

3rd Sunday of Easter “The Resurrection and the Sanctity of the Human Body”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, how often do you stop and wonder, to simply consider, how awesome it is to be alive? Specifically, how often do you consider how wonderful it is to be flesh and blood? How often do you ponder how incredible it is to simply be able to smile or be embraced by a loved one? How heavenly it is to sit down as a family and eat together. Such a simple thing and yet sacramental! My friends, how wonderful it is to have a body!

At first glance, this may seem to be a simple and straightforward idea, but at second glance, you may be surprised that the belief in the goodness of the body marks a fundamental difference between religions. For example, when I was in college I was interested in comparative religion. During that time, I enjoyed learning more about a number of different religions such as Buddhism. Although there are many interesting aspects about Buddhism, I was fascinated to learn that one of its beginning insights is that everything is *dukkha*, translated: all is pain, falsehood and deception. The idea is: our physical bodies are the result of karma from which we need liberation. Notice that the beginning insight of Christianity, however, is radically different. We believe that God created the universe, and it is good! God created matter, and it is good!

In Buddhist systems, we are to renounce the physical world of matter so to liberate the light trapped within us. Christianity, however, says God became flesh in Jesus Christ. There can be no better affirmation of matter than God being born on Earth in the flesh. Furthermore, we were created in the flesh in the image and likeness of God. The Christian perspective is, to be in the flesh is good, to eat is good, to see and to taste is good, and to hear and to feel is good. I believe this is a distinctively Judeo-Christian insight. Flesh is not evil. Flesh is good. It is sin that takes good things and corrupts them, as St. John tells us in our second reading.

Here is some good historical trivia to impress your friends, are you ready? There was a splinter group of Christians in the Early Church that couldn't escape the scandal of Christ coming to us in the flesh. They wanted to keep a dualistic system of religion that holds all matter and flesh as evil while only the spirit is good. They couldn't handle the idea that God truly became flesh because that would become the highest affirmation of matter, an idea very scandalous to them. Throughout the Gospels and letters of the New Testament, you discover little clues of the Early Church's conversation with these splinter groups called *Docetists* or *Gnostics* who denied that being in the flesh was a good thing. The Gnostic Gospels you may have heard about fall into that category. The Early Church rejected these so called “Gospels” because they were determined not to be apostolic and they denied that Jesus was really and truly human. I mention all of this because we see this conversation happening in the Early Church in our Gospel reading today.

The Gospel of Luke goes to great lengths to tell us that the Risen Lord was not a ghost or phantom. Jesus invites them, "Touch me and see, because a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." How clear is that? There is even a kind of funny moment when the risen Jesus asks for food to eat and eats a piece of baked fish in front of them, just so we don't miss this point. The risen Lord has a body that could touch and be touched. And we will have resurrected bodies too someday! Why? Because having a physical body is a good thing!

In our first reading, St. Peter said to the people: "The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus." Notice that it is the God of the living St. Peter is talking about. St. Peter is talking about the God of family, the God of procreation and the beauty of marriage, the God of the flesh and spirit, not just spirit alone.

My friends, many still hold that we will not have physical bodies in the afterlife. And yet, the Gospel of Luke this weekend gives us a look at what our resurrected bodies will be able to do. The Gospel says that we will be able to touch and be touched. It says we will be able to eat food and engage in conversation. Indeed, this week's Gospel invites us to think how wonderful it is to be in the flesh. The Gospel also invites us to have wonder, awe, and respect for the bodies we have right now. These bodies are gifts to be treasured and cared for.

This is why, if I get called to bless the body of someone who died, I will do it. I will bless that body even if no one is around. Why? Because the body is holy! The body is sacred. In fact, this is why the Church insists that we have funeral liturgies and proper burials for our loved ones who have passed away in the hopes of rising again. Why? Because even our earthly remains are special and to be treated with respect!

This is my take on Christian burial, we are gardening. We are gardening, planting a seed. Like Jesus said, "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains but a single grain. But if it dies, it will yield a great harvest." That is what we are doing in Christian burial. During a burial we aren't planting a useless corpse. We are planting a seed that will grow into a new and wonderful creation, into eternal life.

This is why, by the way, even though the Church permits cremation under certain circumstances, the Church prefers that we have our physical body present for funeral liturgies as an expression and recognition of the dignity and holiness of the human body. This is not to disparage those who choose cremation, most do these days, but I think it is good to simply consider the value of having the body present for funeral liturgies.

And boy, it has sure been a week for funerals here at Saint Teresa of Calcutta. The last three funerals here were for people who were younger than me. Life is so precious and fragile. In between these funerals this past week, I took a quick trip to Billings Montana so to concelebrate the life of my cousin who was also a priest, Fr. Tony Schuster, a man of great joy, a good pastor, who loved life and was all heart. By making this trip, I had the grace filled opportunity to reconnect with the Montana Schusters as

well, a very large and down to earth family, full of life and love. I mention this trip because both Tony's vigil and the funeral liturgy had his physical body present and I was so grateful for that. Why do I say that? It gave me the opportunity to say goodbye to him rather than to a box of ashes, follow? Funerals are just simply better with the body present, and healthier in my book, which in my experience equates to better healing for loved ones. Just something to think about.

Jesus summarizes our Easter hope at the end of our Gospel reading, "Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem." This weekend we can ask ourselves: what are those areas in our lives that are still like a corpse in a tomb needing resurrection? What are the sinful patterns in our lives that could be transformed into grace if we allow Christ to be our Lord and Savior? The journey begins with seeing the world with a new sight only Christ can give. And this journey may best begin by asking ourselves simple questions that we can contemplate over and over again. Questions like...

How often do you stop and wonder, to simply consider, how awesome it is to be alive? How often do you consider how wonderful it is to be flesh and blood? How often do you ponder how incredible it is to simply smile or to be embraced by someone you love? How heavenly it is to sit down as a family and eat together. Such a simple thing and yet sacramental! My friends, how wonderful it is to have a body!

The invitation this week is to thank God for the gift of life, the sanctity of life, the gift of family and the people around us. We work and pray for a world that will better respect the precious and fragile lives around us, from conception to natural death, however great or small, in whatever nation they live in or whatever country they come from. We thank God for the awesome gift of our bodies, for our hope of salvation and the life that never ends, through Christ our Lord. Amen.