

Homily for the Second Sunday of Lent

March 3, 2007

The Embodiment of Jesus – Questions Old and New

Have you noticed that there's a lot of attention being paid to the body of Jesus of Nazareth this weekend? I can't read a paper without seeing something there about the claim that Jesus' ossuary (and those of his family) have been discovered. (And speaking of discovery, you probably know there's a tv special on the subject featured on that channel today – not that I'm recommending it.) But I am recommending that we think about Jesus' body for a bit today, because there are few better ways of deepening our faith than by facing questions. Let's start with today's Gospel.

The disciples knew, before the events described today, what it meant for Jesus to have a body. It was the same kind of body each of them had. (We have to avoid looking back at the past through what we now know; as they went up the mountain, they had no reason to expect anything of Jesus' body that they didn't experience themselves. He might have been a wonder-working healer and a spellbinding preacher, but those things happened outside his skin.)

We also have to be careful not to imagine that the Gospel-writer is either: a) drawing a picture (as if a first-century camcorder would have recorded a scene just as we hear it described; or b) making stuff up that is symbolic, but has no foundation in reality. Luke was a careful historian, from everything scholars can discover; a first-century historian, yes, but one who would have recognized the many fables that circulated at that time for what they were, and the histories (like Caesar's *Gallic Wars*) for what they were too – possibly exaggerated or self-serving, but basically accurate representations of what really happened.

So when Luke tells this story of what the disciples experienced (and remember, he was not an eyewitness and never met Jesus during his ministry), he tells it certainly for its symbolic value, but he tells it as something remarkable that happened, something that these particular men (themselves businessmen – fishermen – and not likely to be given to fantasy) saw and heard and later described to others. There was, they discovered, something remarkable about Jesus' embodiment. They saw more in him – quite literally – than they had seen before. And what they saw had meaning: it wasn't just a show, it was a message. The vision communicated to them that Jesus was, not only in his teaching and healing but in his very embodiment, the fulfillment of Jewish hopes, the summation of the “Law and the Prophets” (Moses and Elijah).

This is a good lead-in to the claims about the “tomb of Jesus and his family.” There are lots of good critiques of the bad history and bad science in the show, so I'm not going to talk about them. I want to address the religious angle. Start with the very crux, the alternate stories: Did Jesus have a normal family life and a natural death, leading to the carving of an ossuary for his remains that would be found 2000 years later? Or did something else happen that would remove the need for a box for his “remains”?

We have to avoid a common believers' error here. Too often we approach the Gospel resurrection narratives as if they're the first-century equivalent of videotapes – a picture, not a story with a message. That's led some devout people to thinking of the body of Jesus after the resurrection as *just like* his pre-crucifixion body. It's useful to contrast the Gospel claims about Jesus with those about Lazarus – because the Gospel claims that Lazarus was in fact raised to exactly this sort of “resuscitated” life, after which he would die a natural death – just

the sort of life and death that everyone in the first century knew that everybody lived and died, and which everybody expected of Jesus as well.

We also have to be careful not to let bad religious art influence us through artists' pictures of Jesus coming triumphally out of the tomb, the stone rolled away and the guards falling back to avoid the rays of Divine light coming from within. The problem with that image is that the Gospels make no claim that that's what happened. They present a more complex story, with three key components.

The first is that, on a certain Sunday morning, the tomb was found to be empty. It seems that no one in Jerusalem at the time disputed that, and anyone who cared to inspect things for himself could verify it. (That's why, Matthew says, the Jewish leaders cooked up a story about his body being stolen. Grave-robbery was common at the time, and this was a very understandable tale to put out. But if there had been a body, it would have been unnecessary. The whole budding Christian enterprise would have stopped in its tracks if anyone at the time could say, "Come over here and look – the corpse.") But it seems clear that everybody agreed that the tomb was empty and the body gone.

The grave-robbery story is important to our faith because it shows that an empty tomb, by itself, is no foundation for faith in the resurrection. There were lots of explanations for an empty tomb. Lots of people agreed that the tomb was empty. But only some believed. That's where the other type of stories comes in.

The second component of the Gospels is that some disciples – not everybody, but certain people – had visions of Jesus after his death. Again, such stories were not unknown in the first century – just as they're not unknown today. People will occasionally tell of seeing a vision of a distant relative who has just died – almost as if the person had come to "say goodbye." Whatever the worth or accuracy of such stories, they weren't unknown in Jesus' time and they could be explained just as we might explain such stories today: The person was deluded, or ate something odd for dinner last night; or a wish made it so; or it just reminds us that the world's a lot stranger than we commonly think.

But notice that such stories of visions, now as then, are stories that mean a person is *dead* – not that he's alive. And they seem never to include details of touching and eating, as the Gospel stories do. But even with these extra details, simple claims of such visions would have been just that – claims of visions – to any of the disciples' contemporaries; and they would never, by themselves, have been any foundation for belief that Jesus was again alive in some bodily way. Yet that is exactly what the first Christians claimed, and believed, and won others over to belief in. The convergence of three things – the empty tomb, the post-Easter visitations, and a third element combined to make belief credible. This third element brings us back to the Gospel today.

You see, claims about Jesus having been raised were not about just anybody being raised. The fact that it was Jesus who was claimed to have been raised fit in with everything else the disciples were coming to trust about him – especially that God was at work in a new way in Jesus: The "kingdom of God" was at hand; God's "new reality" was taking root not just because Jesus was announcing it, but because Jesus embodied it – in himself. That's what his body was, and meant. Transfiguration and Resurrection go together: in both, God is shown to be at work in Jesus in a new and unique way. Something entirely unexpected is happening, and the limits on human freedom and human hope are falling away. All the limits – even the finality of death. And God's new reality is met first in Jesus' body.

The claims about Jesus' ossuary stand or fall on the science and history behind them – and from what I've read, they fall, and fall badly. But to a thoughtful and open-minded

believer, such claims are useful if they invite us to dig more deeply into good history and good science, and if they puncture some misunderstandings we might have. The coincidence that these claims hit the news as we read the Lenten Gospel of the Transfiguration can help us: it invites us to dig into just what is being claimed about Jesus' body in the Gospel. And that claim is not just disconnected facts: It is a claim about the entire sweep of Jesus' life as the messenger of God but more: as the Incarnation – the embodiment – of God, announcing, and himself being, the sharp point of God's new entrance into creation. Maybe at the Transfiguration Jesus didn't change at all – maybe it was that the disciples saw him truly for the first time, and couldn't bear it for too long. You may have had a similar experience – perhaps amazement at a newborn child of yours, and then a return to the ordinariness of sleepless nights and diaper-changes. But if you've had that experience you know that the amazement was a time you saw most truly, a time not to be forgotten. So it was with the disciples on the mountain, a time preparing them for what they would experience again, and now permanently, at Easter. If we understand that better after this weekend, we have some eccentric explorers and film-makers to thank – perhaps despite their intentions.