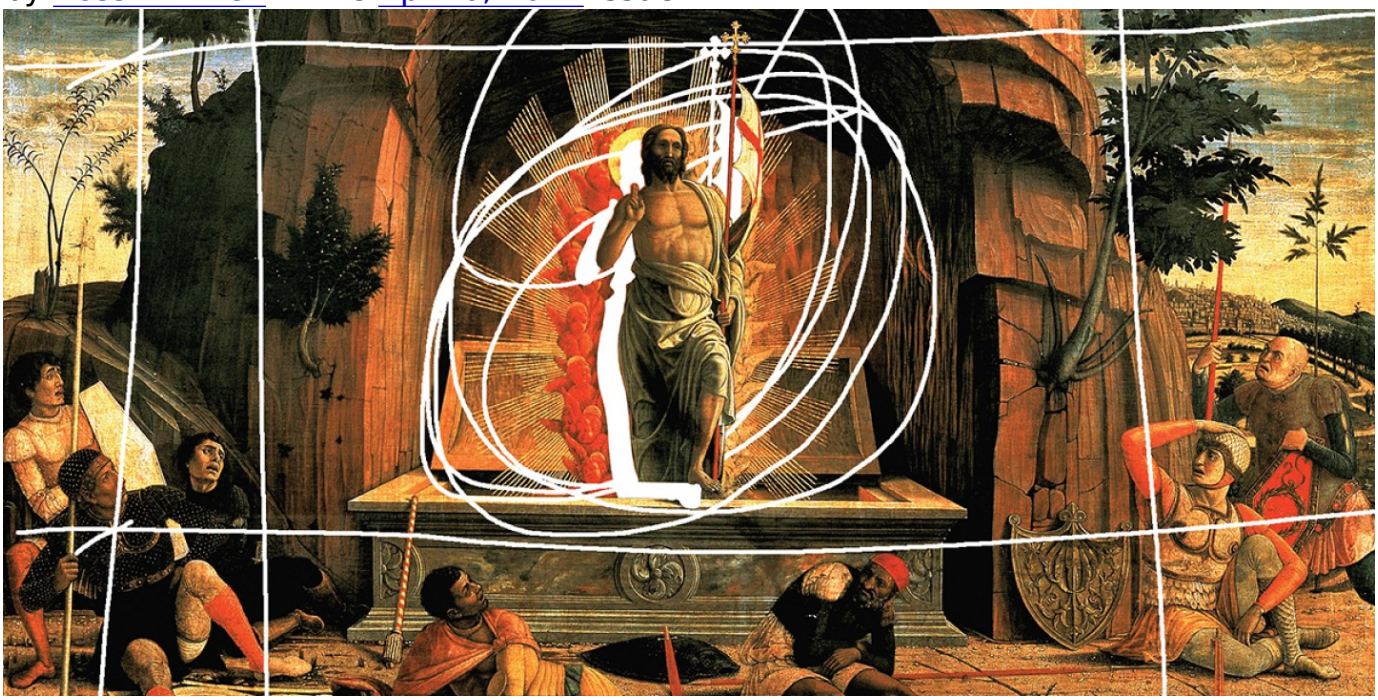
The mystical significance of Jesus’ resurrection

We don’t need to debate the possibility of a reanimated corpse. We need to reimagine our whole understanding of the material world.

by Ross M. Allen in the April 6, 2022 issue



(Century illustration / Source image: La Résurrection (1459), by Andrea Mantegna)

I used to work as a campus minister at Kansas State University. In that context, I worked with dozens of undergraduates who endured faith crises that were made immeasurably more challenging by the theological absolutism they encountered in their home churches. Students often adopted their pastor’s idea of a Christian worldview, one seen through a lens of certainty and insistent on an all-or-nothing approach. When these young people first encountered higher criticism of the Bible or challenges to their beliefs from philosophy or the social sciences, they came to see that the doctrines they had long held as timeless and absolute were anything but.

The ministries I worked with maintained a safe environment where these students could talk about their doubts openly. While many found a way to integrate that doubt into a more nuanced understanding of faith, others could never quite shake the all-or-nothing standard. When they found they could no longer muster infallible confidence, they opted out of Christianity altogether.

A common stumbling block was the resurrection of Jesus. For evangelicals in particular, being a Christian requires an assertion that Jesus' body was reanimated on the third day following his death and that he walked around on the earth for a time before ascending up through the sky to sit at the right hand of the Father. This was where things always got hazy. Everybody knows that when you keep going up into the sky, you hit the stratosphere and eventually outer space without ever whizzing past a throne room. So where did Jesus fly off to? It seemed everyone was fine demythologizing the ascension, but the natural question which followed set off alarms: If that idea was a metaphor, then wouldn't that mean the resurrection was too?

These questions aren't just nagging college kids in Kansas. According to the most recent polling data, only 45 percent of American Christians are certain about Jesus' bodily resurrection, which marks a precipitous 20 percent drop from what the Harris Poll reported 15 years ago. Indeed, in my more recent years doing adult education with older mainline Protestants, I've encountered many who silently struggle with the fact that they can't recite the creeds earnestly or feel confident that Jesus rose from the dead. Most will just shrug indifferently, assuming someone else has an answer if one is needed, but some harbor lingering insecurities about what feels like intellectual dishonesty. Few have full confidence in the idea of the resurrection they grew up with, but everyone seems to feel the need to pretend that they do.

With the resurrection, people seem to feel the need to pretend. What if we didn't?

What if we didn't have to pretend? It matters pastorally how we treat this kind of doubt and how we steward the resurrection story. When reanimation is regularly presented as the default view, take it or leave it, people naturally believe that this is simply what all Christians have, until recently, believed—and that to think differently is tantamount to betraying the received gospel. Thankfully, that's not the case. A closer look at the writings of the early church shows that the earliest accounts aren't committed to the reanimation of Jesus' flesh at all and that, in any event, there has always been a diversity of opinion on the issue.

It is widely accepted that the writings of Paul predate the Gospels and that his, therefore, is the first recorded account of the resurrected Christ. And as Orthodox theologian and Bible translator David Bentley Hart has laid out, Paul flatly rejects the idea that Jesus rose in the flesh.

In responding to a critique on this question by N. T. Wright, Hart shows just how "far removed from the world of the first century" we are as modern readers. While he outlines what for many of us would prove a complicated argument about the New Testament usage of the words *pneuma* (spirit) and *sarx* (flesh) and "the theologies of resurrection that attach to them," the gist is that the only extended biblical discussion of the resurrection body occurs in 1 Corinthians 15, where Paul explicitly says that "flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of God." Paul further claims that Jesus rose with a body that consisted solely of *pneuma*, which was understood in terms of what we might recognize as something like oxygen or electricity. On that view, Jesus' resurrection body would still be made of a kind of material—but it would be an airy, ephemeral kind which at the same time permeates the whole cosmos.

Hart cautions us that we won't understand what Paul means unless we can contextualize our reading and account for his very different classical cosmology. We moderns, formed by the dualism of René Descartes, tend to work in terms of a binary where "spiritual" means "not physical" or "less than physical." This, however, would be completely foreign to the authors of scripture, who saw the spiritual as *more real* than the physical. (For more on this, see Dale Martin's *The Corinthian Body* and Troels Engberg-Pedersen's *Cosmology and Self in the Apostle Paul: The Material Spirit*.)

Hart is quick to acknowledge the ambiguity at the heart of an honest exegesis. He writes, "There is, admittedly, no single consistent account of resurrection—either Christ's or ours—in the New Testament." This debatability is, however, precisely the point. The resurrection has been debated among Christians since the earliest days of the church—not just since the advent of liberalism. While allegorizing the resurrection is often associated with Gnosticism, there is a tradition of otherwise orthodox Christian teaching that denies what we would call a bodily resurrection altogether. While this teaching was, admittedly, an outlier position, it was never anathematized and existed well after the Council of Nicaea in 325.

Synesius of Cyrene, trained as a Neoplatonic philosopher, is the best-known exemplar of this tradition. He was made bishop in 410, but not before writing—in an

open letter to the church that was attempting to elect him, no less—that the resurrection “is nothing for me but a sacred and mysterious allegory.” Throughout his ministry, he would insist on maintaining this view, even as he would also insist that other views must be accommodated. He became a celebrated church leader in his day, and a small but important body of his writing survives today. Synesius demonstrates that earlier generations of Christians were much more heterogeneous in their theological commitments than most conservative accounts would have us believe—and not just at the fringes.

Behind the resurrection debate is a debate about God’s relationship to the world. Theological descendants of the Reformation have inherited a tradition heavily influenced by William of Ockham. Called nominalists, these thinkers understood God as a personal divine being who existed among other objects in the universe just like we human beings do. In this view, reality is imagined as existing outside of God, so divine action is understood as competing with human action. In the wake of this idea, later thinkers would then come to understand the miraculous as a supernatural interruption of natural law.

American Protestants have tended to argue on nominalist terms and then split based on whether they can believe in the seemingly impossible. A better way forward might come from questioning the assumptions behind nominalism’s nature/supernature distinction.

Nominalism marked a departure from the classical theism of thinkers like Iranaeus of Lyon, Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas, who thought of God as not merely a being among others but the source of being itself. In this view, God donates existence to all other things, which “live, and move, and have their being” in God’s self (Acts 17:28). Within a classical understanding, it is much more intelligible to argue that Jesus’ “physical” resurrection was, at its root, spiritual—because the physical world we inhabit is already and always derivative from the spiritual world.

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Most Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians still maintain some form of this classical view. That’s part of why they have recourse to a much richer understanding of the mystical significance of the resurrection than we typically find among Protestants, whether mainline or evangelical. Thus, Catholic and Orthodox Christians are often willing to admit two things that many Protestants find threatening: that we

can’t know the resurrection as an object of historical fact, and that insisting on certainty about Jesus’ physical resurrection proves disillusioning to the faithful and uncompelling to those outside the church.

Michael H. Crosby, a Catholic priest and theologian who died in 2017, made much the same argument: that it is the mystical seeing and not the factuality of a historical event which is at the heart of Jesus’ resurrection. In one of the last pieces he contributed to the National Catholic Reporter, Crosby advocated for a return to the mystical interpretation of the resurrection. He approached the topic through a discussion of Paul’s conversion account as recorded in 1 Corinthians:

> It is my conviction that we need to reclaim this Pauline meaning of Resurrection from our futile debates about the meaning of any physical resurrection of Jesus. . . . Moving from a concentration on the Gospel narratives stressing the “bodily” resurrection to a reclamation of the mystical experience of the Risen Christ will help us grasp the heart of the mystery of faith in the Resurrection which, indeed, is the heart of our belief.
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> Saul was transformed by his mystical experience of the Risen Christ. He insisted that his Resurrection experience was equal to those in the Gospels who had their own experiences of “seeing” Jesus as alive in, among and around them. This led the convert Paul to become the missionary theologian of the church’s understanding of itself as the extension in time and space of the Jesus of history. Now this Jesus was alive (“risen”) in each and every member of the living body of Christ, in the church and throughout the cosmos.

When I traveled more in evangelical circles, I often heard that much of the mainline has not taken the resurrection seriously enough. I still wonder if this critique might be true. That doesn’t mean that Protestants should double down on the wrong question though, of whether the reanimation of Jesus’ body is historically provable. Instead, we might become more ecumenical and learn from our Christian siblings. Like Crosby, the best among them have honored the resurrection as part of a broader paschal mystery—and insisted that this mystery is at the center of Christian life.

Making this move does not require embracing a naive materialism, which by this point many physicists and philosophers see as outdated and false. It also does not require that we try to debate, on a scientific basis, the possibility of a reanimated corpse. Instead, this view asks us to reimagine our understanding of the material world altogether.

What it invites us to is a new way of *seeing*. In this understanding, the body with which Jesus rose is one we can perceive only with our spiritual senses, honed through contemplative practice—but it is nonetheless real. Theologian Sarah Coakley has written a set of beautiful reflections on the resurrection much along these lines, which she delivered at Salisbury Cathedral in 2013. She makes clear that this isn't a kind of abandonment of bodies, as if they didn't matter, but rather a radical commitment to the embodied experience of the risen Christ and our transformation.

As the global pandemic keeps death at the forefront of our minds, so many of us are longing for resurrection. We continue to receive ambivalent news about what life post-COVID will look like, and we are all looking for a sense of ultimate hope that we can trust. For some of us, the idea that the bodies we now inhabit will be brought back in a stronger form is an endorsement of the basic goodness of our physicality and a promise that we will all one day be healed: it offers that kind of steadfast hope.

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But there is also room in the family of faith for those who think a reanimated body, however conceived, simply isn't the best way to make sense of what happened to Jesus and will happen to us. For some, a myopic insistence on resurrection as reanimation can push hope out of reach. Instead of fragmenting along this divide, we might simply acknowledge that questions surrounding the resurrection are—and always have been—complicated, debatable, and invested with existential meaning for those who aim to live in its light.

If the epistles are right, the good news of Easter speaks to all of us. As a result of the resurrection, the Spirit of Christ is alive in all Christians and is at work in the life of all humanity, *pantas anthropous* (Rom. 5). In our dying, we are all promised life "hid with Christ in God," which is free from evil and decay (Col. 3). Thus, if we are going

to make an Easter proclamation at all, let it be something like the benediction with which Coakley ends her final reflection:

> Here is the great truth at the heart of Christian faith—resurrection. Stake your life on it, struggle with it, and everything will change. Die, turn, see . . . and then live in this mystical body, which is the blessed company of all faithful people [who] walk with you on this great adventure of the Christian life . . . and which will hold you in all your frailty and glory, unto your life's end. For Christ is risen indeed. Alleluia. *Amen.*

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Do we need a raised body?"