

SESSION ONE // Resurrection as the Mystery of Embodied Life

Can the resurrection be defined? New Testament Professor, Dwight Peterson, ponders the mystery of both Jesus's resurrection and the resurrection of humanity. Being a hospice patient and confined to a sick bed, Peterson sees the resurrection as something more than a theological idea, but a hope on which he still depends.

Watch the Film *Resurrection with Dwight Peterson*

<http://www.theworkofthepeople.com/resurrection>

Going Deeper

1. Peterson is asked, "Where are you seeing signs of resurrection? Do you still believe in the resurrection?" To this he responds, "I believe in God still after all of this, and I believe in the resurrection after all of this. Exactly what the resurrection looks like, it's hard to pin down..."

Why might it still be difficult to believe in the resurrection when life is difficult?

2. Peterson alludes to a song by the group, The Imperials:
Well it's a great, great mornin'
Your first day in Heaven,
When you stroll down the Golden Avenue.²
Peterson criticizes the content saying, "It's way too literal."

How are these images too literal?

3. Peterson talks about three things that he expects the resurrection to be (It might be helpful to read these texts in order to see the whole context):
 1. Bodily – "Jesus was raised in a body and he was the first fruits of future resurrection, and when we are raised we are raised in our bodies," says Peterson. This is an allusion to 1 Corinthians 15:20.

² The Imperials, "Your First Day in Heaven"

2. Consistent with, but different from our physical bodies – In 1 Corinthians 15:35–44, the apostle Paul describes the physical body as a sown seed and the plant the physical body is compared to that which grows from the seed.

3. Mysterious – Examples are Mary Magdalene’s encounter with Jesus, but Mary thinks he is the gardener (John 20:11–18), and the disciples’ encounter with Jesus on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35).

How do these examples help us to understand the resurrection, but also see that it is still a mystery?

4. Peterson says about the last example, “That failure to recognize Jesus has always fascinated me, and I think it means, at the very least, is a very mysterious animal.”

How does keeping the mystery of the resurrection helpful to Christian faith?

Reflection

There is little that is said about Jesus’s resurrection in the Gospels. Of course Paul did not comment much about it because he was not a witness to the resurrected Christ, only to the vision of blinding light on the Damascus road. However Paul drew from his own religious tradition of being a Pharisee to describe the resurrection in general and its relationship to Jesus’s resurrection.³ The pharisaical tradition had maintained that God would raise all people from the dead in order “to judge both the living and the dead” (1 Peter 4:5). If there were no embodied persons, then who would God judge? The idea of the disembodied soul, like that of Greek views of the afterlife, was foreign to Hebrew culture. The person was not only both physical and spiritual, but an integration of both physical and spiritual. The two were not easily separated.

³ Most of Paul’s discussion of the resurrection of the dead appears in 1 Corinthians 15. The argument is highly complicated and given to much scholarly debate about what Paul means by “spiritual” and “physical,” and exactly what kind of body is Paul describing. However, one must say that Paul did not write this section as a systematic theologian, trying to spell out every detail about the resurrection, because for Paul it was still speculation. The reason he writes this section was for the purpose of the whole letter: unity in the church at Corinth. In other words, the resurrection must be at the center of Christian unity because this is the hope that we have that Christ has conquered death. Therefore, in order to have this kind of life in Christ, there must be death to self. The Christian hope is about this continuity between one existence to another, as the seed and the plant, and not a discontinuity that one finds in death. Exactly what the particulars are, this is not the point of Paul’s writing, even though he tries to answer the questions of “how are the dead raised” and “with what kind of body will accompany the resurrection?”

This much Paul knew, but the disciples who witnessed Jesus after the events of the cross found this to be a reality. Jesus was not a ghost, but an embodied person, albeit having a different kind of body. Thomas was able to touch Jesus's scars in his hands and side.⁴ This body retained a semblance of the past, but was made anew and alive. With new life there was not a disposal of the past. All that we have experienced we in some way still retain. The past makes us who we are in the present. Every scar on my body is a link to a memory. A cut from carving a wooden figure, a burn from making flan for my sweetheart, scrapes from the seemingly endless maintenance on my car and house, these remind me of who I am and what I have done in this world. This might be difficult for those of us whose trauma is sometimes too difficult to bear, but the good news is that the future is not about open wounds, but ones that are healed, ones made new.

After Jesus's resurrection, he broke bread with other disciples.⁵ He shared a meal with them just as he shared meals with them before the cross. It was in the experience of this shared life that they recognized who he was. In the same way, it is in our shared experiences that we recognize the Christ—that God is before us and not left for dead in a tomb. In the meal, the event of eating together, of tasting and savoring all the richness of life, we come to realize the fullness of the resurrection.

Just as the past was real, the future resurrection will also hold this kind of reality. It is not a wishful thought about the future, but a future that can be touched, just as Thomas touched the Master's hands. There are many theories as to what life would be like in this resurrected state. But to ponder these theories would be meaningless speculation. To live a resurrected life means to live with the hope of something to come while at the same time living out this life as we are all called to do—with love. How can you live this embodied life? How can you enter a kind of life that acknowledges both the past and the restoration and healing that is happening in the present?

Christians have the hope of the newly embodied life, a life lived in shared community, a life where we retain the semblance of who we are, and one that is lived as renewed persons. What the particulars are, I don't care about or dare to speculate on too much. What we will find will perhaps surprise us all.

⁴ John 20:24-27

⁵ Luke 24:13-35