

Raised a Spirit, or Raised Bodily?

The Watchtower's Spirit Resurrection, and What the Scriptures Say

by Richard Whiting

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved. May be reproduced in whole, with attribution. See full notice at the end of this document.

Contents

- I. What the Watchtower Teaches
- II. The Lord's Own Words
- III. The Flesh That Did Not See Corruption
- IV. What "a Spiritual Body" Means
- V. A Life-Giving Spirit: Their Best Text
- VI. Transformation, Not Exchange
- VII. The Materialized-Body Theory, and What It Costs
- VIII. The Ransom Argument
- IX. Equal to Angels
- X. A Man in Heaven
- XI. What the Church Teaches, and Why It Matters
- Endnotes

I. What the Watchtower Teaches

Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus rose from the dead. That should be said first, and plainly, because the argument of this essay is with what they believe the resurrection was, not with whether they believe it happened. The Watchtower has never joined the skeptics who call the resurrection a legend. It insists on the event and stakes everything on it, and in that it is closer to the historic faith than much of the liberal Protestantism of the last two centuries.

What the Watchtower denies is that Jesus was raised in His body. The official teaching, stated on jw.org in answer to the question "After Jesus' Resurrection, Was His Body Flesh or Spirit?", is that He was raised a spirit creature, as He had been before He came to earth.

The Bible, they write, says that Jesus “was put to death in the flesh but made alive [resurrected] in the spirit”—the bracketed word is theirs—and the body that walked out of no tomb at all was not the body that was buried. The appearances over the forty days are explained the same way the appearances of angels in the Old Testament are explained: “After his resurrection, Jesus also assumed human form temporarily, just as angels had previously done.” The bodies in which He appeared were materialized for the occasion and dismissed afterward, and “the fleshly bodies that he materialized were not identical from one appearance to the next,” which is why even His friends did not always recognize Him.

Three texts carry most of the weight of this teaching, all from the New World Translation. First Peter 3:18: Christ was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.” First Corinthians 15:45: “The first man Adam became a living person. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” And 1 Corinthians 15:50: “flesh and blood cannot inherit God’s Kingdom.” Behind the texts stands a doctrinal necessity. On Watchtower teaching the ransom demanded that Jesus’ perfect human life be surrendered forever; to take the body back would be to take back the payment. And the destiny of the anointed 144,000 is spirit life in heaven, patterned on the spirit resurrection of their Lord. The pieces hold one another up, which is why the question of this essay is worth a whole essay.

It matters for a further reason. What a Christian believes about Christ’s resurrection is what he believes, in advance, about his own. If the Lord’s body was left behind—dissolved, discarded, or preserved somewhere as a relic of the ransom—then the resurrection hope is a hope of escape from the body. If His body was raised and glorified, then the hope is the redemption of the whole man. Those are two different faiths, and only one of them is what the apostles preached.

II. The Lord’s Own Words

The place to begin is the one passage in which the risen Christ addresses the very interpretation the Watchtower proposes, because the disciples proposed it first. On the evening of the first Easter, Luke reports, the disciples “supposed that they saw a spirit.”

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.

Luke 24:39, RSV

He then asked for something to eat, “and he took it and ate before them” (Luke 24:42–43). The exchange is remarkable because the mistake the disciples made that evening is, almost word for word, the Watchtower’s doctrine: they thought they were seeing a spirit. Jesus corrects them. He offers His hands and feet as evidence, and the evidence is supposed to show not merely that something was visible but that the one they saw was

not a spirit—"it is I myself." A week later He repeats the demonstration for Thomas: "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (John 20:27). The wounds are the credential. The body being shown is being identified as the body that was crucified.

Jesus had also said in advance what would rise. When the Jews demanded a sign, He answered, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up," and John adds the interpretation: "he spoke of the temple of his body" (John 2:19–21). The prophecy is specific. The thing destroyed is the thing to be raised. If the body that died was disposed of and never raised, the sign Jesus gave to Israel did not come to pass, and it is difficult to see why John would record—after the resurrection, and as a proof of it—a prophecy his own doctrine would have to call false.

III. The Flesh That Did Not See Corruption

The first apostolic sermon makes the same point from the Psalms. At Pentecost, Peter quotes David—"thou wilt not let thy Holy One see corruption" (Psalm 16:10)—and argues that David cannot have been speaking of himself, since David "both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day." He was speaking, Peter says, of Christ: David "foresaw and spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to Hades, nor did his flesh see corruption" (Acts 2:29–31).

The argument only works one way. What distinguishes Jesus from David, in Peter's sermon, is what happened to His flesh: David's saw corruption and remained in its tomb, and Christ's did not. On the Watchtower's account the contrast collapses. A body dissolved by God, or removed by God, has not been preserved from corruption; it has undergone it, or been spared it only in the sense that it was destroyed some other way. And a resurrection in which the flesh plays no part could have been preached over an occupied tomb. Peter's whole argument assumes what it asserts, that the resurrection happened to the body that was buried.

The empty tomb tells the same story. On the apostolic teaching it is evidence: the body is not there because the body was raised. On the Watchtower teaching it is scenery. If Jehovah removed the body so that belief in the resurrection would be possible, then the tomb was emptied to produce a conviction that its own emptiness does nothing to support, since what it appeared to attest—the raising of the buried body—is precisely what did not occur. It is hard to state that account in a way that does not have God arranging misleading evidence, and the God of Scripture does not deal in staged effects.

IV. What “a Spiritual Body” Means

The Watchtower’s strongest ground is Paul, and any honest treatment must meet Paul at full strength. In 1 Corinthians 15 he answers the question “With what kind of body do they come?” with a series of contrasts: the body is sown perishable and raised imperishable, sown in dishonor and raised in glory, sown in weakness and raised in power, “sown a physical body... raised a spiritual body” (1 Corinthians 15:42–44). If the resurrection body is spiritual, is the Watchtower not simply reading the text?

Everything turns on what “spiritual” modifies, and Paul’s own usage answers it. Two chapters earlier he had contrasted the “unspiritual” man with the “spiritual” man (1 Corinthians 2:14–15), and no reader supposes the spiritual man is made of spirit. The words describe orientation, not composition: the natural (*psychikon*) body is the body animated by ordinary human life, and the spiritual (*pneumatikon*) body is the same body animated and governed by the Spirit of God. William Lane Craig, surveying the philology, concludes that the contrast “is not between physical body / non-physical body, but between naturally oriented body / spiritually oriented body,” and notes that virtually every modern commentator agrees: Paul is not describing a body made out of spirit, any more than the “natural body” is a body made out of soul. Augustine had drawn the same distinction fourteen centuries earlier: “when the flesh serves the spirit, it will justly be called spiritual”—spiritual, he is careful to add, not because flesh turns into spirit, but because of what rules it.

The phrase “flesh and blood cannot inherit God’s Kingdom” (1 Corinthians 15:50) is read by the Watchtower as an anatomy lesson: nothing made of flesh can enter heaven. But “flesh and blood” is a Semitic idiom for frail, mortal human nature—Paul uses it elsewhere to mean simply “any human being” (Galatians 1:16)—and the second half of the verse restates the first: “nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.” What is excluded from the Kingdom is not the body but mortality. Paul’s remedy follows at once, and it is not the shedding of the body but its change: “this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (15:53). A man who puts on a coat has not been replaced by the coat.

V. A Life-Giving Spirit: Their Best Text

The best Watchtower text is 1 Corinthians 15:45: “The first man Adam became a living person. The last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” Read alone, the sentence sounds like the whole doctrine: Jesus became a spirit. It deserves a careful answer rather than a quick one.

Paul is quoting Genesis 2:7, where Adam became a living soul (*psyche*). If “became a life-giving spirit” means Christ was turned into spirit as His substance, then by the same

reading “became a living soul” means Adam was turned into soul as his substance, and Adam had no body—which is absurd, and defeats the parallel Paul is building. In both halves of the verse the point is what each Adam became for others: the first Adam became the fountainhead of natural life, transmitting to his race the psyche-life he had; the last Adam became the fountainhead of resurrection life, transmitting the Spirit-life He has. The verse is about what Christ gives, not what He is made of. And it sits inside an argument whose every other sentence concerns bodies—sown, raised, changed—so that a reading which removes the body from verse 45 removes verse 45 from its chapter.

The same holds for 1 Peter 3:18, “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.” The datives describe two spheres, not two substances: dead as regards the fleshly mode of existence, alive as regards the Spirit. Paul says the same of every Christian: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you” (Romans 8:11). What the Spirit gives life to is precisely the mortal body. If “made alive in the spirit” meant “became a spirit,” Romans 8:11 would promise the believer’s body a resurrection its Lord’s body never had, and the New Testament’s constant logic—that His resurrection is the pattern of ours—would break at its first link.

VI. Transformation, Not Exchange

Set side by side, the two accounts differ most clearly in one word. The Watchtower teaches an exchange: the human body is laid down forever, and a spirit creature resumes existence. Scripture teaches a transformation: the thing sown is the thing raised, changed beyond present imagining but continuous with itself, as the wheat is continuous with the seed in Paul’s own analogy (1 Corinthians 15:36–38). The seed is not discarded while a different plant is handed over; the seed dies as seed and is raised as wheat. “We shall all be changed” (15:51)—the verb has a subject, and the subject is us, in our bodies, not replacements for us.

Philippians 3:21 says it of Christ directly: we await a Savior “who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body.” Two things are worth noticing. The destiny of our body is change, not disposal. And decades after the Ascension, Christ has a body, called glorious, to which ours will be conformed. Paul does not write that He once had one, or that He materializes one when needed. The risen and ascended Lord is embodied, and our hope is to be embodied as He is.

VII. The Materialized-Body Theory, and What It Costs

The materialized-body theory is the load-bearing wall of the Watchtower account, since without it the appearances refute the doctrine outright. It holds that Jesus, now a spirit,

formed temporary human bodies as the angels of the Old Testament did—different ones on different occasions, which is offered as the explanation of why Mary Magdalene took Him for the gardener and the Emmaus disciples walked miles with a stranger.

Consider what the theory costs. The body shown to Thomas bore the wounds of the nails and the spear, and the demonstration was offered as proof of identity: the one before him is the one who was crucified. On the Watchtower reading, that body was a construct of the moment, and its wounds were manufactured marks in flesh that was never crucified, worn to persuade Thomas of a continuity that did not exist. The words “see my hands and my feet, that it is I myself” become, on this account, a stage direction. And “a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have” becomes the strangest sentence in Scripture: a spirit assuring His friends, by means of a temporary body, that He is not a spirit. The theory does not explain the evidence Jesus offered; it converts that evidence into a performance, and the God who (on the Watchtower’s own teaching elsewhere) cannot lie is made to persuade by exhibition what He knows to be false.

The remaining proof-text turns on the same mistake. “Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer” (2 Cor. 5:16) is read as though according to the flesh described what Christ is now made of. But the phrase modifies the knowing, not the Christ—and Paul applies it in the same sentence to everyone: “we regard no one according to the flesh.” If the verse turned Christ into a spirit, it would turn all Corinth into spirits with him. To know someone according to the flesh is to appraise him by worldly standards, as Paul once appraised a crucified pretender and, after Damascus, never did again.

The recognition failures have a simpler explanation, and Luke states it: “their eyes were kept from recognizing him” (Luke 24:16), and at the breaking of the bread “their eyes were opened” (24:31). The withholding was in the seeing, not in a rotation of bodies. Mary recognized Him the moment He spoke her name (John 20:16). As for locked doors and sudden appearances, they show that the risen body is not subject to the limits of the present one—which is what glorification means, and what Paul’s contrasts in 1 Corinthians 15 promise. A transformed body having new properties is an argument against the Watchtower’s position only if one first assumes that any real body must behave exactly like an unglorified one, which is the very assumption Paul spends a chapter denying.

VIII. The Ransom Argument

The deepest Watchtower argument is theological. Jesus gave His flesh “in behalf of the life of the world”; the ransom was His perfect human life; if He took the body back, the

payment was refunded and the ransom undone. The jw.org article puts it exactly that way: had he taken back his fleshly body, he would have canceled the ransom sacrifice.

The argument assumes that a sacrifice is annulled unless its victim stays dead. Scripture's own treatment of sacrifice runs the other way. In the Levitical figure the offering is not left on the altar; it is accepted, and acceptance is shown by what God does with it. The Epistle to the Hebrews, which the Watchtower cites for the finality of the offering ("once for all," Hebrews 9:12), presents the risen and exalted Christ as high priest who "entered once for all into the Holy Place" and "always lives to make intercession" (Hebrews 7:25)—a living priest, presenting a completed sacrifice. Paul joins the two without embarrassment: Jesus "was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Romans 4:25). The resurrection is not the taking back of the offering. It is the Father's acceptance of it, the public vindication of the Lamb, who stands in Revelation "as though it had been slain" (Revelation 5:6)—slain, standing, and bearing the marks. That is also why the wounds remain in the glorified body: the sacrifice is not undone by the resurrection but displayed in it.

There is, besides, something the ransom argument quietly concedes. If taking the body back would cancel the sacrifice, then what was offered was the body. A doctrine that then has God dispose of the offering—neither raised, nor kept, nor honored, but simply gone—has the sacrifice vanish rather than be accepted. The Christian claim is stronger and stranger: the offering was accepted, and the acceptance has a name, Easter.

IX. Equal to Angels

The Witnesses also point to the Lord's answer to the Sadducees: those in the resurrection "neither marry nor are given in marriage," for they are "equal to angels" (Luke 20:35–36). If the raised are like angels, and angels are spirits, does the resurrection not make spirits of us?

The comparison has a stated scope. Jesus names the respect in which the raised are like the angels: they do not marry, "for they cannot die any more." Marriage belongs to the mortal order, where generations must replace the dying; immortality retires it. Nothing in the passage extends the likeness from marriage and deathlessness to incorporeality—and the extension would prove far too much, since the same Jesus who spoke it stood in a body three days later saying that a spirit has not flesh and bones. It is also worth remembering to whom He was speaking. The Sadducees denied the resurrection precisely because they thought it meant resumed mortal life, wives and all. Jesus corrects them not by dissolving the body but by transfiguring it: the raised are embodied, and their bodies belong to a deathless order in which the arrangements of mortality have no place.

X. A Man in Heaven

What, then, of Christ now? The New Testament's answer is consistent and, on Watchtower premises, startling. Paul told the Athenians that God "will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead" (Acts 17:31). To Timothy he wrote, in the present tense and long after the Ascension, "there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). To the Colossians: "in him the whole fulness of deity dwells bodily" (Colossians 2:9)—dwells, not dwelt. The mediator is a man; the judge is a man; the fullness dwells bodily. The Incarnation was not an episode from which the Son has since withdrawn. It is a permanent fact about God's dealings with us: one of us, body and soul, is at the right hand of the Father, and He has not laid our nature down.

XI. What the Church Teaches, and Why It Matters

The Catholic Church has defined this matter with unusual precision, and it is worth seeing how firmly. Ludwig Ott's standard manual grades the propositions. That "on the third day after His Death Christ rose gloriously from the dead" is *de fide*, of the faith, denied by no Catholic. That the dead will rise "with the same bodies as they had on earth" is likewise *de fide*; the Fourth Lateran Council declared in 1215 that all "will arise with their bodies which they have now." That the bodies of the just will be "re-modelled and transfigured to the pattern of the risen Christ" is the certain teaching of theologians, resting on Philippians 3:21. And Ott notes what the Gospels record: "The Risen Christ retained the wounds in His transfigured body as tokens of His triumph over death." The Catechism gathers it up: the risen body is the very body that was tortured and crucified, now possessing the new properties of a glorious body, no longer confined by space and time; Christ's resurrection "was not a return to earthly life," and in His risen body He passes to another life, the life of the age to come (CCC 645–646).

Notice that the Church affirms everything true in the Watchtower's instinct. The risen Christ is not a resuscitated corpse resuming mortal life; the resurrection body is not simply the old body patched; "spiritual body" is a real and radical newness. Lazarus came back to mortal life and died again; Christ rose beyond death's reach. The dispute is not between a crude physicalism and a refined spiritualism. It is between transformation and disposal—between a God who redeems the body and a God who discards it.

And that is finally why the question matters to someone deciding what to believe. The Christian hope has never been the soul's escape or a spirit's survival; it is "the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting," professed in the Creed since the beginning. The Watchtower offers the anointed a heaven without flesh and everyone else an earth without

heaven. The Gospel offers something better than both: the whole man, body and soul, raised and glorified after the pattern of the risen Lord, who kept His wounds and ate broiled fish and said, to men who supposed they saw a spirit, it is I myself. He did not think the difference a small one. Neither should we.

Endnotes

1. “After Jesus’ Resurrection, Was His Body Flesh or Spirit?”, jw.org, Bible Questions Answered. The article answers with 1 Peter 3:18 in the New World Translation, inserting the bracketed gloss: “was put to death in the flesh but made alive [resurrected] in the spirit.” The bracket is the Watchtower’s own.
2. Ibid.: “After his resurrection, Jesus also assumed human form temporarily, just as angels had previously done”; “The fleshly bodies that he materialized were not identical from one appearance to the next.”
3. New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (2013 revision): 1 Peter 3:18; 1 Corinthians 15:44–45, 50. Quotations from the Watchtower’s translation are given exactly, per the practice of this site.
4. William Lane Craig, “The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus,” in *Gospel Perspectives I*, ed. R. T. France and D. Wenham (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 47–74, drawing on Robert Gundry, *Sōma in Biblical Theology* (Cambridge, 1976), whose survey concludes that *sōma* in the New Testament always concerns the physical body, never a “person” abstracted from it. Craig’s essay is available at reasonablefaith.org.
5. Augustine, *City of God* XIII, 20: “For as, when the spirit serves the flesh, it is fitly called carnal, so, when the flesh serves the spirit, it will justly be called spiritual”—not, he adds, because flesh is converted into spirit. Translation of Marcus Dods, at newadvent.org.
6. “After Jesus’ Resurrection, Was His Body Flesh or Spirit?”, jw.org, citing Hebrews 9:11–12 and John 6:51 for the argument that reclaiming the body would negate the ransom sacrifice.
7. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (1955; TAN reprint, 1974), Book Three §13 (“On the third day after His Death Christ rose gloriously from the dead. (De fide.)”; “The Risen Christ retained the wounds in His transfigured body as tokens of His triumph over death”) and Book Five §7 on the general resurrection (“The dead will rise again with the same bodies as they had on earth. (De fide.)”, quoting Fourth Lateran, D 429). The transfiguration of the bodies of the just to the pattern of the risen Christ is graded *Sent. certa*.

8. Catechism of the Catholic Church 638–658, esp. 645–646 on the properties of Christ’s risen humanity; cf. 988–1004 on the resurrection of the body.

For Further Reading

The Bodily Resurrection of Jesus, by William Lane Craig—the philological case that “spiritual body” means Spirit-directed, not made of spirit.

The Resurrection of the Son of God, by N. T. Wright—the standard scholarly treatment of what “resurrection” meant to those who first proclaimed it.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, §§638–658, “On the third day he rose from the dead”. Free online at <https://usccb.cld.bz/Catechism-of-the-Catholic-Church2/186/>.

Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, by Ludwig Ott—the defined propositions on Christ’s resurrection and ours, with their theological notes.

Answering Jehovah’s Witnesses, by Jason Evert—the Watchtower’s arguments taken up one by one, this one among them.

City of God, by Augustine—chapter 20 on why the risen flesh is called spiritual. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/120113.htm>.

See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.

Luke 24:39

* * *

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

Copyright and Distribution

© 2026 Richard Whiting. All rights reserved.

This essay may be reproduced and distributed freely, in printed or electronic form, provided that it is reproduced in whole and without alteration, and that the author’s name

is retained. Excerpts may be quoted in reviews, scholarly works, or other writings consistent with fair use, with attribution.

A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the bodily resurrection of Christ, in answer to the Watchtower's teaching of a spirit resurrection*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.