
"I Am Spiritual, But I Am Not Religious"

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler
Easter Sunday – Year A

"I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious!"

Has anybody heard that phrase lately? I sure have heard it, all over the place. Usually, I hear it at parties, just a few seconds after my conversation partner learns I am an Episcopal priest.

"Oh," they say, "you work in a church? Well, I used to go to church. Right now, I consider myself spiritual, but not religious. You know what I mean."

Yes, I know what the phrase means. And most of you here this morning know what it means, too. You've probably said it. It means there is a difference between just going through the motions of institutional religion and really having a sense of spirit.

This morning, we all know, is about rejoicing in that sense of spirit. To celebrate Easter, to celebrate the Resurrection, means that we are renewed in our soul. "Alleluia! Christ is risen!" we shout out, behaving just like we might at a high school sports game.

Ezekiel, the prophet, saw God assemble a working human person from dry and dead bones, Ezekiel was fascinated. He saw the foot bone connected to the leg bone, the leg bone connected to the knee bone, the knee bone connected to the thigh bone, until gradually a walking body was right before him.

Our scientific communities are close to doing that now. We can reconstruct human bodies out of interchangeable parts! My father had his hip replaced a month ago. Physicians can replace knees, and hips, and even hearts. Our bodies can be considered beautiful mechanical machines.

We treat our teams and churches and communities in the same way. If our team needs a left-handed relief pitcher, we go out and find the right part. If our community group needs a lawyer, we go out and find the right part. If our church needs someone with financial skills or who can play the organ beautifully, we go out and find the right part.

We connect those parts together, and –*voilà!* -- we have a body.

But that body is not complete, is it? When Ezekiel saw the body assembled before him, he realized that the body did not yet have spirit! It needed that breath of life, that spark of mystery which makes every person unique, and that same spark of mystery which connects every person to God. A true community is not just an impersonal machine. A true community needs the *distinctive* spark of every *unique* member.

That spark is what we call spirit. When people say, "I am spiritual," I know that is what they mean. It means they are in touch with something deep inside them which makes them unique, and which also connects them to God. It is a beautiful spark.

Easter is about finding that spark again. Easter is about finding that breath again. Remember that the word for breath in

both the biblical languages –Hebrew and Greek—the word for breath-- is the same word as “spirit.”

God breathed into those bones before Ezekiel, and only then were they truly resurrected. God breathed into creation itself when the world was made. God breathed into the first humans, Adam and Eve, in order to transform their dust and mud into bodies with soul!

Today, Easter, we celebrate soul and spark, breath and spirit. Let this spirit of fire and fresh water fill your hearts again. God wants to breathe this spirit of fresh air into your soul again. That spirit of life seeped into the soul of Jesus, long ago, and his spiritual body was resurrected. Because he lives again, we can live again, too.

That is spirit. If I had an Easter bumper sticker for my car, it would be like those milk advertisements that say, “Got milk?” Mine would say “Got spirit?”

So, I know what people mean when they say, “I’m spiritual, but not religious.” It means they have not been able to get that spirit and spark in traditional religious communities, traditional religious communities like churches. Churches, they say, are full of hypocrites and politics. Some folks want one thing; another group wants another thing. We might be embarrassed by what the pastor says one day (as Senator Obama recently discovered).

These people say, “Churches are too complicated for simple faith. There are too many moving parts, too many things to get in the way of my direct experience of God. Churches are always trying to raise money for new bathrooms, new projects, new staff, new ideas.”

“I’m spiritual,” they say, “but I don’t want to be religious. I don’t want to be connected to all that other stuff. I don’t want to worry about whether the ankle bone is connected to the knee bone and then connected to the thigh bone. I don’t want to worry about taking care of blood vessels and muscles. I don’t want to worry about exercising tendons and ligaments. I just want to be spiritual. I don’t want a religious body.”

That’s what they are saying. But you are wrong when you say that. For, it is impossible to be spiritual without some sort of religious body. This is the other great truth of today, Easter Sunday, the Feast of the Resurrection. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he had a body. He was not simply a dis-embodied ghost, a free-floating spirit bounding around from dream to dream.

The truth of the Resurrection is that God resurrects bodies! God needs that ankle bone to be connected to the knee bone and connected to the thigh bone. God needs those tendons and ligaments.

In fact, the word “religion” comes from the same root word as does our word “ligament.” Ligaments tie muscle and bone together in our bodies. “Religion,” too --“re-ligio”-- means “to tie something back together.” Good religion ties together. Good religion holds together our spirit and our body. Good religion is good relationship!

So, there is no such thing as healthy spirituality without religion, without *relationship*. The moment we actually try to do something with our spirituality, the moment we try to connect our spirituality with other people, or with some project, or with the world, --voila!—there is religion. Good spirituality is always religious.

So, if I had another Easter bumper sticker for my car, it would say, “Got religion?”

Today, Easter Sunday, is not only a day to get spirit. The Feast of the Resurrection is also a day to get religion. There is no resurrection without a body. Yes, a real live body, full of tissues and organs and germs and protein and all that stuff that needs caring for. There is no resurrection without a body. And, in the same way, there is no spirituality without religion. Yes, a real live religion, full of tissues and organs and germs and protein and all that stuff that needs caring for.

Today, we have both. I love saying, “I am spiritual, *AND* I am religious.” The first disciples wanted to hold on to Jesus when he was resurrected, because he was really flesh and blood. I want to hold on to this resurrected Jesus, too.

Religion is spirituality in the flesh. Religion is this beautiful Easter service, full of the spirited flesh and blood of real people. Religion is teaching the newly baptized the ancient faith. Religion is touching the flesh of your partner in prayer. Religion is feeding the flesh of the hungry. Religion is speaking for justice, arranging flowers, singing music, lighting fires. Religion is what causes us to be glad this Easter morning. Yes, religion and Resurrection are the same thing. Religion –Resurrection!—

is spirituality in the flesh.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia!

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