

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Boston
Easter 3
May 1, 2022

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I once read that the human body can completely regenerate itself every seven years. That from a cellular level, we become new roughly every seven years, with our old cells dying off, and new ones taking their place—in fact, our health and well being depends on some cells dying so that we can allow others to regrow.

As most things are that you read on the internet, this isn't exactly 100% true. Some cells regenerate at a far higher rate than others- for instance our skin, our stomach lining, our white blood cells which help stave off infection—these are the quick turnaround parts of the body. Our skin cells regenerate every two to three days, and our various blood cells between three days and a month. Some of our organs—like our brain; our tooth enamel; the lenses on our eyes; they don't regenerate nearly as often, or at all—what happens there, usually remains¹.

Much like the old adage asking if you replace both the handle and head of a beloved old axe, are you still in possession of the same axe, I find this exchange of cells fascinating. How much of us is 'us' and how much of us is meant to change.

Which is to say: are you the same person you were twenty years ago? Are you the same person you were ten years ago? Two years ago? Two weeks ago?

And more importantly: would you want to be as you once were?

While there is nothing more that I would like to do than address why Peter was fishing naked in this morning's Gospel (always remember, metaphor, Church!), our readings today are about something a little more nuanced—the difference between resuscitation and resurrection when it comes to people.

We have two of our best-known disciples post-Easter this morning in scripture. Saul/ Paul, persecutor of the followers of Jesus; and Peter, denier of being Jesus' disciple and friend. Two more different people, personalities, you cannot find in scripture, no matter how often the Church pairs them up neatly. The Conversion of Paul is a story of one who not only changes—but has a dramatic reversal of everything they have upheld to that point. The zeal of the converted is a hallmark of Paul, going from persecutor to proselyte in a matter of days, and as scripture tells us, 'it was as if scales had fallen from his eyes'.

¹ Full disclosure, this basic information first came to me via a 2nd grader who watched too much PBS during the pandemic shit-down of school, but I did verify and receive more information from a variety of other sources, including: <https://www.discovery.com/science/Body-Really-Replace-Itself-Every-7-Years>

In the Gospel, we have (and Church, I am clearly biased here) beloved Peter. Peter, who after the crucifixion has gone back to his fishing boat, because to him, this experiment with Jesus is over, and he goes back to the life he once knew and lived, and found there, if not peace in it, then a certain amount of comfort. How many of us try to return to the predictable after an upheaval?

While we may not have the same abundance of flowers or timpani or zuzh that we had on Easter Day, friends, it is still Easter—and every single thing we read or say or pray on should be through the lens of Resurrection.

And resurrection is different than resuscitation or restoration.

Resuscitation seeks to keep the old cells of our body alive—to keep ‘what is’ going indefinitely, as it is, even if ‘what is’ is less than adequate. Restoration seeks to replace the cells of our body with the same ones we used to have—replacing like for like, so as to maintain equilibrium.

Resurrection, however, doesn’t avoid death. Resurrection allows for cells to die so that others may live. Did you know that cells dying is what enables us to have fingers and toes? The cells between our digits must die in order for us to exist without webbing in the parts of our body which give us the most freedom and capability².

What allows Paul and Peter to stand out as disciples of Jesus isn’t their goodness—Lord knows, each of them has some colorful history and I’m not sure that either of them would look back and want to be who they once were. It’s not their faithfulness, either, as much as we tout that in the Church. It’s their capacity to live into a life of Resurrection—allowing parts of them to die—to be let go—so that the greater life within them, the greater love within them, may grow.

Paul, when Saul, functioned in his work and life off of fear and violence. What he was known for was his ability to hunt communities down and cut them off from each other, with the help of the coercion of the Empire. Peter, always represented by the rooster, in the heart of Maundy Thursday, denies knowing Jesus three times out of fear. “I do not know the man” echoes in our ears as we sit at the cross of Good Friday, words which could have come from our own mouths as well.

We could end the story with these two characters here. Everyone likes there to be a bad guy in the story; everyone likes to have a fan favorite who then falls from grace.

But in the Resurrection, the story doesn’t end where we expect it to. Paul becomes the creator of communities, the encourager of the wayward, and the one who sees the various parts of the body of Christ, even in those early days following the death of Jesus, as inextricably bound together and needing one another to live. Peter, even in face of his denials, is asked three times by the resurrected Jesus in the gospel this morning if his love remains— “Simon, son of John, do you love me?” And three times, Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you”. Even after denial and betrayal, we are offered redemption and a way to allow the parts of us die which need to die so other parts can live.

² <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK10048/>

Which brings us back to the question: are you the same person you once were? Would you want to be?

And points us to the next question: what in us needs to die; to be let go; to be dropped; to transform—in order for us to be the resurrected people of Christ?

How are we spinning our wheels trying to resuscitate or restore what was, instead of diving into the potential of the resurrection? Are we trying to be the people we once were, or looking at the people we want to be going forward?

I found myself reading a column in the New York Times this week about the NFL draft process—a reading choice, by the way, as unlikely for me as Paul becoming a convert to the Way. Titled, ‘Humility and hubris’, it focused less on the draft and more on the belief that given an enormous amount of financial and brain-trust resources, one could predict the outcome of a player or team’s success in the future. However, the research seemed to imply that even with lavish funding, the outcomes of predicting success based on painstakingly detailed calculations regarding a player’s past play, were mezze-mezze at best— higher draft picks rarely outperformed those far lower down the ladder, and in some cases, were eclipsed completely by those lower down. Perhaps we all recall the 199th draft pick of 2000? (Ahem, Tom Brady)

The author writes, “To be clear, the implication is not that nobody knows anything. The trouble is that human beings tend to overstate their ability to predict events. People who can resist that hubris — who can mix knowledge with humility — are often at a competitive advantage.”³

Knowledge and humility. Our potential cannot always be predicted by our performance to date.

People change from who they were to who they might be. And the greatest gift we are given as humans is the capacity *to* change. In this incarnate world, even NFL draft data points to that theological truth.

What scales need to fall from our eyes? What forgiveness do we seek from our previous denials or error? Do we believe that we can still be loved and valued by God if we acknowledge our growing edges, our imperfections, and allow that we have room to grow closer to God by letting go of those things which stymie resurrection?

I often consider Paul and Peter when it comes to my attention that I am wrong. It was easier for Paul to keep his rather successful job than start over again, and face the suspicion of others as to his conversion. It was easier for Peter to keep his head down, and just do the thing which was familiar to him- with his old buddies, his family, his pat knowledge of fish, boats, sustenance. It would have been easier for them to restore and resuscitate their old lives, keeping on with what they knew.

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/28/briefing/nfl-draft-picks-vegas-humility-hubris.html>

But knowledge and humility, coupled with love, and with trust in God, allows us to do more than reanimate. We can be part of the resurrected body too, scars and all. We don't need to be a new body, just one which allows that which needs to die, to die. By allowing what no longer serves us, no longer connects us, no longer deepens us, to be let go, we will truly live.

The Easter story isn't just about life, it's about possibility. The possibility of being the people of God we can be, regardless of where we have been previous to this point. We have possibility deep within us—in our souls, and literally, in our sinews and bones. In two days, our skin will be different. In a few months, our red blood cells will be renewed. In ten years, our whole bones will have regenerated.

The body—this body, our body, Christ's body—will tell us the truth about resurrection if we allow it to, Church. And it can do more for us that we can possibly ask or imagine.

Amen.