

## “Bodies Matter”

Acts 1: 6-11; Psalm 93; Ephesians 1: 15-23; Luke 24: 44-53

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Bodies matter. Not because I say so, but because God shows us: bodies matter. God created bodies, and in His holy Word He tells us He created them as *good*, always good, even if there comes disease and brokenness. None of this stuff about the body being evil but the spirit divine; we are embodied creatures who are made in His Image, good and holy.

The whole message of the Incarnation is that God took on a body with real human flesh in the Person of Jesus. He took on the good, the body, in order to defeat the bad, sin.

And in doing this, Christ in the flesh was renewing creation and restoring the bodily life through the Resurrection. His mission was not to rescue spirits for heaven, but to bring the Resurrection to bodies, our bodies, trapped by the power of death.

So, for Christians, the body is not a thing to transcend but is that for which Christ came to resurrect, to raise us up one fine and special day.

And we know this most fully, because Jesus, in His body, ascended into heaven. And He reigns there, *in the body*, His glorious body, awaiting the time when we too will rise to heaven in our flesh.

We speak this understanding when we recite affirmations of faith in our worship service, especially in the Apostles' Creed: “I believe in the resurrection of *the body* and the life of the world to come.” We are talking here about **our** body, this mass of cells, this house I dwell in . . . being put back together, whole and entire, rising again. Because bodies matter.

Today we celebrate the Ascension of the resurrected body of Jesus Christ; an event Augustine called *the* most important Christian day of the year. It surpasses, says Augustine, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost because it completes Jesus' reign as Lord and as Christ until His return at the end of time. The Ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven is the culmination, the last phase of the Resurrection. And we remember today that Jesus took His physical body with Him into the Godhead.

Think of this trajectory with me: God became one *with us* in Jesus of Nazareth...so that we can become one *with God* in Jesus; in the life, the bodily life, of the world to come. When Jesus left here, taking His human flesh with Him, His full glorification came about. And the glorification of all human nature is a part of that. This is what it means to be

human: the assurance, as Calvin says, that “our **flesh**, yours and mine, is acceptable to God and destined to dwell in and with God’s divine and eternal Presence.”

Wow. Heady stuff. Our flesh and blood is welcome in God’s heaven. Our bodies will live in His Kingdom. Next to Jesus in His flesh. We will dwell for eternity in the bodies made good and pleasing, to tie Creation to the Incarnation, the Incarnation to the Resurrection, and the Resurrection to the Ascension. And all involve the body: Baby Jesus, Risen Christ, Ascended Lord. Baptized Christian, redeemed sinner, future ascended body on the day of Christ’s return.

So, what does all this mean for us and for every *body* remaining here? What does it mean to our lives today as we continue to live on this planet? Our Master has left this world, but we remain in it, at least for a time. What does He ask of us?

Well, maybe this true account of another master’s departure will help us as we wait and work: with the help of the Holy Spirit we do what Jesus asks us: make disciples and complete the mission our Lord and Master began here.

Our story is about Giacomo Puccini, the opera great who composed *La Boheme* and *Madame Butterfly* in the early 1920’s. Puccini believed that melody was paramount; that gorgeous melodies make opera live and weep....and soar to the heights of passion and the highest good.

Well, in the midst of writing the opera *Turandot*, which some consider his most elevated and transporting work, Puccini was diagnosed with throat cancer. Though he was dying, he continued to work on the opera’s score day and night, despite his friends advising him to rest and conserve his strength.

As Puccini faced *his* departure from this world, he gathered his musical disciples around him. And he instructed them, “If I do not finish *Turandot*, I want you to finish it. Do not leave my work undone.” In 1924 Puccini died, leaving the work unfinished. His followers met, studied his uncompleted work, and reflected on the score. Then they wrote the remainder of *Turandot*; *they finished the work of the great master*.

At its world premier at La Scala in 1924, Toscanini, Puccini’s trusted student and most ardent follower, conducted *Turandot* . . . conducted the opera up to the point where Puccini had left it: at a death scene’s final duet. Putting down his baton, Toscanini turned to the audience and announced, “Thus far the master wrote.” There was a long pause, and it was uncertain if the work would continue. But then Toscanini picked up the baton, and with tears in his eyes, conducted the rest of the work, the notes of Puccini’s followers ringing in that grand house.

And a master’s body of work, his enduring beauty, was celebrated; melodies soaring to the very height of heaven’s door.

Thus far *our* Master, Jesus, has placed His work before us, before our bodies *not finished yet* in the Book of Life. His work is passed on to us, His beloved disciples of 2020. We hear the call to build His Church. To complete His mission. To tell all what He has done and Who He is. We use our body and our mind and our will to follow where Jesus leads, our triumphant King Jesus Who reigns now from above, His Cross before us lighting the way.

The baton has been passed to us, and lifting it we conduct the melody of the true Master, Whose song of triumphant we sing forever more. Until our work is done and our body raised to heaven's door.

There we will sing a song of praise that never ends, one that endures as long as time spins into eternity; there, where Heaven is our home, and *where bodies matter*. Amen.