

**Easter 2010
King's College Chapel
Halifax, Nova Scotia**

From the Gospel for Easter Tuesday:

“Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: Handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.” (Luke 24.39)

For some choristers I suspect that this will be your last time singing in this Chapel. I want to thank you very sincerely for your song, which has brought great joy to so many in our worship term. As George Herbert says of Church Music—and to those who perform it—“you know the way to heaven’s door”.¹

This chapel is a place where Truth, Charity, Beauty, and Goodness are sought in a spirit of humility and prayer. I think Father Curran will agree with me that whenever a student walks into this chapel we seek to honour the Beauty and Goodness within that student, and thus our community is made strong. Our lives have been enriched and enlarged by your willingness to share your gifts of song, and we thank you deeply.

I want to say a few words about the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection.

As scholars and popular writers are keen to point out, there is very little that is unique in the teaching of the Christian religion. We are repeatedly reminded that there are countless paths to spiritual enlightenment, the uplifting of the soul, and the good life.

For example, we find throughout both the ancient and the contemporary world the notion of the immortality of the soul. Christian moral teachings, then and now, do not contain anything very new or startling. That we should give ourselves for and to others in a mutuality of caring, compassion and friendship is a teaching found amongst all peoples of all faiths.

The notion that the world must have a singular source or beginning in God, and must find its end and completion by returning to God, is to be found throughout the history of the West. When St. Paul went to Athens, he quoted the Greek pagan poets who had it right: “In God we live and move and have our being.”

¹ George Herbert, “Church Musick,” from *The Temple*

(Acts 17.28) Those of you in the Foundation Year Program will recall that the Trinitarian nature of the soul and indeed of the universe are to be found in writings ancient and modern.

Men and women of all faiths and of none engage in spiritual disciplines of body and soul to bring one’s life into a conformity with the love and harmony which gives unity and integrity to the created order.

And, of course, recent authors have made it their livelihood (a lucrative one, at that) to point out to itchy ears that the teaching of Jesus about the Fatherhood of God, the primacy of love, the reaching out of the divine to the human, the unity of humankind, the privileging of the poor, etc., are to be found in other religions and philosophies, both ancient and modern.

But nowhere else do we find God crucified.

*Holy God,
Holy and Strong,
Holy Immortal One,
Who was crucified for us,
Have Mercy upon us.*

In the Coptic Church (the Egyptian Church for whose Pope Shenouda we pray in this chapel) the tradition is that these words were first uttered by Nicodemus as Christ was taken down from the Cross.

The crucifixion of that one person Jesus Christ who was both God and Man—Holy God, Holy Immortal One—is the scandal of the Christian religion. As Paul says in his first letter to the Corinthians: *...unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Gentiles foolishness....Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men...* (1 Corinthians 1.23-25)

Nowhere else is it imagined that God himself, God the Son, took on human flesh and, as God, “humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.” (Philippians 2.8)

Nowhere but Christianity is it imagined that God took on flesh precisely so he could be wounded by our wounding of him: that the ineffable God would place himself in human hands to be at our disposal.

Nowhere else is it imagined that the tomb be found empty.

In the 17th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles Paul meets in Athens both Epicureans and Stoics: *Then certain philosophers of the Epicureans and of the Stoics, encountered*

him. And some said, what will this babbler say? Others said, He seemeth to be a setter forth of strange gods: because he preached unto them Jesus and the Resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead seemed absurd.

This is something other than a *spiritual* salvation. That is, this is not in keeping with the understanding of the process of freeing of the soul from the body. This is not the pagan practice of the gradual purification of the soul until it was ready to leave the body eternally, nor is it the notion that the cycle continues forever.

Foundation Year students will recall the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, when Aeneas journeys through the underworld and meets the spirit of his father, who points out those who were preparing to return to earth.² Aeneas cries out:

*'But, O my father, is it thinkable
That souls would leave this blessedness, be willing
A second time to bear the sluggish body.
Trade paradise for earth?
Alas, poor wretches,
Why such a mad desire for light.'*

Anchises (Aeneas' father) explains that only after drinking the waters of the river Lethe, where memory of the former earthly life is erased, are the souls willing to enter once more into mortal bodies, and thus the conflict of soul and body, spirit and matter, goes on, in endless cycles.

Since Sunday we have been reading the accounts of the resurrection appearances of Christ, and they have all been so clear in teaching the absurd doctrine of the Resurrection: the reconciliation of spirit and flesh—the redemption of the BODY.

² Illustration taken from a sermon of Father Crouse.

Mary Magdalene and the other women make their way to the tomb, wondering how they will roll the stone away. But when she arrives and sees the stone moved she runs off to fetch Simon Peter: they look in and see the linen cloths lying just so, and the napkin in another place, laid out.

The disciples went away home, confused, but Mary lingered behind, weeping. As she wept, she stooped down into the sepulchre.

There sat the angels, in holy contemplation. “Woman, why weepest thou?”

“Because they have taken away my Lord and I know not where they have laid him,” Mary responded, and turning away, tear-blinded, she saw the gardener, or so she thought.

“Woman, why weepest thou?” repeats the gardener. “Whom seekest thou?”

“Sir, if thou hast borne him hence, tell me where thou hast laid him, and I will take him away.”

“Mary.”

She turned herself and saith unto him, “Rabboni,” which is to say, “Master.” (John 20:1-16)

As commentators since the third century have taught, Mary spoke truthfully—for Christ is the Divine Gardener. He is the Divine Gardener not of our souls only, but of ourselves—souls and bodies. Or, if you prefer, of our bodies that are our souls: equally, of our souls that are our bodies.

Our Gospel for Tuesday evening from Luke tells how Jesus appeared to his Disciples, who thought they were seeing a ghost. Jesus replies, *'Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have.'* And when he had said this he showed them his hands and his feet. Then he asks for a piece of fish and honeycomb and eats it in front of them. (Luke 24:39-43)

Thomas wasn't there with the other disciples, and he simply refused to believe the account of his colleagues. The resurrection from the dead seemed as impossible to the disciples as it seemed to the ancient philosophers, as it seems to us. Thomas said: *'Except I shall see in his hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and thrust my hand into his side, I*

will not believe.’ So Jesus appears to him: ‘Peace be unto you.’ Then saith he to Thomas, ‘Reach hither thy finger, and behold my hand, and thrust it into my side; and be not faithless, but believing.’ (John 20.25, 27)

The Resurrection of Jesus Christ was not the escape of the immortal soul from the body (the Risen Lord was not a ghost); nor was it simply a return to, or a resuscitation of, his mortal body.

Rather, it was the transformation of body, the reconciliation of flesh and spirit. It is the redemption of the Body, including our memory.

Our life in Christ denies nothing of who we are—but rather redeems, makes holy, all that we have ever been.

In last evening’s New Testament Lesson Peter announces to the other disciples that he is going fishing. John’s Gospel tells us that they catch nothing. Jesus appears on the shore but the disciples don’t recognize him. He shouts out to them to let their nets down on the other side of their boats. Their nets become full. John says to Peter: “it is the Lord.”

Now when Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he girt his fisher’s coat unto him; (for he was naked,) and did cast himself into the sea. The other disciples came in a little ship; (for they were not far from land, but as it were two hundred cubits,) dragging the net with fishes. As soon then as they were come to land, they saw a fire of coals there, and fish laid thereon, and bread. (John 21.7-9)

A fire of coals. Do you remember? Peter does.

He remembers the fire of coals burning in the High Priest’s courtyard when he had denied his Lord.

No river of Lethe here for Peter. And no river of Lethe for you or me. It is not through forgetfulness, not the rejection of the body, that our sins are forgiven. Rather, it is through the taking up of our Body, the Redemption of our Body.

Peter smells again the sour scent of his betrayal in the drifting smoke of the fire. His memory is redeemed. Nothing is lost, but all is taken up, transformed, transfigured and redeemed.

The Resurrection of the Body.

This is the Christian faith, and this is why we can say with Saint Bernard of Clairvaux that Jesus is ‘honey to the mouth, sweet song to the ear, joyful delight to the heart.’

Amen.

Before becoming University Chaplain at King’s College, Halifax, Father Gary Thorne served as Rector of St. George’s Parish in Halifax’s inner city for 16 years. During his incumbency, the church building – a national historic site – suffered a major fire that required a \$5 million restoration. Since leaving the



parish ministry for university chaplaincy he continues to be involved in advocacy work in the inner city, maintaining contacts and serving on several boards.

A reservist military chaplain for 18 years, he was deployed to the Israel/Syria border for six months in 2003, ministering to Canadian and UN troops during the beginning of the American invasion of Iraq.

Dr. Thorne serves on two national committees of the Anglican Church of Canada – the Primate’s Theological Commission and the Faith, Worship and Ministry Committee.