

## **“In the Flesh”**

### **Sermon – April 14, 2024 Stone Presbyterian Church**

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Raise your hand if you have ever met someone famous in person.

Now “famous” is admittedly somewhat relative—as is also “meeting” someone.

In 2002 at an economic development conference by chance I happened to “meet” Hiliary Clinton with a group I was with—for about 1.5 seconds.

On the other hand, in the 1990s I did actual meet and had conversations with Werner Klemperer and William Christopher separately on different occasions. Klemperer played Colonel Klink on the 1960s TV series Hogan’s Heroes and Christopher played Father Mulcahy on the 1970s TV series M\*A\*S\*H.

I met them across the road from my house at the home of Bonnie Jones Reynolds, our older children’s great aunt and who was formerly married to Gene Reynolds the producer of those TV series and was in some episodes herself. They were old friends visiting with her.

I wasn’t surprised to find them to be pretty down-to-earth people; I mean, most prima donnas don’t come to rural Central New York just to visit. Still, there was something about meeting these people in the flesh. It did make them more real, which actually shouldn’t be a surprise.

In the early 2010s for my day job I used to have many conference calls on the phone. Finally, after a few years I traveled down to Virginia for an in-person meeting and met many of them for the first time in the flesh. And it was a bit of a shock on both sides because neither side looked as the other expected. Because my voice is often deep I think they were expecting someone tall, dark, and handsome and instead they got, well, me.

With Zoom and Teams these days we don’t get quite the same shock value.

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Of course, in Jesus’ time you might hear about a person from a messenger or through others, but you only met and knew person in person in the flesh.

These first three Sundays in Eastertide focus on the resurrection itself and Jesus appearing to people. Last week we heard from the gospel of John of Jesus appearing to the disciples behind closed doors and again a week later now with Thomas there and upon seeing him in the flesh Thomas then believed.

Today’s extended gospel lesson is from Luke and all takes place on Easter Sunday. Jesus appears with two walking to Emmaus. At their urging he stays with them for dinner and after blessing and breaking the bread and giving it to them their eyes were opened and they recognized him. Then he vanished.

They rush back to Jerusalem just in time for Jesus to appear to all the disciples, greeting them with “Peace be with you.” But “they were startled and terrified, and thought that they were seeing a ghost.”

Jesus assures them he is not, saying “Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” Then he asks for something to eat, again showing them that he is flesh and blood. This is a theme that shows up multiple times in the gospels.

To be honest, this resurrection in the flesh has always troubled me a bit.

I have several questions:

What kind of body is it that can disappear and reappear?

Given that we know heaven is not “up there” how does this body sit on the right hand of God, which clearly is not in our physical world?

How are people to be resurrected with new bodies when the vast majority have died and long turned to dust?

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There has been much debate about it from the beginning. Paul writes about some of it in 1 Corinthians 15.

The short answer is there are not definitive answers, particularly for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The less than satisfactory answer is that God will make it all happen somehow.

The real question is why having a physical body in the resurrection such a big deal in the first place?

For some people in the first few centuries after Jesus’ resurrection (and for some even today) they believed maybe Jesus was never truly a human being. That he only appeared to be human. There were many variations on this with different groups such as the Gnostics, Docetics, and Arians.

The Ecumenical Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople in the 4<sup>th</sup> century made those beliefs definitively heretical, and that Jesus truly lived, died, and was raised in the flesh as reflected in the Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds.

Fundamentally, if Jesus didn’t have a physical body to begin with then he was never truly human, he was never one of us. And so his resurrection would have no meaning.

And his resurrected self needed to be a physical body to show through God that he had conquered death and sin. Otherwise, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:14 “then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain.”

So what is the consequence of all of this?

One is that we need to take to heart all that Jesus said and did—because he told us to do the same. Remember the threats to his own life were initially because he was upsetting the status quo by helping the poor,

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the sick, the marginalized and castigating those in power and with wealth for not doing so themselves.

Secondly, Jesus commissions us to bear witness to his life, ministry, and resurrection. We are to tell the story of Jesus, which leads to a “change of mind”, that is repentance, and a proclamation that in Christ we find forgiveness.

Thirdly, that the good news of Jesus Christ is good news for everybody. We must remember that the blessings of God in Jesus Christ transcend racial, ethnic, gendered, and heteronormative prejudices. It is good news for everyone without exception.

As the Acts of the Apostles shows in general and today’s passage reiterates: the story of Jesus really has not ended. It has continued since then and continues with us and our lives. Yes, we look forward to the end of days and the resurrection of all, but the nature of Christian hope is to live simultaneously in the “now” and the “not yet.”

The book of Acts argues that the ministry of an Easter church looks very much like the ministry of Jesus. There’s healing, there’s proclamation, and sometimes there’s confrontation because Christ’s message of love sometimes goes against the status quo and speaking truth to power.

The disciples needed to see Jesus in the flesh to know that all he promised was true for this life and the next. We believe because they believed and that we have seen Christ work in our lives. So go, proclaim the good news and live Christ-like lives so that others will believe as well.

In the name of God the Creator, God the Redeemer, and God the Sustainer.  
Amen.