

Luke 24:36b-48
Third Sunday of Easter
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When I was in seminary, my father and I tried to have a conversation about resurrection. My father was a human geneticist, so he had a lifetime of experience with human bodies, what they could do and what they could not do. So it wasn't surprising to me when he asked if we still believe in the resurrection.

I knew the core belief of the church had not fundamentally changed in the many centuries since its introduction, but in that moment, I was at a total loss as to how to explain this to my scientist father. Of course bodies are not resurrected. We know better, don't we?

I've witnessed this struggle in the way we talk about our faith. It doesn't matter whether you are young or old, a pastor, an elder or a lay person. When folks are asked what they believe about Jesus, most people will mention his death, as in "he died for our sins," – but rarely have I heard anyone talk about his resurrection or how it impacts our lives today. Truth be told, in the development of my own faith statement, even I have said precious little about resurrection.

This oversight is hardly surprising for 20th century Protestant Christians, like us. Many of us grew up experiencing the sacrament of the Lord's Supper more as a funeral than a party. The emphasis on the meal as the Last Supper always overshadowed the numerous meals Jesus shared with his friends after he was resurrected. It's no wonder we aren't sure what to do with resurrection.

I think that's exactly what the disciples are wrestling with when Jesus appears in their midst. They saw him die. He was dead. And no matter how many times he might have told them that he would rise again, they knew that bodies did not rise from the dead. As far as they were concerned, the dead stayed dead.

No wonder it takes four encounters to convince them otherwise.

First, the women go to the tomb to anoint Jesus' body, and are met by two angels who tell them that Jesus is not dead. He has been raised. The women report to the disciples what they have seen and heard but are dismissed out of hand.

Then, Peter goes back to see the empty tomb for himself. There is no record of what he said to the others about his visit, perhaps because he wasn't sure what to say.

Later the same day, Jesus joins two unnamed disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus, talking about everything that has happened in the last few days. They don't recognize Jesus until later, when they invite him to join them for a meal. When he breaks the bread, suddenly

they realize who he is. After the meal, they hurry back to Jerusalem to share the news with the others.

Despite these multiple reports of the empty tomb and encounters with the risen Christ, the disciples are totally unprepared to see Jesus when he enters the room where they are staying. Their first response is not joy and relief, but fear and disbelief.

In this encounter, Jesus goes to some length to prove that he is really alive. He is not a ghost. He has been resurrected. "Look," he says. "See." "Touch." He shows them his wounded hands and feet as proof, but even then they did not know what to think.

Finally, he asks for some fish. They give it to him and he eats it. Turns out that not only does Jesus have real flesh and bones, but he also has taste buds and a digestive track, as well!

Something about him is different now but this is the same Jesus that broke bread with them, the same Jesus they saw arrested, tortured and executed, the same Jesus who died and was buried in Joseph's tomb.

So what is the point of all this, you ask? Why do the gospel writers insist on a bodily resurrection? Do we still believe this, even now?

I wish my Dad were alive for me to have this conversation with me today.

If he were, I might say something like this: Look, I know it sounds crazy, but yes, the resurrection has always been at the core of the Christian faith and yes, the church does still believe it.

The emphasis on Jesus' body is not new in the biblical narrative. "From the earliest story of God molding people out of dirt to the one where Jesus breaks bread one final time before his death, God revels in physicality."¹

In the beginning, God created our bodies, along with all the rest of creation and then pronounced them good. In Jesus, God entered into the world as a human being -- not a ghost, not a spirit -- but a human being with a real human body; one that developed the same way ours did -- in our mother's womb.

So, why, if God raised Jesus from the dead, would Jesus come back as anything else? As unbelievable as that is, that seems to be with the gospel writers are telling us.

And here's the good news about the resurrection! If Jesus was resurrected, that means that creation -- physical stuff -- *our* bodies -- really matter to God: young bodies, old bodies, ailing

¹ <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/april-15-easter-3b-luke-2436b-48>.

bodies, fat bodies, skinny bodies, abused bodies, male bodies, female bodies, trans bodies, black, brown and white bodies, tattooed and pierced bodies.

Just as it did then, so even now the resurrection challenges a dualistic view of the world that values the spiritual reality over the physical. Contrary to this Greek understanding of the world, the Christian faith does not claim that we are spiritual beings trapped in an imperfect physical shell, waiting to pass on to our true, spiritual home.

God's work in creation, incarnation and resurrection does not distinguish between the two. God does not rescue Jesus from his body, as if it were something to be shed in search of something greater. Just so, resurrection doesn't liberate us from our bodies either; resurrection transforms our bodies, along with all the rest of God's good creation.

According to one writer, "the key question" we face when we wrestle with resurrection is whether *this* world and *these* bodies of ours have a future with God....²

He continues,

God could have done at least two things differently. The first is to have abandoned us and our world because we rejected God. The second is to abandon *creation* but not human beings. God could say, "You are not your bodies. The 'real you' is non-material. And this world isn't ultimately 'real' – ultimate reality is another place altogether, called heaven. So let me rescue you from all this mess of creation (bodies, earth etc)".³

God does neither. God does not abandon us nor does God abandon what God created.

The Hebrew and Christian God is a God who is inextricably linked to creation by love and a determination to save what has been created. Matter matters! *Bodies* matter! God embraces body in Jesus (Incarnation) and enters into our world. God becomes *part* of our world. And God does so in order to *save* it by transforming it into all that it was always intended to be.⁴

During his ministry, Jesus shows us what that looks like. He doesn't talk about life as something to be endured while we dream about the sweet by and by. He talks about the transformation of life. He preaches repentance and renewal. He doesn't abandon the physical needs of people for the sake of their spiritual needs. He tends to them. He touches them. He heals them. He feeds them. He loves them.

² <http://disclosingnewworlds.net/easter-3b-2/>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

The last thing Jesus says to the disciples is “You are witnesses of these things.” We, too, are witnesses of these things. We are witnesses to God’s love for us, God’s care for us and God’s desire for our lives to be transformed into all God intends for us, right here and right now and not in the sweet by and by.

Thanks be to God!