



I wanted to preach today from this elevated pulpit because it offers the best view of the magnolia tree out in our courtyard. This marvel of God's creation, you can see it there through the window, has been marking time, through this longest of winters, And even on this cold morning, is in blooming-good form, announcing the resurrection. Majestically rising to tell us that He is risen. He is risen indeed. Hallelujah!

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The tomb is empty.  
Death has nothing to show for,  
it is evacuated of its darkness.  
Christ lights the way, passes with us,  
through death, from life,  
and from death, to life again.  
Death is not the final word.  
There is no raging against the dying of the light.  
There is only that living love that rolls away the stone,  
throws open the doors;  
a love that's stronger than death,  
flinging its light far and wide.

How did we come to embrace this Easter destiny?

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Rowan Williams, reflecting on Good Friday and the meaning of the cross says this:

"The crucifixion of Christ represents our rejection of what is most genuine in us, most human in us. [It tells us that] we don't know how to live, ... that all that actually gives me life, gives me energy and hope, or anchorage in reality, all of that also frightens me. So much so, that I want to run and not only run but want to strike out at what seems to promise what is good for me."

Rowan then turns to the poem by Charles Causley 'I AM THE GREAT SUN'.

Charles Causley is not well known, but counted among his friends and enthusiasts, Ted Hughes, Philip Larkin, and Alan Bennett.

Causley's 'I AM THE GREAT SUN' is a meditation is subtitled "on a Normandy crucifix of 1632" —

I am the great sun, but you do not see me,

I am the captive, but you do not free me.  
I am the truth, but you will not believe me,  
I am the city where you will not stay.  
I am that God to whom you will not pray.  
I am your lover whom you will betray.  
I am the holy dove whom you will slay.  
I am your life, but you will not name me ...<sup>1</sup>

We know what gives us life, but we fear it, and so we resist it, deny it, and do everything in our power to oppose it. Finally, we crucify it.

The apostle Paul, writing more prosaically, but in a vulnerable moment, simply says:

“why is it that, what I want to do, I do not do, but  
what I do not want to do, I do all the more?” (Rom 7).

Are we surprised then that our first instinct, as with the disciples on that first Easter, is to deny the Resurrection?

And so to deny the God whose is love, and refuses to be God without us. For that, in the end, that’s the Resurrection in a nutshell. God refuses to be God without us.

What the disciples see, is not a dematerialised body living in a dematerialised world. They see a spirit-animated body, the body flooded with the Eternal, shot-through with the adrenalin of life rekindled anew, and rekindling new life wherever it is celebrated and received.

For us, today, the body we encounter in the Eucharist, mediated physically in bread and wine, and in the Christ we see in each other’s faces, is the same body at the heart of our reading in acts.

“God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. He was not seen by all the people, but [... we] *ate* and *drank* with him after he rose from the dead”.

There’s the God who refuses to be God without us.

The resurrected Jesus must in so way surprise himself with this life made new. He must in some way stop to say “I had not thought it would be like this?”

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On my first day of high school, in Los Angeles, California, when I was thirteen, I made friends with a guy called Tony, a recently arrived Cuban refugee: Antonio Menendez, but he was Tony from day one.

At lunch, Tony told me about his family’s escape from Havana, a raft with an outboard motor that broke down within hours, leaving them to slowly drift into the Gulf of Mexico, and three and a half

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<sup>1</sup> The Tablet (28 March 2018) <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/features/2/12870/rowan-williams-on-charles-causley-the-poet-who-fed-his-theological-imagination>

months at sea. They were finally spotted and rescued off the Texas coast, and the Tony and his family were resettled in California. That's how we got to meet.

Tony had spent his time on the boat reading an English schoolbook. He was surprisingly confident getting by in a very basic, more or less improvised, English.

I'll never forget the moment Tony pointed to the apple on my lunch tray: What is that? He asked. Tony had never seen an apple. I couldn't believe it. And I couldn't explain "apple" to him. How could I describe its texture, taste, and tang? So I handed Tony the apple. I watched him take a bite, and taste an apple for the first time.

Tony's English was rough; he didn't have the words. But all you had to do was see his face to know that, in that first bite, Tony acquired a language of the body he didn't have before.

In the story of Easter, there is no "game, set, match" description of an event for which words simply fail us. But for Christ's disciples, there *is* a language of the body they didn't have before.

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In our Gospel reading, it is Mary Magdalene who teaches us to make something of this resurrection event with the makings of our own bodies, our loves, our lives.

The new film on Mary Magdalen, which I know some of you have seen, tries to redeem someone that history has scandalised and shamed into anonymity and myth. But in John's gospel there is no ambiguity about who she is: She is the first disciple Jesus commissions to tell others.

The commission from Jesus is her vindication: the love that drove her to the tomb in mourning is the vitality she will need to face down the unbelief of the other disciples.

They don't believe. And quite frankly, how could they?

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Fast forward with me, if you will, to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. And meet another one of Jesus' disciples, commissioned, no less, to *sing* and not only tell the Resurrection. I am talking about Mahalia Jackson, the African-American singer known as the Queen of Gospel.

The year was 1958, Mahalia Jackson, took the stage at the Newport Jazz festival, a gospel music singer sharing the stage with the likes of Theolonious Monk, Gerry Mulligan, Anita O'Day singing 'Tea for Two' and two for tea, Luis Armstrong, and even Chuck Berry.

Throughout her career, Jackson refused to sing secular music. So, when invited to perform the closing set, she sang jazzed-up arrangements of her by-then Gospel classics.

Years later, Mahalia Jackson, would share the stage with her friend, The Revd Dr Martin Luther King. She stood with him when King gave his history-making "I Have a Dream" speech at the March in Washington.

History has forgotten that it was Mahalia Jackson, who said to King, five minutes into his prepared speech:

“Tell them about the dream, Martin.”

MLK set aside his written text, looked up at the crowd, thousands strong, and for the next five minutes, delivered extemporaneously the most famous part of that speech. Capturing lightning in a bottle! And firing all engines on the civil rights movement against racial segregation!

But in 1958, back at the Newport Jazz Festival, it was Sunday, and all the acts ran long. Mahalia’s final number wound down at midnight to great ovation. She was asked to return for an encore.

She returned to the stage, but told the director filming the festival documentary, that as it was midnight, she would end with a prayer. So, would they please shut off all the recording equipment?

The director said it would be a sin to miss a single second of Jackson’s power and presence on stage. Jackson agreed to a single camera from the back of the venue. As it happened, all cameras kept rolling. And her prayer became the closing scene in the film *Jazz On a Summer’s Day*.

“Tell them about the dream, Martin.”

Mahalia Jackson had the language of Resurrection, the language of freedom, the language of body and spirit in music and song.

She knew who she was, and she knew the God who refuses to be God without us, the resurrected Christ who says to Mary Magdalene, Speak to the disciples about

“my father and your father, my God and your God.”

In a moment, I will invite you to hear Mahalia Jackson’s prayer.

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Earlier this week, Sara Marks’ installation, *WAIT*, helped us mark the journey of Holy Week. *WAIT* was an ice-block suspended from a cotton cloth, with a steel bowl beneath to catch the slowly-dripping water.

The cloth was used to represent the curtain torn in half at the death of Jesus on Good Friday. The sound of the ripping fabric marked the end of our Good Friday prayer and reflections on Christ’s passion and death.

The cloth, has now been sewn here in the church, overnight. You see it hanging over the empty cross, signaling the grave cloth left behind at the resurrection.

On Maundy Thursday, however, the water collected in the basin was used for the traditional washing of the feet. And at the end of the service, we carried the bowl full of water in a procession out to Piccadilly. We poured the water out as this church’s offering of humility and service to those around us.

The rust that had formed in the bowl over the two or so days of the melting sculpture, was visibly intermingled in the water with the dirt from all the feet we washed.

We have a God who, in the grave, has tasted earth;  
a God who, in Jesus, has stooped to the level of rust and dirt.

But today, as we hear Mahalia Jackson's prayer, I invite you to listen in her voice the UPLIFT of resurrection. And as you hear it, I invite you to let God roll away the stone, and touch a part of you, – or someone you love, someone you know, – that needs to be lifted, healed and unbound, resurrected, and in the joy of Easter, finally set finally free.

*CUE MUSIC: 'The Lord's Prayer', by Mahalia Jackson, live soundtrack from Jazz On a Summer's Day (Bert Stern, 1959).*

Amen.

Ivan Khovacs