

Deborah Sokolove: Being the Body of Christ

A Sermon for Seekers Church

February 18, 2001

by Deborah Sokolove

Being the Body of Christ

Last week in the Word for the Children, David talked about the difference between resuscitation and resurrection. He said that resurrection does not result in a body that looks like the original, physical body; rather, resurrection is a kind of transformation, not unlike the way an acorn becomes an oak tree. This, he said, helped him to understand what Paul was getting at in First Corinthians, in which he says, "if Christ is not risen, then we are fools, and our faith is in vain." In this week's Epistle, Paul continues,

"But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" Fool! What you plant does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you plant, you do not plant the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or some other grain. Nevertheless, God gives it a body as God chooses, and to each kind of seed its own body. So it is with the resurrection of the dead. What is planted is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is planted in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is planted in weakness; it is raised in power. It is planted as a physical body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body. This it is written, "The first human, Adam, became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. However, it is not the spiritual that is first, but the physical, and then the spiritual. The first human was dust, so are those who are of the dust; as is

the human one from heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the human one of dust, we will also bear the image of the human one of heaven."

It seems clear from Paul's explanation that some of the people in Corinth were having as hard a time understanding resurrection as we do, today. Resurrection is a hard thing to bend my mind around, especially when I think about it as applied to myself, or other ordinary people. I grew up believing pretty much that when you are dead, you are dead; and that is the end of it. Any ongoing life, I was taught, was in the minds and memories of those who knew you. However, as far as one's own consciousness was concerned, well, nobody has come back from the dead to tell us, so we do not really know.

When I became a Christian, however, I had to reconsider what I believe about resurrection. Because as Paul makes abundantly clear, we are complete fools if Christ is not risen. According to Paul, Christian faith depends, completely and utterly, on this fundamental point. Moreover, if that was hard for first century Corinthians to believe, living as they did in a world in which the existence of any number of gods and goddesses was simply taken for granted, it is orders of magnitude more difficult for us, the heirs of the Enlightenment.

Without the Resurrection, it is possible, of course, to believe in God, to pray, to live a spiritually fulfilling life. Jews and Moslems do it all the time, not to mention those who practice innumerable other religions with completely different conceptions of how the universe works. But to be a Christian is to be forced to grapple with the relationship between the historical, first century human being known in the scriptures as Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph the carpenter and Mary, his wife; and the uncreated, eternal, ever-living Logos, Bread of Heaven, the only-Begotten of God.

In the fall, Jeanne Marcus led a number of us in a [course in](#)

[the School of Christian Living](#) on the topic of Jesus of Nazareth. It was her aim, she said, to stop short of the Resurrection, to simply examine what we can know from the scriptures about the man, Jesus, within the context of the first century Jewish world and the larger context of the Roman Empire, which controlled Palestine at that time. Her good, thoughtful questions and reading assignments led to lively discussions about what Jesus taught, and what each of us understands about those teachings. However, it was only at the last class meeting that we began to touch the reason that these questions matter, the reason the Gospels and the letters of Paul were written at all. These stories would not have been recorded unless something more had happened after Jesus was crucified. These were confessional documents, written much later than the events they record, written in the light of various communities' experience of the living Christ.

Without the experience of the Resurrection, it is likely that no one today would care about Jesus of Nazareth, except as yet another of those Jewish false messiahs. Jews might remember him like Bar Kochba, who led the revolt against Rome that resulted in the fall of the second Temple in 70 CE; or remember him like Sabbatai Zvi, the medieval mystic who many Jews believed would rescue them from oppression, until he converted to Islam on pain of his own death. Historical figures continue to live in the long, long memory of the Jewish people. Without the experience of the Resurrection, the followers of Jesus might have remained a cohesive group, living by his teachings of radical, self-giving love, not unlike those Lubavitchers who today continue to revere their beloved Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson, who died a few years ago. But without the experience of the Resurrection, the followers of Jesus probably would have remained a small sect, like the Essenes or the Therapeutae mentioned by Philo were, and eventually died out or became absorbed into the normative Judaism of the late second century rabbis.

What is the Resurrection that the early Christians experienced, and that we, later Christians, are asked to believe? The gospel accounts are silent regarding the actual event. We are simply told of an empty tomb, the stone rolled away. We simply do not, and cannot, know what happened between the time that Jesus was laid in the cave late on Friday, and the cave was found empty on Sunday morning. We are told, however, of several post-Resurrection appearances: Mary of Magdala sees him in the garden near the tomb; he visits the frightened disciples as they hide in the upper room; he walks along the road to Emmaus with two others, only to disappear after breaking bread with them. He comes and goes suddenly, mysteriously, seeming to walk through locked doors, to vanish into thin air. Clearly, the Resurrection body is not the same as the original, physical body. Those who had seen something special in Jesus of Nazareth, something that seemed to let them know about God's own way of loving, now seemed to experience his living presence, even after they had seen him die.

For a long time, I could find no explanation of all this that felt satisfying. All I was able to say was, "well, **something** happened," and "it's a mystery." Beyond that, I had no words for what I meant when I said that I believe in the Risen Christ. Lately, I have been coming to a new understanding.

In the last few years, I have spent a lot of time studying the historical arguments about the nature of Christ, and especially what people thought was happening in the Eucharist. People were excommunicated, and even killed one another, over different interpretations about what Jesus meant when he said, "This is my body," and what we are to understand when we repeat his words over the bread and cup. Even today, one of the fundamental differences between the Roman Catholic Church and most of the Protestant churches is on the issue of whether Christ is present in, or merely signified by, the Eucharistic elements.

In the nearly 40 years since the Second Vatican Council, however, Protestants and Catholics have been talking with one another in new ways. They have been sharing their scholarly discoveries with one another, helping one another to write new eucharistic prayers based on ancient models, and – more importantly – coming to new understandings about the location of the real presence of Christ. Both Catholic and Protestant churches now understand Christ as present not simply in the bread and cup, but in the Eucharistic assembly, in the gathering of believers around the table.

Well, you may say, that is obvious! It certainly is our heritage, as a church in the tradition of the Radical Reformation. In fact, all the major figures of the Reformation, not just the Anabaptists and other radicals, but Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, too, understood that the gathered assembly was necessary for a proper celebration of the Eucharist. The so-called private Mass was one of the major issues of the Reformation, and congregational participation in Communion was one of the hallmarks of the Reformation churches.

What is new in my understanding is a dawning realization that all of these controversies about how or when Christ is present in the Eucharistic are somewhat beside the point. When we serve the bread in Communion, we say, "The Body of Christ." The Body of Christ! However, is it the bread that is Christ's body, or is it we, ourselves?

In First Corinthians 12, which we read a few weeks ago, Paul wrote: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Gentiles, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. ... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it." Much is often made of his admonition, in this passage, to not be proud of being an eye, or envious if one is merely a foot. Nevertheless, I have

come to believe, not enough attention is paid to the underlying reality that we – we who believe, we who together are the church, we who are called to follow Christ – **we** are the Body of Christ.

We are the Body of Christ. People say it all the time. It is almost a cliché, a phrase tossed off with no thought, simply a colorful phrase used as a synonym for "church," but with no more profound meaning than that. But, what if we really **are** the Body of Christ? Not just us, here, Seekers, but all Christians, all who sincerely seek to follow Christ? What if **that** is what Resurrection means? What if the Risen Body, the Word of God become flesh, consists of you and me, and those Presbyterians worshipping at the Church of the Pilgrim, and the Episcopalians using the Book of Common Prayer over at St. Mary's, and the Catholics at Mass at the Church of the Sacred Heart, and some group singing praise music in a high school auditorium in Northern Virginia? What if it's not just some pretty metaphor, but we are all in this together, as the feet and hands and eyes and ears and intestines and heart and liver and sweat glands of the really and truly Risen Christ? Just the thought gives me goose bumps!

A couple of weeks ago, I was invited by the Church of the Servant Jesus, one of the new churches that has grown out of the Ecumenical Service recently, to talk to them about my art. One of their mission groups, Seeing and Believing, organizes the newly-named Mary Cosby Gallery of the Potter's House, and one of the members of the group, Lee Porter, is a friend of mine from Wesley Seminary. Lee is the one who arranged my current show. When I arrived a little before 5:30 on a Thursday afternoon, not really knowing what to expect, three or four people were standing around, chatting. Little by little, other people began to drift in; soon a big, African-American gentleman wearing overalls took the microphone and began to sing some old spiritual, and everyone else joined in. I cannot remember what the first song was, because for about

half an hour, everyone was singing and clapping, with no need of hymnals or song sheets. C.W. (as I later learned he was called) would line out the words, and everyone would just follow along. At first, I was a little uncomfortable, because I did not know many of the songs, but it was easy enough to catch on, eventually.

By the time we were done singing, there were thirty or forty people sitting at the tables, which had been set with knives and forks and glasses of water. After a final round of "Standing in the Need of Prayer," my friend Lee went to the podium and introduced me. As I spoke, people nodded and smiled, encouraging me to be as open and natural as if I were in a room full of friends, rather than people whom I mostly did not know. After my talk, baskets were passed for the collection, and then another woman stood up and began to talk about the meaning of the Lord's Supper. She broke the bread, spoke the Words of Institution and passed chunks of it on small plates to each table, so that people could serve one another. Later, I was told that they do Communion this way every week, with a different person leading.

When Communion was over, a few of the people went behind the counter, and soon plates of rice and beans and platters of cornbread were being handed around. While this was going on, someone at each table began to read a passage of Scripture. Then, for the next half hour or so, over supper, each group discussed the passage among themselves, starting with some questions that had been prepared earlier. Finally, everyone was invited to stand in a circle, there were some prayers out of the silence, C.W. led a few more songs and the service was over.

Several things struck me about this service, so different in many ways from our own, and yet in many ways very familiar. Like ours, this was a highly participatory service, with leadership shared among women and men. However, unlike our custom, there was no written liturgy, no responsive readings,

and no one spoke from notes (not even me). In fact, nothing was written down, except for the scriptures and the questions for study, and these were read aloud at each table, so that even those who could not read could participate fully.

The biggest difference between the Church of the Servant Jesus and Seekers was in the diversity of the congregation. Some of the people had light skin; some had darker skin. Some wore expensive-looking clothing; others were dressed like laborers. Some spoke in educated accents, others spoke in the language of the street. Moreover, none of these things seemed to matter.

I often worry about the ways that race and class intersect in this part of the country, where most the rich and powerful seem to be white and all the poor seem to be anything else. I am often critical of those whom I perceive as using their interactions with "the poor" for their own spiritual transformation. Moreover, I am often paralyzed in my efforts to help those in need, because I am too self-conscious of being yet another white do-gooder, trying to show those poor unfortunates how to do things right.

What I learned at the Church of the Servant Jesus is that, in the Body of Christ, none of those things matter. At the Church of the Servant Jesus, anyone who walks in the door gets dinner, even if they arrived too late for the sermon, the collection, or even the Eucharist – and nobody has to pay. At the Church of the Servant Jesus, everybody serves everybody else, no matter what the color of his or her skin or the price of his or her clothes. At the Church of the Servant Jesus, everybody seems to know that **everybody** stands in the need of prayer.

Now, I am not suggesting that we turn ourselves into a clone of the Church of the Servant Jesus. While I am able to appreciate the kind of inclusiveness that can do away with hymnals and printed liturgies, I also appreciate the kind of

inclusiveness that recognizes the need for non-sexist language. While I am able to appreciate the simplicity and directness of unrehearsed, spontaneous prayer, I also appreciate the poetic creating of responsive readings. Moreover, while I am able to appreciate the kind of tradition embodied in their form of worship, I appreciate the flexibility to use new words for ancient ideas, to find new forms for embodying ancient truths.

What I am suggesting is that we not get too proud of our ways of doing things, too self-congratulatory about our strengths, too comfortable in our self-understanding. What I am suggesting is that we pay attention to Paul, when he says, "Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot would say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. In addition, if the ear would say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as God chose."

The members of Christ's Risen Body are not simply each individual person who follows Christ's call, but also the various churches that make up the Church Universal. As each person has his or her own way of being in the world, so, too, does each church. Ours is one way, that of the Church of the Servant Jesus, another. God calls each of us, each person, and each congregation, by name. Each of us, all of us together, is a part of the Resurrection Body, and we all need one another so that, together, we can be Christ to the world. When I remember that, I do not need to know what will happen to my body, or to my ego, after I die. As a member of this community, I am part of something much bigger than this congregation is alone. As one who follows Christ's call on my life, I do not have to wait until I die to be part of the

Resurrection, because I already participate in the spiritual body of the Word of God made flesh. As those who live out God's calling in this church, let us remain aware that this fragile, earthen vessel is only one small part of the Risen Body of the one those first Christians knew as Jesus, the one we know as Christ.