Burnham Abbey, in Taplow, Buckinghamshire, is home to the Sisters of the Society of the Precious Blood, an Anglican Augustinian community. This image is a Processional Cross, which was made for the Sisters' House of Prayer (now closed), St Pega's Hermitage, near Peterborough, when the Chapel was re-furbished. Unusually, the Corpus is not a figure mounted on the Cross but is carved into it. The Cross is currently used during Eastertide in place of the more traditional Cross in the Chapel. The reason for this is that it seems to hold within it a powerful witness to both the Crucifixion and the Resurrection.

Salvation is only possible through Christ’s bodily resurrection, “who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification”.[[1]](#footnote-1) The physical resurrection is an integral part of the New Testament narrative, as much as his death.[[2]](#footnote-2) Paul makes a case that if Jesus had not resurrected from the dead, there would be no justification of sins, faith of believers would have no foundation and there would be no hope for those who depart this world.[[3]](#footnote-3) Christ’s resurrected body was the same physical body in which he was crucified, and at the moment it was resurrected became an immortal, glorified body, physical, but also imperishable.

Denials of the physical nature of the resurrection body focus on different arguments, some claiming Jesus ‘rose’ in spirit but not in body, or that although he rose bodily, it was not a tangible, material one, but essentially invisible and immaterial. Furthermore, the appearances of Jesus post death were the result of miracles, whereby the invisible and immaterial resurrected body was made visible and material.

The nature of what took place at the moment of the resurrection explains the devotion towards the Shroud of Turin, a rectangular piece of cloth about 14 feet long and 3 and half feet wide, purported to be the shroud that wrapped Jesus’ body in the tomb. At first sight, there is the image of a man imprinted on the cloth, naked and with his hands covering the groin, with what appears to be bloodstains also visible. Although the image is unmistakable, its authenticity has been highly contested. The first historical mention was in the 14th century, and it became a subject of immediate controversy, with a French bishop writing to the pope denouncing it as a forgery. Regardless of this, devotion to the Shroud did not diminish and travelled from France through different places, until arriving in Turin, Italy, 400 years ago, where it remains. Although there is significant evidence that the Shroud originated in the Middle Ages, and was created by human hands, there is no explanation how the image was made, which leaves it open to different theories and speculations. Regardless of the different explanations in favour or against the authenticity of the shroud, for argument’s sake, if the image was created at the time a dead body disappeared, it can be argued it would require a suspension of the laws of physics, or at the very best a challenging of existing laws. If there was an event that generated an outpouring of light and heat, as well as neutrons, it could have impacted on the results of carbon dating. The counter argument is that there is no evidence that a human body could spontaneously vanish in a flurry of neutrons. But equally, if we do follow the argument that a supernatural explanation is to be proposed, then it can be argued that an attempt to marry the rigour of science with the mystery of religion will not be possible. It is a juxtaposition of those who hunger for evidence, or those who believe religion needs no experiments to prove its worth.

Regardless of arguments in favour or against the Shroud of Turin, it does not detract from the fact that without a physical resurrection there is no material continuity between the preresurrection and postressurection body, or they would become two different bodies. There needs to be a physical continuity. Only through the physical resurrection Jesus “abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel”.[[4]](#footnote-4)

It could be argued that a comparison between Burnham Abbey processional cross and the Shroud of Turin is somehow far-fetched. However, instead of the traditional depiction of Jesus hanging on the cross, the processional cross shows a hollowed, and hallowed, imprint of him. Although far less controversial than the Shroud of Turin, and its contested authenticity, the processional cross bears the same numinous quality that provides an impossible insight into the moment of the resurrection, the empty tomb, the defeat of death. On the processional cross it was engraved on a piece of wood, rather than on a cloth. The more one looks at the processional cross, the more one struggles to fully apprehend it, and ultimately, comprehend it. It challenges visual perceptions and plays with the mind. Ultimately, it appeals to faith, as no human explanation will suffice. Perhaps that is what we are invited to do when looking at the processional cross, to surrender to the unexplainable and glimpse into something which our eyes cannot fully see. The cross is empty, just as the tomb is empty, and the hollowed imprint bears witness to it. Death has been conquered. Humanity is saved and redeemed.

1. Romans 4:25 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. 1 Corinthians 15:1-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Corinthians 15:14-19 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. 2 Timothy 1:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)