

Views from the Pews - The Resurrection appearances

Like the Corinthians quizzing Paul, we want to know 'How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?' Here is a modern analogy that might help.

Water is a familiar, definable substance that is commonly found in three interchangeable states. It can switch between visible, hard ice, through a visible, liquid state, to an invisible gas, depending on the temperature. Its material composition is the same in all three states, but their molecules are arranged differently. Ice and liquid water are confined to particular locations by gravity, but water vapour surrounds us everywhere humans can live.

Imagine that the Resurrection gave Jesus the ability to switch between visible physical and invisible spiritual states at will. From the Incarnation to the tomb, Jesus' visible, material, pre-resurrection human body could have been in only one place at a time. But from Easter to the Ascension, the risen Jesus was now unseen everywhere, but with the additional capability of switching back to his remembered material form to greet particular people who loved him. This idea casts some interesting light on some otherwise puzzling aspects of the Easter story.

On Easter morning, he could switch from a cold, dead material body to a living spirit. The angel who rolled the stone away did not need to let him out but to let people in, to see that his body had gone. They saw that the grave clothes were lying there as if he had simply vanished from within them. The cloths had not been unwound and stripped off his body, as those of Lazarus had been.

The locked door of the upper room did not imply Jesus could walk through walls. Rather, he was inside all along, invisible until he chose to switch into his familiar form to greet the astonished disciples. Likewise, he could vanish back into his invisible form with no warning, as when he suddenly disappeared from the dinner table at Emmaus (Luke 24:31). If God is all around us, as is water vapour in the air, then we breathe in his spirit, day and night, awake or asleep. As the old idea puts it, God is "nearer than hands and feet".

Analogies are much used in theology, including by Jesus himself ("This is my body.... my blood"). Analogies are not to be taken literally, but a non-literal comparison can still contain a real, comforting truth.

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