

Third Sunday of Easter (B)

Acts 3:12-19

1 John 3: 1-7

Luke 24: 36b-48

### Not Leaving the Body Behind

A few years ago, I was in a conversation with a friend of mine who was a professor of Liturgy in Chicago, and part of a liturgical commission tasked with developing new texts for the Rite of Christian Burial. She told me about one prayer which began: *Having left the body behind...* which prompted a spontaneous exclamation from a colleague: *How careless!* Being liturgical nerds, we got a good chuckle out of this.

The phrase came to mind as I considered the series of resurrection appearances we hear about during these Easter weeks. I think the phrase could be applied to Christianity, which some might say has left the body behind over the millennia. There has always been something of a dualism: Flesh vs. spirit, or body vs. soul. And it's been pretty clear which is considered to be superior, privileging the spiritual over the physical. The *body* is often seen as the locus of sin and impurity, and as limitation. In particular, the female body was problematic in the eyes of the Church. Many religions preserve ancient customs of purification rituals after birth, or require women to cover their heads or even their entire bodies, or separate their bodies from males in the context of worship. Christianity has also nurtured a long-standing phobia about sexuality, which has prevented the development of a good theology about the body and what bodies are designed to do. Religion has tended toward strict regulation of what we do with our bodies, particularly in regard to sexuality, which we were often counseled to avoid at all costs until the "proper" situation was established. And leaving the body behind at the time of death is minimized as loss, since we then shift to the superior appreciation of the endurance of the spiritual.

I think that most of us have a certain degree of ambivalence about bodies—our own bodies and the bodies of others. We might enjoy bodies in the prime of youth or in the experience of tender lovemaking. We might be proud of our bodies at times, and enjoy adorning them with jewelry, body art, tattoos, piercings, and all manner of costuming. But bodies can also be the source of anxiety and pain, such as developing bodies in youth and declining physically as we get older. Some people find themselves at odds with their bodies, feeling that their physical identification is not aligned with their sense of gender and their true selves. And there seems to be no limit to the degree of body *shaming* imposed by others in society and through our internalized critical voices. We worry about being too fat, too thin, too weak and on and on. Any number of circumstances might seem to impose limitations upon us, from profound disabilities to the inevitable decline of aging.

What if we really sensed that our physicality is the locus of the sacred—not in some puritanical inhibition or in denial of what transcends the body—but as a particular place where we encounter the holy and seek to live our deepest lives, with all the opportunities and challenges that bodies provide?

Today's Gospel presents one of Luke's depictions of a post-resurrection encounter between the risen Christ and Christ's disciples. What is striking is the dramatic physicality of the human Jesus in the transformed body. There are several depictions of these post-resurrection appearances among the four gospels, all of which seem somewhat surreal, varied in their details, but consistent in their themes. Clearly, much has changed as a result of the resurrection, but the risen Christ continues to retain the body of the earthly Jesus. This body continues to manifest flesh and blood. The wounds from the cross remain visible, and the disciples are invited to touch Jesus. Jesus shares food with them, another

common theme among these narratives. This is not only a glorified body, but a very human one as well. The one the disciples see before them is not a ghost, nor a collective fantasy

Skeptics and critics have often opined that these passages at the end of the gospels are merely a series of “proofs” that seek to reinforce the idea that Jesus really was risen from the dead. But this period in the lives of the followers of Jesus truly is a kind of liminal time and space where the ordinary parameters of experience seem somewhat altered. The risen Christ is real, strangely other-worldly. Christ is with them, but also elusive. Jesus appears to a select group of disciples—including many women—but does not go back into the streets to continue preaching. That task will be taken over by the apostles as the primitive church begins to coalesce, as we here about these weeks in the readings from the Acts of the Apostles. But I also think a deeper theological point is being made.

We tend to think of the major events in the coming of the Christ as discrete episodes, each of which carry particular meanings and importance: the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection. But some theologians would say that these are all of a piece, along with everything that happened in between. So the appearance of the risen Christ who is also still in the flesh links with the Birth of the Christ Child, word made flesh. This is all about incarnation: God becoming intimately joined with Creation through the agency of human existence, which itself is subject to all the possibilities and consequences of living in a body: growth, death, joy, sorrow, and transcendent transformation. The other events in the life of Jesus happen only because of the mystery or incarnation. That’s why the totality of God’s communication of God’s self to the world can never be understood through any single event in the life of Jesus apart from Christ made human, nor through any separation of spirit and flesh as the locus of holy presence.

Holding the body in mind may actually help us navigate many of the vexing issues which are facing us personally and socially helping us know these realities more clearly and powerfully. The Black Lives Matter Movement brought into focus the impact of violence on black bodies, a phrase which seems to cut through any attempt to rationalize, intellectualize or spiritualize what so many had witnessed in the death of George Floyd and many others. There is a *visceral* reaction to the reality of a body being beaten and asphyxiated. This is not an abstraction, this is real. Similarly, the image of immigrant children in cages of the violence done to the bodies of persons trying to find refuge in our country might heighten our outrage and move us to protest in ways that merely talking about “the problem” do not. Almost all violence is violence against bodies. We most often react to others through the appearance of the color of their skin, and that is the root of most racial trauma. And our experience of “trauma” in any of its forms, is only partially about the feelings we might have about a major event in our lives. Trauma is primarily held in the body, which remembers the pain and seeks to release it. Deep empathy is rooted in our bodies. Can we really grasp the reality of living as a trans person unless we can imagine what it is like to feel so at odds with one’s own bodily presentation? Across the spectrum of sexual identities, being aware of how our bodies experience sexuality in both positive and negative ways. Sex is complicated, and there are moralizing positions which disavow all kinds of desire while failing to confront exploitation and sexual violence. So much of this is implicated in the ecstasy and terror of being a body.

If the body is as sacred as the soul, we might be inclined to treat it with greater appreciation and dignity. The incarnation is not a compromise in an inferior state, but rather a revelation of the uniting of God and the human in the flesh. But bodies also have a temporal limitation. At some point, we all die. We rely on our spiritual capacities to maintain our bonds with those we love. But once again, we will feel these connections in our bones, in our guts, and in our hearts.

In communion, we receive *the body and the blood* of Christ. Nothing can be more tangible than this, even though we take this in under the form of bread and wine. There is a reason Jesus used these

specific words to link the cross and the way in which we continue to partake in Christ's presence. May we continue to see our embodiment as a gift of presence of the divine, no matter how much we might struggle with the limits of human existence. May we see in the body of Jesus the template of what it means to live a divine life. Let us not leave our bodies behind.

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