels are memories of bodily events!

Everybody: The Christian faith is open to anybody. You don't have to be a particular body to count: neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, both male and female, anybody: all are included. We see this 'anybody' faith expressed with extraordinary clarity in the first outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Gentiles, as recorded in Acts 10. Everybody began to respond – the slaves, the free, the women, the men, the Gentiles and some very surprised Jews. Peter can now see clearly that though God had a particular vocation for the Jews he also shows no partiality: every nation, all are included; but all are also called to fear the Lord and do what is acceptable to him.

Somebody: One of the amazing things about our faith is that although it's for everybody, it makes each of us feel as though we are somebody. The Spirit connects with each of us, with our own story, with our particular life experience through, and with, the body that we each are. Jesus calls Mary by name, and she responds personally. Each one of us receives forgiveness of sins in Jesus' name. The nature of faith is not private but it is personal. Yet this is not like the illusion of 'personal' we can get from social media; this is where personal starts. Jesus speaks to us by name: that makes us personal. We're truly somebody, in time & space, because of him.

Risen Body

Risen body: The bodily resurrection of Jesus points backwards and forwards to two other great miracles: to creation and to new creation. Christians believe God created the world and that he will glorify this old world, saved through the death and resurrection of Jesus, in a new creation filled with his Spirit: bodily life made new. For this hope we rely on the eye-witnesses chosen by God, those who knew Jesus well and ate and drank with him after he was raised from the dead.

This is strong stuff. We're invited to believe Mary who says she has 'seen the Lord'; we're invited to believe Peter and the other disciples who ate and drank with Jesus. Their witness is that Jesus was, and is, bodily risen from the dead. In his resurrection any body may be included.