



HIS HANDS, HIS FEET, ONCE MORE

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Luke 24:36b-48

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The Gospels do not describe the actual resurrection of Jesus. The “how” of it remains a mystery contained within the Godhead. Perhaps this is because no words of human language are adequate to describe the miracle of resurrection. Or perhaps, like Moses up on that mountain, we cannot behold the raw power and presence of God and live. Whatever the reason, this detail of Easter, *the* Easter moment, the resurrection itself, is hidden in the cleft of the rock—the stone rolled firmly over Jesus’ tomb; and, for that matter, over every tomb we stand before as well. Whatever resurrection is, or how exactly it happens, the Gospels do not say.

What the Gospels do record is resurrection’s aftermath. That the stone was removed and the tomb was empty and, the risen Lord appeared to his disciples. These resurrection stories also note the very human reactions to the empty tomb, littered with its linen wrappings now occupied by an angel or two dressed in dazzling clothes. In the earliest gospel we have, the Gospel of Mark, the ending is abrupt and frankly less than inspiring. Mary Magdalene, another Mary, and Salome find the stone gone, the tomb empty, and a young man dressed in white who tells them Jesus has been raised. He then says, “Go and tell this good news to others!” But what they did instead was run away, for, Mark says, “terror and amazement had seized them. . . and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” Sounds like the Presbyterian version of evangelism to me! Matthew’s Gospel throws in an earthquake and an electric angel, saying fear gripped the guards and the women alike. In John, there is weeping, confusion, and a little friendly competition. In Luke, the women are terrified and the men are skeptical.



Things don't improve that much when the Risen Jesus actually begins appearing to his disciples. Both John and Luke tell multiple stories of Jesus coming to his disciples and the predominant response is fear and doubt, even stark terror. Sometimes, they do not even recognize him. It was late afternoon on Easter when two followers of Jesus fall into step with a stranger on the way to Emmaus. They knew everything that had happened in Jerusalem, but not the thing happening before their very eyes—that the stranger journeying with them was Jesus. Once they figured it out, they raced back to Jerusalem to tell the 11 and other companions. This opens our passage today.

They were all together on Easter night when Jesus appeared in their midst. “Peace be with you,” he said, but they do not respond, “And also with you...” because peace was the farthest thing from their minds. Luke says they were startled and terrified and thought they were seeing a ghost.

Far from it, Jesus is a fully embodied person even in resurrection. Jesus tells his followers to look at his hands and feet. Touch me, Jesus says, and see that I am flesh and bones. “See,” he says, “I am myself.” And then, as further evidence, or maybe because our Risen Lord was hungry I suppose, Jesus asked for a piece of fish and ate it in their presence.

Over and over again, the Easter stories emphasize the sheer physicality of Jesus—his flesh-and-bloodness—though raised from the dead. There is something essential about his *bodily* resurrection in the Gospels. The stories make it clear that the Risen Lord was no disembodied spirit, no ethereal ghost. There is continuity between the Jesus they had known in his earthly life and the Risen Lord who stood among them. To be sure, there was discontinuity, too. Something new had also happened, transforming him enough that sometimes they failed to recognize him at first. But they go on to recognize him. He is their beloved teacher and friend *and* the Risen Lord. His resurrection has implications for our own. As our call to worship from 1st John puts it, what we will be has not yet been revealed, but we know we will be like him. That we, too, will be raised not as a disembodied spirit, but as ourselves. The same yet transformed. This part of the Easter story is so



foundational to the Christian faith that when the early church composed its very first official creed—the Apostles’ Creed—they included this core tenet, which we declare to this day: I believe in the resurrection of the body.”

Now there were some very specific heresies the early Christians had to combat that compelled them to stress this truth. While there are centuries of debates behind it, in a nutshell, the Christian faith rejected any notion that our bodies and our soul or spirit were separate. The Christian faith rejected the belief that our bodies were lesser than, even evil, while in us there was a spirit, superior and pure. Our faith teaches us that we are whole—body and soul together—created in God’s image. This means we can’t spiritualize our faith, rising above this bodily existence, untouched by lived reality on earth. It also means that when we die, we do not just casually “pass on,” shedding these worthless shells as our spirit floats finally free to heaven. No, when we die, we die body and soul, and it is only by the raw power of God that we are raised completely, body and soul.

If this seems like esoteric or academic theological gymnastics, it is not. God has created us as embodied persons...God came to us in human form in Jesus, who lived and died as we do. And the Easter stories reveal that in the life to come, we will still be somehow embodied—as Jesus said, “See, I am myself...” then how we treat our bodies here and now—and how we treat others, too—matters very much.

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and author, calls it the Christian “Practice of Wearing Skin...or the daily practice of incarnation. I like her writing about this, but honestly I’m not sure I will ever try one of her recommendations. Taylor says she thinks it is important “to pray naked in front of a full-length mirror sometimes, especially when you are full of loathing for your body.” She notes things we have all said about our bodies...we are too heavy, too hairy, we sag here, shake there. Maybe we have been sick or had surgery and struggle with the changes these have brought to our bodies. Taylor then gets to serious heart of it. This can only go on so long, she writes, especially for those of us who officially believe that “God loves flesh and blood, no matter what kind of shape it is in. Whether you are sick or well, lovely or irregular there comes a time when it is



vitaly important for your spiritual health to look in the mirror and say, ‘Here I am. This is the body-like-no-other that my life has shaped. I live here. This is my soul’s address.’ After you have taken a good look around,” Taylor continues, “you may decide there is a lot to be thankful for, all things considered. Bodies take real beatings. That they heal from most things is an underrated miracle. That they give birth is beyond reckoning.” When she practices this herself, she usually decides, “it is time to do a better job of wearing my skin with gratitude instead of loathing. No matter what I think of my body, I can still offer it to God to go on being useful to the world in ways both sublime and ridiculous.”ⁱ

At least three times a day since I have moved to New York, I have had occasion to reflect on these things. Whenever I am walking Bentley in Central Park, I am amazed at the number of people at any given time running, biking, roller skating, or strolling. Most are young and in terrific shape, but plenty of us are older, too, and slower. One day in a cold rain, I was walking the same route as someone perhaps in his forties. He walked with the aide of a walker that he would place out in front of his body, his arms gripping its handles. Then he dragged his feet and legs toward it, ready to take the next step. The sheer effort it took to move any distance, the time he had to devote to it, the strength of his will, was awesome to behold, even, I felt that day, sacramental.

Taylor says that it is her body that connects her to all other people. “Wearing my skin,” she says, “is not a solitary practice but one that brings me into communion with all these other embodied souls. It is what we have most in common with one another. ...followers of Jesus are called to honor the bodies of our neighbors as we honor our own.” When in Luke, Jesus says, ‘See my hands and my feet...’ they are the feet that took him into the presence of many different people and places. His hands touched “leper bodies, possessed bodies, widow and orphan bodies, as well as foreign bodies and hostile bodies.” His flesh encountered those who flesh was discounted by the world in which they lived.ⁱⁱ

When I was interviewing with the Transitional Search Committee and we were discussing worship and other matters, someone remarked that it had taken about 10

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



years for the Session to approve the Passing of the Peace in worship. Well done! Think of it as your weekly practice of the incarnation. Actually touching each other, whether it is a fist bump, a handshake, a hand on the shoulder...at least they did not ask you to follow the ancient church and greet each other with a holy kiss!

The truth is, we are still learning to practice wearing our skin and to honor the skin of others as Jesus did. We have a long way to go. I think of Michael Brown, the young man who was shot to death on a Saturday afternoon in Ferguson, Missouri. Horrified relatives and neighbors stood witness as his body lay in the hot summer sun for four hours uncovered. It prompted national coverage and outrage. Collectively we knew this was against the sacredness of every *body*. The #MeToo movement proliferated, as millions of women gave testimony to ways their bodies have been violated. I am proud that this congregation takes the Practice of Wearing Skin seriously through responsible child protection policies. Recently the Day School teachers held an all-day training event to better understand the complexities of gender, sexuality, and sexual orientation. This Wednesday, the Session will consider an updated policy to prevent harassment in the workplace. In these ways, we are practicing incarnation faithfully.

In this passage the embodied, resurrected Lord appeared to his disciples. He opened their minds to the scriptures. Then he commissioned them to proclaim repentance and the forgiveness of sins to all nations. But it began when he showed them his hands and his feet. “Touch me and see,” Jesus said. Now, where will our feet take us? How will we use our hands as a practice of the faith? Writer and pastor Rachel Held Evans says that ultimately we are all commissioned. She writes: “The hands that pass the peace can pass a meal to the man on the street. The hands that cup together to receive Christ in the bread will extend to receive Christ in the immigrant, the refugee, the lonely, or the sick. Hands plant, and uproot, and cook, and caress. They repair, and rewire, and change diapers, and dress wounds. Hands wipe away tears and rub the bellies of dogs. Hands,” she says, “sanctify all sorts of ordinary things and make them holy. ...Through touch, God gave us the power to injure or to heal, to wage war or to wash feet. Let us not forget the gravity of that.”



Isn't that just it—the gravity within Easter. An embodied, Risen Lord who commissions us, his hands and feet, once more.

Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *An Altar in the World: A Geography of Faith* (HarperOne, 2009), 38.

ⁱⁱ Taylor, 42.