



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue  
in the City of New York

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[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**Sunday, February 7, 2010**  
*The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany*

*Choral Evensong*  
*at 4pm*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin  
on  
II Timothy 2:14-21

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### *THE STRANGE WORLD OF THE RESURRECTION*

The fact of the resurrection is the heart of Christian faith, and the doctrine of the resurrection is the heart of Christian teaching. Nevertheless, from the first century of the Christian era people have misunderstood the resurrection and have denied its facticity, its reality. I think this misunderstanding and denial has happened *and still happens* because what Christian resurrection teaching proclaims is in fact very strange. I would call it: “the strange world of the resurrection.”

The passage from 2 Timothy read this evening takes us into this topic. Second Timothy is one of the shorter epistles in the New Testament, a letter from Paul in which he guides his younger protegee in his work. In our passage, Paul advises Timothy not to get into disputes over mere words, but to be manifestly a man of good character who teaches sound doctrine. Most of the passage is vague about the content of the disputes over mere words that Timothy was to avoid, but there is one line that is clear. The ungodly and profane chatter comes from people “who have shot wide of the truth, saying that the resurrection has already taken place” [v 18; trans JND Kelly]. We see here that even in the first Christian century the resurrection was a point of dispute, and that the ungodly, profane claim—with the dreadful consequence of causing people to lose their faith—was that the resurrection had already occurred.

Why would Paul say that it is *wrong* to claim that the resurrection has already occurred? After all, it is manifest in the case of Jesus that the resurrection *has* occurred: there is the bare cross, there is the empty tomb, there is Christ on his throne in glory. Every Sunday of the year we celebrate the great event of the first Christian Sunday, the discovery that Jesus was not dead but has risen from the dead, a new creature, never to die again. Christian faith manifestly proclaims the past fact that Jesus has risen from the dead; in the case of Jesus the resurrection does not lie in the future.

As you may know, this was totally unexpected. Many Israelites expected a resurrection at a last day in which all would be judged. But no one expected one human being and one only to rise from the dead at a moment in time after which history went on as before: with human beings continuing to die, with wars continuing of nation against nation, and in general with the ongoing experience of sin. Yet that is just what has happened. Jesus has risen from the dead, but only Jesus.

Still, we are not disconnected from Jesus’ resurrection. There is a sense in which we can say that Jesus’ resurrection has already happened for us. It is a sacramental sense. When you are baptized, you are baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus puts himself in solidarity with

you, which means that what happened to Jesus—death and resurrection—is something that has happened to you in Jesus. But this is a *sacramental* reality, a sign of something that is true but not yet. Because you have been baptized into Jesus’ death and resurrection it does not follow that you will not die. And it also does not follow that, after your death, you will not be raised in a resurrection like his.

That is the point that Paul thinks is key: for Christian people, resurrection is in our future. It is a “resurrection of the dead” (as the Nicene Creed says) because there is death in our future too (unless Jesus “comes again” before we die). It is a “resurrection of the body” (as the Apostles’ Creed says) because it is a resurrection of the whole human being, and you can’t be human if you don’t have a body.

You might wonder how it is that a dead body can be resurrected. The first thing to say is that resurrection is not resuscitation. To be resuscitated is to be brought back from death to life, but it is to the same life, a life in which you will still have to die. People who have “near-death experiences” have been resuscitated, not resurrected. If you’ve had a near-death experience, you will in the future have a death experience. The Lazarus whom Jesus brought back from the dead was not resurrected; Lazarus still had death in his future. Resurrection, by contrast, is an event that takes you to the far side of death. Christ has risen from the dead, never to die again.

The question is, how can a body be resurrected, how can a body have a life that does not have death in its future? Clearly, there has to be transformation, because the body as we know it is nothing if it is not our constant reminder of our vulnerability to death. Slip on the ice: it is your body that reminds you you are mortal. Catch a virus, discover a tumor, or find even something as everyday as a paper cut on your skin that doesn’t heal as quickly as it did five years ago—your body bears the truth that you have been made from dust, and “unto dust shalt thou return” [Gen. 3:19]. The resurrection of the body is something material and difficult and strange to believe in. Those who teach that resurrection is just a concept, a metaphor for a kind of change in heart—they are preaching something that’s intellectually too simple. It’s like: the sun will come up in the morning, look hard enough and you can find a silver lining in anything, even death, and so forth. There are many theologians and preachers that would give you this easy doctrine, the thinning-out of Christianity’s difficulty; many preachers with pabulum Christianity who think they are scientific and up-to-date but really have nothing to say that wasn’t heard by the contemporaries of Paul and Timothy.

In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul makes a stab at describing the strange world of the resurrection. It is a contrast between the organic body that we now have, and what he calls a “spiritual body,” a body, to be precise, that is animated by the Spirit of God. The resurrected body is animated by—lives by—God’s Spirit. This is the key: and it ties resurrection to God’s victory over sin. The prophets of the Old Testament (think of Jeremiah, Ezekiel) spoke of God’s solution to the problem of human wickedness as God’s giving to sinful people a new heart, a heart of flesh not of stone, and (as it were to say the same thing) that he would put his Spirit within them—and they would live. So it is in the greatest Old Testament picture of resurrection, the prophecy that Ezekiel is given to make to the dry bones in the valley of death: “Behold, I will open your graves, and raise you from your graves . . . And I will put my Spirit within you, and you shall live.” [Ezek 37:12,14; cf. 11:19f.]

The strange world of the resurrection is that, in the future, we will have a body that lives by God’s Spirit. If this is not the case—if there is not to be for those who believe a resurrected body that lives by God’s Spirit, then there is not a resurrection from the dead, and there is not a conquest of evil and sin, and Jesus has died in vain, and there is no lasting hope. That’s why resurrection is the heart of Christian faith.