Bodies Matter

JOHN 20:19-31 (NRSVUE) ***When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors were locked where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 20After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. 21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." 22When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. 23If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." 24But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. 25So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." 26A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." 27Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." 28Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" 29Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." 30Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book. 31But these are written so that you may continue to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.***

The Word of God for the People of God!

He was Kyle's brother. Not our Kyle. She was a beautiful, vibrant young woman—an actress. I first saw her as a college student in a production of "Godspell." Some years later, I moved to serve another church, and she and her husband were members there. Her husband also was an actor. I saw them in an outdoor community theater production of "Oklahoma." She was Ado Annie, and he was Curly.

Her brother (I don't recall his name) shared her charisma. He was a handsome young man. Witty. Curly blond hair. I saw pictures of him before AIDS had ravaged his body. He was average sized, but athletically built—six pack abs, and in most photos he wore no shirt.

By the time I met him, his body was wasting away, but not his bright personality. I think he was wearing makeup to hide the lesions on his face, and I thought, "He still cares how he looks."

His minister didn't visit him. He came once; stood at the door and read a prayer and left. I continued to visit him in the hospital a couple of times a week. Of course, that was 40 years ago, and things have improved somewhat. Back then, we just watched his body waste away. Occasionally I'd help lift him so the bed linens could be changed. It got easier every time I lifted him. Once he cried and said he looked like an inmate in a concentration camp.

When he was scarcely more than flesh and bones, his body gave out and he breathed his last breath.

I went to his funeral. They recited the Apostles' Creed… "I believe in the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting."

Will Willimon wrote, "I'm sorry for those who think that what we're about here is something 'spiritual.' Christianity is carnal, incarnate, bodily formed. 'The Word became flesh and dwelt among us' (John 1:14).

"Some faiths keep all their thoughts spiritual, ethereal. Christianity is inescapably, material. We believe in the body. God gave us our bodies, loves us in our bodies, shall love us forever in the body."[1] The Church is the Body of Christ. The creed affirms, "We believe in the resurrection of the body, the life everlasting." And that make a world of difference.

In the Scripture Nolan read, Jesus came into their presence and said, "Peace be with you." Peace? They desperately needed it! No more discouraged people could be found than that bewildered, broken, frightened little group of disciples.

In the first place, they had good reason to be afraid; some of those who'd had Jesus crucified still stalked the streets, redneck holdouts from Friday's mob violence. And so, the disciples huddled together, peeking through the curtain, cringing at the sound of every step on the stair. Shhhh! Blow out the lamp! Lock the door!

And then Jesus appeared in the room and said, "Peace be with you!" He spoke.

Good Friday changed so many things. It brought fear and danger; shattered hopes and dreams—left them disillusioned. They'd dreamed, not only of a new political order, but even of positions of status and authority for themselves in that new order. Good Friday left them drowning in disillusionment.

But now it's Easter, and he stands in their midst and says, "Peace be with you." How is it they're caught so completely off guard? He's already appeared to Mary Magdalene; and she's told them he was alive. But it was just so incredible—and she was just a woman.

But John also saw the empty tomb and believed. Surely, he told them? We don't know. We're told only that Jesus was there: so evident; so obvious; so undeniable. And they believed; and rejoiced. And somehow his body was a part of what powered their belief. "See my hands; see my side."

The Gospels offer different ideas about Jesus' body after the resurrection. For John, when Jesus came from the tomb it wasn't as some disembodied soul, some phantom. That's Hollywood, not John. He had a body, a recognizable, touchable body; his feet actually touched the ground.

But John is vague about the nature of that body. When Jesus spoke to Mary Magdelene at the tomb, he said, "Don't touch me, because I have not yet ascended to the Father." In today's text, he "appeared"—behind closed doors—walked through walls… Some of those who were in the room thought he was a ghost.

[1] *Pulpit Resource,* Vol. 31, No. 2, Year B, April, May, Junem, 2003 (Inver Groves, MN: Logos Production, Inc.) Page 22.

A week later when Thomas showed up, Jesus said, "Touch my side where the spear was thrust." There was enough body to hear, to see, and to touch—enough for the disciples to believe and rejoice.

One of the great mysteries of Christianity is that, in Jesus, deity and humanity are united. Most Christians have little problem with his divinity; it's his humanity that gets confusing for some. Still, it's hard to image somebody without a body. The word itself: some body.

In the 21st chapter, a story told only in John's gospel, when the disciples come in off the water after a night of fishing, Jesus is waiting for them with a charcoal fire and breakfast, and he eats with them.

I think the least we can take away from John's Easter and post-Easter Jesus is that the body is important. The word became flesh. Ask Mary what she wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. There was a body; and when he called disciples to follow him, his feet actually touched the ground—left footprints. There was a body that walked and talked and washed disciples' feet and bled on the cross.

And John says a body appeared to the disciples on that first Easter.

Resurrection theology aside… was it historic fact, literal, concrete, tangible? Was it a metaphoric way of explaining the totally new way the disciples understood and embraced the life and teachings of Jesus? —once perceived as a political movement to overthrow Rome and reestablish the kingdom of David; now understood as the unification of God with humanity in a totally new way of perceiving reality.

Jesus came preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of God is near!" Repent: one of the most misunderstood words in the Bible, commonly understood as being sorry for your sinning; groveling before God. The word is "metanoia," It literally means "beyond the mind; beyond knowing; understanding in a completely different way; seeing in a way you've never seen before." Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

Paul wrote to the church in Rome and said, ***"Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind…"*** **(ROMANS 12:2)** That's what resurrection means.

It's just easier if Jesus doesn't really have a body—if he's just some phantom that looks like a man—totally spirit. Then it's easy to rationalize: "But, he's the son of God, and I'm just human. But that's Gnosticism; not Christianity.

See, here's the thing: if he's human, if there's a body, there are those footprints we're called to follow. We may not like where they lead: Love the Lord with your whole being and your neighbor as if he or she were you; that's one thing. Love your enemies; turn the other cheek; don't seek revenge; feed the hungry; welcome strangers and immigrants. That's different. It's called "discipleship."

Invitation to the Table

Last week, Nolan greeted us with, "Welcome, Easter people!" Indeed, we are Easter people—a people of the resurrection.

Resurrection doesn't mean much if it was simply a one-and-done historical event that happened 2,000 years ago. *That* resurrection was a window through which we see, not just what happened in the past, and not what we anticipate in the future—not even in eternity. Through the window of resurrection, we see the nature of God.

In our baptismal liturgy, as I lower a person into the water, I say, "Buried with Christ in baptism, we are raised to walk in newness of life."

At this table we remember a broken body and spilled blood; but, we've read the last chapter; therefore, we eat and drink in celebration of the newness of life that is ours when we follow the One God raised.

Pastoral Prayer

Risen and eternal Christ, like the disciples, we gather the week after Easter, wondering whether it's true, marveling at the possibility, and daring to hope.

Like the disciples, we are sometimes afraid, sometimes full of doubt.

But in your extravagant grace and limitless love, you appear to us in our fear and love us in our doubts and grant us your peace. Thank you for loving us as we are.

Teach us not to hide from our doubt, but to recognize it as a door to mystery and to deeper faith.

This morning, we pray for the many who have no faith at all, who live without hope. Grant us the insight and courage to live as witnesses to your resurrection.

We pray for ourselves in those moments when we find it difficult to believe. Remind us that even Christ's own disciples struggled to believe all they had seen and heard. Yet you appeared to them, and they rejoiced. Grant us that same awareness of your presence and empower us to live and serve through our fears and doubts.

And grant to all of us, living Christ, renewed faith, great courage, and your boundless peace. Amen.[2]

[2] Adapted from https://re:Worship: Pastoral Prayer: Easter 2 (re-worship.blogspot.com)