

WHICH WAY WILL YOUR FEET POINT?
Psalm 118: 1, 2, 14-17; I Corinthians 15: 51-55
Easter - April 11, 2004
Union Church of Cupertino, CA
Art Domingue, Interim Minister

I love a good cemetery. There's no better place to take a stroll or enjoy a picnic. You can find fascinating stories written on the stones. In a cemetery in Lincoln, Maine there is this inscription:

**Sacred to the Memory of Mr. Jared Bates
Who Died August the 6th, 1880
His Widow aged 24 who mourns as one who can be comforted
Lives at 7 Elm Street this village
And possesses every qualification for a good wife.**

If you avoid cemeteries you miss this good stuff.

Cemetery records can be a goldmine of information about the deceased's personal beliefs.

In 1899, Major Peter Labelliere of Dorking England was, by his own request, buried in a vertical position with his head pointing down. The Major held an unusual but firm belief that on the Day of Resurrection the earth would begin to spin and it would spin faster and faster until all normal positions would be reversed. What was heads down would end up heads up and he would end up face to face with his creator. - cf. *This England Magazine*, Spring, 2002.

A hatter in Windsor, England left a legacy of 100 pounds to a neighbor on the condition that that neighbor would bury him in a specific manner. The hatter's wish was to be interred under a mulberry tree in his own back yard. He wanted to be 10 feet down and while the grave digger was at work he wanted two French Horns to be playing. Finally he wanted everyone who attended the grave opening to have a good time and stipulated that there would be 12 bottles of wine present to be shared. The local newspaper reported all these conditions and wrote: "This was performed yesterday to the great offense of (The Rev.) Mr. (George) Goldsmith (rector) who says the hatter was not a Christian." - David R. Coffin, *The English Garden: Meditation and Memorial*, pg. 134.

The style of burial which the Rev. Goldsmith would have approved was called 'incumbent' burial which meant the body was placed in the ground in a horizontal position with the feet pointing east.

It was an important article of belief for many of our ancestors that one day a trumpet would sound and graves would be opened and the physical bodies of the deceased would be raised. If you were buried with your feet pointing east, the first thing you would see on that glorious resurrection morning would be the sun coming up over the horizon and God's Son beckoning.

**Death where is your victory?
Death where is you sting?**

There was one exception to the rule. That was that all ministers, parsons, vicars and rectors would be buried with their feet pointed west.

The minister always rests with... his feet westward, that at the resurrection day, when all rise, he may be facing those for whom he must give an account... (and so) he may say... “Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me.” - S. Baring-Gould, *The Vicar of Morwenstow*, pg. 2

Years ago people imagined that the general resurrection would occur on Easter morning and, to be prepared, they went to the graveyard the evening before Easter and decorated the graves of their beloved. In the Rev. Frances Kilvert’s diary for 1870 we find this description of the process:

More and more people kept coming into the churchyard as they finished their day’s work. The sun went down in glory behind the dingle, but still the work of love went on through the twilight and into the dusk until the moon rose full and splendid.... At 8 o’clock there was a gathering of the choir... to practice.... When (they) had gone and the lights were out and the church quiet again, as I walked down the churchyard alone, the decked graves had a strange effect in the moonlight and looked as if the people had laid down to sleep for the night... ready to rise on Easter morning. - William Plomer (ed.), *Kilvert’s Diary*, pp. 24, 25.

Many of our ancestors believed that on that great wakin’-up morning a trumpet will sound and the graves will be opened and the dead will be raised to new life. What do you believe about the resurrection? Which way will your feet point?

About 15 years ago a woman wrote to “Dear Abby.” She had taken an organ donor form with her to church for five Sundays in a row. All she needed was two people who would witness her signature but no one would do it. Her neighbors in the pew were worried that she might need all of her parts at the resurrection and they did not want to be responsible for her missing some crucial part. “Abby,” she wrote. “What should I do?”

As always, Abby was tactful:

Keep on trying. Willing one’s organs is a benevolent act and should you return to live again in the body of your previous life, the good Lord can be counted

on to replace or restore the missing parts. - *The Christian Century Magazine*, February 26, 1986, pg. 200.

Which reminds me of a story Stuart Udall liked to tell about the woman who heard her minister say that after the resurrection day there would be a judgment day and on *that* day there would be wailing and weeping and gnashing of teeth. "But," cried the woman, "I ain't got no teeth!" Whereupon the minister responded: "Madam. On judgment day teeth will be provided."

Will having a body be important?

Paul believed it would... but he was doing ideological battle with the Gnostics. The Gnostics were people who had little respect for the human body and placed all their emphasis upon the soul. Let the body go! What's eternal is the soul. For our brief span of years it might seem as if we are a separate entity but just as a drop of water arches from the wave and then falls back into the ocean to be absorbed, so too are we absorbed by God. Gnostics taught that the physical body was inferior to the soul. It temporarily trapped the soul and death, in fact, was a blessed release.

I certainly have met people like the Gnostics who refuse to imagine the body will be a part of their hereafter. They're content to find genetic similarities between themselves and their children and guess that that is what will live on.

But Paul was adamant. It was the physical body that God would bring to new life.

**"Do you not know that your body is God's Temple?
That God's Spirit dwells in your flesh...? (You must
not demean) harm or destroy God's temple.... Gods
temple is sacred. - I Corinthians 3: 16, 17.**

Paul believed that if a person was willing to denigrate his own body then that person would be more prone to accept abuse - physical abuse, substance abuse.

Paul believed that if a person is indifferent to the fate of her own body then it's a small step to becoming indifferent to another's hunger, suffering or death.

I believe it was fuzzy Gnostic thinking (plus a good deal of insanity) that led to the Jonestown massacre a generation ago, nonsense about the soul that lay behind the group suicide of the young men in Rancho Santa Fe 8 years ago, false idea of the hereafter that convince young Muslim men and women to blow up their bodies and those of others so as to gain paradise.

Said in another way: It matters what we believe about the resurrection. "Do you know that your body is God's temple?" That matters a lot.

But Paul went on to say that our resurrected body will not be the same body in which we

now dwell.

The perishable nature will put on the imperishable. We shall be changed. - *I Corinthians 15:33.*

That's good news for those of us who have hearing aids. We are not condemned to an eternity of "Say whats?" Good news for those who are tired of struggling with an infirmity. The prophet Isaiah said: The blind shall see, the deaf shall hear, the lame shall leap for joy."

Paul would be okay with that...

The perishable nature will put on the imperishable. We shall be changed.

That's Paul. And now it's time to tell you what I think...

I think that belief is nothing if it is limited to what my mind will accept.

I think that fuzzy thinking about the resurrection- sloppy eschatology has been the cause of a lot of grief.

I believe in the resurrection of the body, not because it's my body but because it's God's temple.... and when God chooses to love something God does not quit.

I believe that when this body has lived all it can; when it is, in the poet's words, "too broke to mend," God will fashion for me another body, one more appropriate for the life that lies ahead.

I believe that by affirming a bodily resurrection I am also affirming my own worth - right now- and your worth - right now and placing our futures in the hands of God.

I believe in the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Thanks be to God!

So... you've heard from Paul and Art Domingue. It's your turn. What do you believe? Which way will your feet point?