

The Resurrection of an Earthy Jesus

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April 20, 2018

Psalm 65:5-13; Luke 24:36-43; Revelation 21:1-6

When the renowned physicist and author, Stephen Hawking, died in March, I was pleased to learn his ashes would be interred at Westminster Abbey. It is surely fitting that one of the greatest scientific minds of the modern age be laid to rest beside Sir Isaac Newton, Charles Darwin, and other intellectual giants.

And yet I found the decision to commit Hawking's remains within a storied cathedral a bit surprising. Because Stephen Hawking was not, by his own admission--"religious in the normal sense"--of the term.

Instead, he believed science offered a compelling explanation of the universe with no need for God. As he explained in an interview with ABC News, "I believe the simplest explanation is, there is no God. No one created the universe and no one directs our fate . . . We have this one life to appreciate the grand design of the universe and for that, I am extremely grateful." Or as he added in a slightly edgier interview with *The Guardian*, "There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

And yet, Hawking's family choose to commemorate their beloved's life with a Christian

service of worship, first in Cambridge, where he lived and worked, and later this year in a service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey. It sounds like whatever Professor Hawking thought about his chances of awakening from death in the nearer presence of God, others--myself among them--hope he does.

In some ways, Luke's story of the resurrected Jesus appearing to his disciples offers a similar collision of meanings: spirit and matter, death and life, hope and despair. To hear Luke tell it, Jesus' resurrected life is something utterly new, unlike anything seen or experienced before. As Jesus stands before his dumbstruck disciples, he longs to quell their grief and quench their fear. But the disciples are simply terrified: they think they are seeing a ghost.

Jesus refuses to compress his risen life into any known category of reality. Instead, he presses his disciples to absorb and ponder this new thing God has done: "Why are you frightened? Why do doubts arise in your hearts?" Then Jesus asks them to get up close and personal. "Take a good look at my hands and feet," he chides them. Or as the risen Christ challenges Thomas in John's Gospel, "Press your finger into the mark of the nails." The point of this careful examination and even touch of the radiant figure shimmering before them like a pulsar in deepest space, is so they can in, Jesus' words, "See that it is I myself."

At the realization dawns it is really is Jesus, standing before them, the disciples' fear morphs into joy. But they still can't fathom what is happening. Then Jesus does something even more unexpected, even laughable.

"You got anything to eat around here?" he asks. One of the disciples offers him a piece of broiled fish, gingerly, like a frightened child offering a morsel of food to an animal at the zoo. Jesus gobbles down the fish and smacks his lip, just like they had seen him do a thousand times before by the sea or at the supper table. And at last they know, in both their heads and heart of hearts they know, "The Lord is risen! The Lord is risen indeed!"

Clearly, Luke is eager to impress upon them and us that the risen Christ is not a ghost,

not a free-floating spirit or the vivid memory of a once great figure, now dead and gone. Nor is the risen Christ a resuscitated corpse, like some ghoulish zombie, clawing its way out of a grave. No, the risen Christ is robed in a new category of existence we might call “spirit-matter.” Or as Paul unpacks the meaning of this startling event in 1 Corinthians 15, Jesus rises with a “spiritual body.” As the Gospels reveal, the risen Christ is sufficiently physical that he can enjoy a bite of broiled fish, and sufficiently spiritual that he can appear and disappear at will, slipping through locked doors like someone being vaporized and then reconstituted aboard the Starship Enterprise!

Sir Michael Faraday, a renowned 19th century chemist, once heard a student sneer at the resurrection of the body. Faraday then dropped a silver goblet into a jar of acid, completely dissolving it. He added other chemicals that caused the silver to settle to the bottom of the jar.

Faraday took the scraps of silver to a master silversmith who transformed the shiny slivers into an even more beautiful goblet than before. Later, holding up the gorgeous goblet up before his student, Faraday observed, “If I, an ordinary scientist, can dissolve and remake a silver goblet, is it a thing too incredible that God can raise the dead?”

Christians think not. Because they see in the resurrection of Jesus, the coming together of things a broken world tore apart: spirit and matter, heaven and earth, God and humanity. So that in the deepest sense of the word, “spiritual” does not mean other-worldly. Rather, being truly spiritual means recognizing and reclaiming this world as the hot spot of divine love and longing our Creator always meant it to be.

Consider for example the promise of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation chapter 21. Yes, the passage opens with the announcement the first heaven and the first earth “have passed away,” but hold on! That doesn’t mean the first heaven and earth have been tossed, like a spent printer cartridge, but rather restored and recycled as the precious creation of God they are. What does the scripture say next: “For I saw the new Jerusalem *coming down*

out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” *Coming down* where? Coming down to the new earth where first heaven and the first earth are yet again, by the grace of God, one--One, holy/human sacramental playground where the divine intimacy with man and woman--celebrated in the opening chapters of Genesis is restored. This reality is anticipated in that beloved gospel song, “in the Garden,” where the glory of the good earth is alive with the divine presence: “And the Lord walks with me and talks with me and tells me--again and again--I am God’s own.”

The Bible does not subscribe to the ancient, yet modern heresy that matter is evil and spirit is good. Rather, as Archbishop William Temple observed, “God must like matter because (God) made an awful lot of it.” No, the Bible--almost without exception--celebrates the goodness of the earth and the goodness of the body. The Christian hope for eternal life rests not in some disembodied pseudo-existence but in the resurrection, the transformation, of the body. And the creation is not some Godless domain, but a living, breathing membrane resplendent with the divine life. As the author of Psalm 65, titters with delight, “The hills gird themselves with joy, the meadows clothe themselves with flocks, the valleys deck themselves with grain. They shout and sing together for joy.”

The earth and the cosmos are pulsating with divine life that hint, like a handkerchief dropped in the wood, someone had been there before us. This is something most of us know instinctively and experience from time-to- time. As Bill McKibben confesses in his book, *The End of Nature*, “I am a reasonably orthodox Methodist, and I go to church on Sunday because fellowship matters, because I find meaning in the history of the Israelites and in the gospels, and because I love to sing hymns. But it is not in ‘God’s house’ that I feel God’s presence most. It is in his outdoors, on some sun-warmed slope of pine needles or by the surf. It is there that the numbing categories men have devised to contain this mystery—sin and redemption and incarnation and so on—fall away, leaving the overwhelming sense of the goodness and the

sweetness at work in the world.”

Fortunately, at Knollwood, we don't have to leave God's house to experience the renewing power of nature. Because of our sanctuary windows, we can gasp in wonder at the beauty of creation as it pours through the panes. It happened to me this week as I glanced up to see in the fluttering leaves of those now vivid green trees, the Spirit of God breathing life into the world. Those windows are also a sign that heaven and earth, the sacred and the ordinary, are meant to bleed into one another in a single lavish feast of divine favor.

Yes, the great promise of the Revelation is not that this world will be replaced, but renewed. As one interpreter notes, the one on the throne in John's grand vision does not thunder, "Behold, I make all new things!" but "Behold, I make all things new." For the created order is not doomed to extinction. Someday, by God's grace, it will be raised, transformed, glorified, as matter and spirit are rejoined in God's new creation, as surely as they were in the resurrection of Jesus.

And that means Earth Day, which happens to be today, is not some new age obsession people of faith can and should ignore. Rather, Earth Day offers a clarion call to our most ancient vocation as decreed in the Genesis story of creation; to be care-givers and faithful stewards of the good earth, seeking the personal and communal practices--and public policy--that preserve the vitality and beauty of this grand, yet fragile planet. Until, by God's grace, heaven and earth are made one again. And "the home of God" is once more "among mortals. And God will dwell with them . . . and God own self will be with them. And God will wipe every tear from their eyes."

Jesus' resurrection calls us to a holistic faith that cares for and about the good earth. And Jesus' resurrection calls us to a holistic faith that cares for and about the whole person. Remember what risen Christ says to those bewildered disciples, gaping in wonder and awe? "Do you have anything to eat?"

This is not just a question that helps the disciples grasp the concrete, tangible nature of the risen One standing before them. This question also recalls their forgotten vocation: to provide hospitality to strangers and to feed the least of these, Jesus' brothers and sisters. It is no accident the tangible reminder Jesus left of his life among us was bread and wine symbolizing his body and blood.

In her book, *Take This Bread*, Sara Miles, tells about what happened when she wandered into a church one Sunday and here I quote "ate Jesus." Miles describes herself as a "blue-state, secular intellectual; a lesbian; a left-wing journalist with a habit of skepticism." And yet as she took communion that Sunday, holding the bread between her fingers and sipping the wine, she found "at the eternal and material core of Christianity body, blood, bread, wine, poured out freely, shared by all."

"I discovered," Miles writes, "a religion rooted in the most ordinary yet subversive practice: a dinner table where everyone is welcome, where the despised and outcasts are honored."

After her spiritual awakening, Ms. Miles began starting food pantries all over San Francisco, serving up real food for real people with real bodies. Until in the rag tag assembly of thieves and business professionals, day laborers and millionaires, gathered around a common table, she saw the kingdom of God drawing near.

A week ago last Tuesday, our church did something similar. In partnership with two other churches and an anonymous donor, we started a food pantry right next door to Bolton elementary school. Bolton is the school our mentors and Bolton buddies visit each week. And it's the school where for years we've provided backpacks of food for children who would otherwise go hungry.

Now that ministry of connection and caring is unfolding into something more: a food pantry where Bolton parents can shop for nutritious food to help feed their children. And this is

a gift not just to those families, but to us. Because it allows us to say “Yes” when Jesus, clothed in another’s need, asks, “Do you have something to eat?”

No, ours is not a disembodied faith for disembodied people whose only hope is someday to make it to heaven. Ours is a holistic faith that preaches the whole gospel for the whole person. And ours is a fellowship that prays and seeks to live the prayer, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth* as it is in heaven.”

“Even so, come Lord Jesus.” Not to take us away, but to make us right here, right now, a sign of your new creation, that sacred place where heaven and earth, God and humanity, matter and spirit are yet again, becoming one.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus, and surprise us with your living presence: in our neighbor’s need for food, in our planet’s need for care, and yes, in our own times of doubt and despair. Renew within us the grace and courage that is a sign of your risen life. And make us faithful witnesses to your kingdom, breaking in already, wherever people actively strive to follow you. Amen.