

## And Embodied Faith: The Mystical Body Colossian 1:15-20

- <sup>15</sup> The Son is the image of the invisible God,  
the one who is first over all creation,<sup>[a]</sup>
- <sup>16</sup> Because all things were created by him:  
both in the heavens and on the earth,  
the things that are visible and the things that are invisible.  
Whether they are thrones or powers,  
or rulers or authorities,  
all things were created through him and for him.
- <sup>17</sup> He existed before all things,  
and all things are held together in him.
- <sup>18</sup> He is the head of the body, the church,  
who is the beginning,  
the one who is firstborn from among the dead  
so that he might occupy the first place in everything.
- <sup>19</sup> Because all the fullness of God was pleased to live in him,  
<sup>20</sup> and he reconciled all things to himself through him—  
whether things on earth or in the heavens.  
He brought peace through the blood of his cross.

We have been talking these four weeks about bodies in many forms and the way our awareness of bodies shapes our Christian faith. We've talked about our body. Our social body. The earth as a body. Today is the last day we talk about bodies. So we need to address the big problem with bodies as a primary theological concept. The problem is bodies fall apart. This comes as no surprise to most of you. Bodies become sick. They break down. Bodies die.

This is at the very least an inconvenience. Enduring our body's break down is no walk in the park. But theologically, it's rough, too. If we hinge our faith on God's embodiment and all we've got are these frail and temporary bodies, what does that say about God? What is God doing, investing so much love and care in bodies that go away? It's not just our physical bodies that die. Social, communal bodies do the same. Visit Italy and the majestic Roman empire is ruins, roads, and aqueducts. Communities die—we drove this summer through small farm towns in Iowa, Minnesota, and South Dakota, their once thriving main streets are empty shells. The church dies—the once-thriving Baptist church across the street is now a Sprouts. Even the grand, self-organizing, generative body of the earth will die. I'm not talking about climate change, though that's not helping. The sun will burn out. One day, the earth will no longer support any life.

Entropy, scientists call it. Things fall apart. Every body comes undone.

This is a conundrum for our tradition that has staked so much on divine embodiment. God always moves in the direction of embodiment—that's what I've been affirming and I do believe

that. What does it mean, then, that the bodies that God makes and God loves and God inhabits all come *undone*?

Maybe these big questions don't concern you. Maybe ignorance is bliss. Maybe we ought to ditch any grand vision for bodies. Thomas Hobbes, the English philosopher, was famous for saying we shouldn't expect too much; life, he said, is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." For much of history—and even for some of us today—life in the body may not often look or feel like a gift from God. And yet I also believe that in every life, there is enough joy, enough love, enough beauty, to allow us to grasp the luminous quality of our embodied life.

So everyone one of us has to look at the conundrum of our own end. When is the last time you gazed, clear-eyed, at the end of your own bodily life? What do you feel? Some of us look away; we will deny our death for as long as we can, often until it is too late. Some of us can only see death as a cruel joke—a negation of the beauty and joy of bodily life. Some of us will take a stoic posture, releasing bodily attachments. Some of us will "eat, drink, and be merry," for this is all we get and we might as well enjoy it.

There's no judgment here. The end of our body is *the* great mystery of our living. All of us will do our best to reconcile ourselves to the fact of our end.

I want you to know that our tradition has its own response—it's own wisdom—to the problem of the ephemerality of bodies. Our wisdom—our truth—is resurrection. Resurrection is the way our tradition responds to the grim fact that things fall apart.

I'm not saying that a couple of guys and gals got together in the mid-30s CE in Antioch and said, "hey, let's write a good philosophical response to the existential dilemma of mortality." How it all happened came about is a mystery. What seems to have happened is that in the days after the body of Jesus was crucified and put in a tomb, his followers had a bodily experience of a risen body of Christ. I don't know how they experienced that body—as a force, as a warmth, as a vision, perhaps the experience was as plain as you and I experience one another today. But something convinced them of the persistence of Jesus' body as a living being after the fact of his death. They wrote stories about this Risen Body. And other stories about how the Spirit of God that was in that Risen Body, came to be in their own bodies. They had hope that when they died, the same love that raised Jesus' body would raise their bodies, too.

The experience these women and men shared of Christ Resurrected became the organizing principle of their lives. Death, this eternal conundrum—this fearsome negation of bodily life—was not what it seemed. The direction of God towards embodiment was not finally stopped by the death of the body. God's love does not let bodies disappear. Not Jesus' body. Not our body. Not any body. Resurrection is the affirmation that the movement of God toward love-in-the-flesh does not end. Resurrection says that the movement of God toward forming us into the a social body—the Body of Christ—in which every member is honored does not end. Resurrection says that the movement of God toward the re-situating of our human bodies to be at home within the life of the body of the Creation is not halted by death.

Resurrection is the organizing principle of the Christian life. Resurrection says that things do not fall apart. They hold together. This is an existential wager.

I've spoken with a few of you about a recent episode of the program *On Being*, in which the host, Krista Tippett, speaks with physicist Brian Greene.<sup>1</sup> Their conversation touched on these same questions. Greene was quite clear—according to the laws of physics, the universe is now falling and will eventually fall completely apart. There's no argument about it.

But Greene is a lovely conversation partner for people of faith, because he acknowledges that human beings live by stories and science is only one of those stories. The stories of faith are just as essential for organizing our existence, for galvanizing our persistence, for giving us the capacity to thrive in the face of entropy. Our capacity to imagine a way through the “falling apartness” of the physical universe is not madness, it is marvelous. Our capacity to imagine the persistence of love overcoming death is not a denial of reality—our theological imagination is itself a part of the fabric of reality.

Is resurrection true? Their truth is measured not in laboratories or in equations, but by the beauty and goodness that it draws out of our human lives. Does resurrection allow us to see and be on this earth in a new way? Does it draw us away from fear of death? Does the promise of resurrection move us to invest in a life live of love and kindness and joy. Does resurrection show us how much God loves bodies—and therefore move us toward an embrace of bodily life—both our neighbors' and our own?

The great old creed of our tradition says, “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.” I know some of you cringe when we say that. You're not sure what you believe and that's OK. We're all working it out with fear and trembling and a glass of wine. But our tradition affirms that resurrection is real. That love raised the body of Christ. And the love, grace, and peace in that resurrected body of Christ is not restricted to that particular body, but love and grace and peace infuses *every* body.

Christ is the head of the body, the church,  
... the beginning,  
the one who is firstborn from among the dead

<sup>19</sup> [A]ll the fullness of God was pleased to live in Christ,

<sup>20</sup> and God reconciled all things through Christ—  
whether things on earth or in the heavens.

I know things seem like they are falling apart. Look again. Look closely. Look through the eyes of love. Things don't fall apart. They are coming together. All things are reconciled to God through Christ. I believe in the resurrection of the body... and the life everlasting.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://onbeing.org/programs/brian-greene-this-tiny-slice-of-eternity/#transcript>