

**November 11, 2007**  
**Haggai 2:1-9, Luke 20:27-40**  
**Dr. Lewis F. Galloway**

**“The View from the Far Side”**

Thomas Wolfe’s autobiographical novel, *Look Homeward Angel*, tells the story of a young man growing up in a large and volatile family in Ashville, North Carolina. In the novel, the author is stricken with grief at the unexpected death of his younger brother. He drops to his knees and cries out, “God, whoever you are, wherever you are, if you are, take care of my brother tonight.”

Such poignant words echo our own feelings of vulnerability and grief in the face of death. Death casts its cold shadow over all of life, swallowing hopes and dreams, devouring our best accomplishments, making a mockery of our days and breaking the bonds that unite us with those we love. Even though we may manage by our own wits, technology and caution to extend life, we cannot avoid the inevitable. The American Philosopher, William James, was right to call death, “the worm at the core of human happiness.” The emotional and cultural scarecrows we have made to frighten away the old crow death are, in the end of things, not much help. By ourselves we are helpless before death’s power to pluck life from among us. So we join in Thomas Wolfe’s desperate plea, “God, whoever you are, whatever you are, if you are, take care of us tonight.”

The scriptures dare to claim that death is not the end of life. God is the God of the living and not the dead. Those who die are raised to new life in Jesus Christ. Each week we affirm this truth in the words of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting...” Yet there is so much in our world and in our own hearts that contradicts this hope.

There are many who do not find any convincing reason to believe the resurrection. Life is limited they say. We are born to die. We return to the earth. Some would counter with examples from nature of birth and transformation: the caterpillar spins its dark cocoon and is reborn a brilliantly colored butterfly; the water bug emerges from the pond and sprouts its wings to become the airborne dragonfly; the seed planted in the dark earth bursts forth as a flowering plant. While these analogies from nature may be helpful to explain the transformation of the kind of body we will have in the resurrection, they do not offer any real proof of the resurrection from death to life. Modern science has made things more complicated by doing away with the three tiered universe of heaven up there, the earth here and hell down beneath. What is the geography of heaven? In what parallel universe, new dimension beyond time and space, or a lterna te state of being unknown to our senses is heaven to be found?

In Hamlet’s famous soliloquy, he thinks of death and wonders what lies on the other side of the grave:

“...To die, to sleep;

To sleep, perchance to dream: ay, there’s the rub;

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,...

But that the dread of something after death,

The undiscovered country from whose bourn

No traveler returns puzzles the will...”

Yet, the Christian faith dares to proclaim that one has returned from that “undiscovered country” to reassure our fright-

ened souls of the reality of the resurrection and to guide us home to God.

Jesus gives us the view from the far side. The resurrection of Jesus Christ is the decisive battle that God has fought and won against death. Walter Brueggemann has written that the resurrection is not “a magical individualistic act of resuscitation,” but a vindication of the power of God’s sovereignty over all of creation. The God of the resurrection – not the old crowd death – is the ultimate power of the universe. Throughout the gospels, Jesus proclaims the truth of the resurrection. When his friend Lazarus dies, Jesus says, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die.” (John 11:25, 26)

In our gospel lesson today, the Sadducees ask Jesus a question about the resurrection. The Sadducees do not believe in the resurrection. Their question is an effort to reduce belief in the resurrection to an absurdity. They ask Jesus a hypothetical question about a woman who marries a man who dies childless. The woman then marries each of his six brothers in succession. All of them die childless. They ask whose wife she will be in the resurrection.

In responding to their question, Jesus speaks about the character of resurrected life. Resurrection life is transformed existence. The resurrection does not mean that this same marvelous arrangement of cells and astonishing chemistry will continue unchanged in the world to come. The mark of time is upon our lives. Our bodies wear out and we disintegrate into dust. We are of the earth and to the earth we shall return. The resurrection of the body does not depend upon our ability to preserve the body after death in the way the Egyptians tried to do. The resurrection of the body depends upon the power and intention of God to give us new life.

When the Bible speaks of the resurrection of the body, it is not talking about resuscitating corpses. It is talking about you and me as persons being given new life in the Kingdom of God. It is the resurrection of the self. Al Winn has written that when we speak of the resurrection of the body, we mean “the pattern, the form, the framework, the shape, which has grown and changed throughout ...[our] life, yet remains identical to itself, recognizable, a basic and indispensable part” of who we are. It is the resurrection of the “total self in its unique identity, with its own memory and history, with its intricate, individual web of relationships.” (p. 178, *A Christian Primer*)

As a person, I am shaped by my relationships and by my personal history. I would not be who I am apart from my relationship with my wife, my children, my friends and my family. If we do not know others in heaven, then we will not know ourselves. When Jesus says that there will be no marriage in heaven, he does not mean that we will not know one another in heaven, but that heavenly existence is a transformed, fulfilled and completed existence. Jesus is saying that resurrected life in the kingdom will not be a collection of undifferentiated souls, but a community of persons. What a joy it will be to be with those with whom we have shared this life. In heaven, we will experience a spiritual communion in which all wounds are healed, all misunderstandings overcome and all hurts forgiven. We will know the inner strength and beauty of one another for we shall become what God has created us to be. As Jesus says, we shall be like the angels for we shall be children of God.

Of course we speak of mysteries that our words fail to convey and of realities that our minds cannot fully comprehend. The best way to understand this transformed resurrected life is to look at the One who has returned to give us a view from the far side. When Jesus is raised from the dead, he is the same Jesus the disciples have known and loved. Yet, he is different. Mary Magdalene does not recognize him until she hears his voice call her name. The disciples on the road to Emmaus talk with him and spend time with him, but they do not know who he is until they recognize him in the familiar gesture of breaking bread. On one occasion, we hear that he eats; on another, he does not eat. He appears and disappears. No physical body as we know it can do that. His wounds can be touched, but they are not to cling to him. Jesus is the same and, yet, he is different. Paul, who encounters the risen Lord on the road to Damascus, searches for an expression to describe our existence in the resurrection and falls upon two words that by themselves mean opposite things. He speaks of the resurrected self as “a spiritual body.” (Romans 15:44)

This spiritual body will be more glorious than the form of life we know today. When the Israelites return to Jerusalem

from their exile in Babylon, things are not as glorious as they imagined they would be. Life is hard. The people struggle to survive. It is all they can do to build their simple houses, cultivate their abandoned fields and put food on the table for their children. They have little time to think about rebuilding the once magnificent temple of King Solomon. Their faces are fixed on the ground; it is hard for them to look to the heavens. The prophet Haggai calls upon Joshua, the high priest, and Zerubbabal, the governor, and the people to turn their attention to rebuilding the temple. The Lord promises that this new temple will be even more splendid than the former temple. The Lord will bless the vision and the labors of the people. The future will be greater than the past.

Sometimes we fall into the trap of thinking that this life is all there is. Sometimes the struggles and disappointments of everyday life wear us down. We feel overwhelmed by the tragedies of life and defeated by the death of those we love. Like those who returned from exile, we have our faces set upon the ground and we are afraid to look up to the heavens and trust the promises of God. We wonder if the promise of resurrection can be true. These words of the prophet Haggai were spoken not only to a people who lived a long time ago, but they are spoken to us today. I hear God saying that just as the new temple will be more splendid than the old, so the new heavenly temple of the resurrected body will be even more glorious than this earthly temple of our physical bodies.

How do I know? Because I trust the words of Jesus who said that in the resurrection we shall be like the angels for we shall be children of the resurrection.