

The Church of the Pilgrimage  
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo  
April 15, 2018

Luke 24:36-48

While they were still talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost. He said to them, "Why are you troubled, and why do doubts rise in your minds? Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence. He said to them, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, "This is what is written: The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things.

**Embodied**

A focus on the body is not only where I've been living; it's where Luke's gospel lives, or where the risen Christ lives.

Let me explain. Those of you who were here last Sunday know that, for me, much of the week after Easter was given over to my father's final days. Though Dad departed on a Friday, five days into Eastertide, it was during Holy Week that it was clear to us that Dad was actively dying. He had suffered some stroke like symptoms, and over time these affected his swallowing, so it seemed he was getting a bit worse, day by day.

One day we sat in his room, he in his wheelchair, looking tired and weak, and me in a chair right in front of him, looking him in the eye. He didn't say anything, but he looked at me in a way I hadn't seen before. He was sad. It was getting to be the end, and since he wasn't speaking much by then, he just looked at me in this telling way.

The pastor daughter could think of nothing to say. Though it had been a long goodbye, I suppose I didn't want to accept it, this sense that the end was approaching. I stood up, found some nice smelling hand cream my sister in law had brought him and rolling up the bottom of Dad's sweatpants began to rub the lotion into his ankles and calves, giving my Dad a leg massage of sorts. Dad smiled a smile. When words fail us, we find other ways to communicate.

As a way of getting to our scripture today, and to something of an Eastertide message, I want to speak of death. Of death as a process, a natural process, like birth, and something that comes -- in some cases -- when the time is right. I want to lift up there being such a thing as dying well. I want to give thanks for nurses and

hospice workers and people who know how to help the person dying – and their family. I want to give thanks for medicines that can ease pain, calm ragged breathing. I want to give thanks for church members who come and pray and chaplains who offer blessings that give thanks for life and also give permission for letting go. I want to give particular thanks for Cranberry hospice, who did everything possible to ease the strain, to help our family enter into this dying process clear eyed, present, and unafraid.

When my father's dying was done, when he gently passed from this life, the hospice nurse came into the room and pronounced him deceased. A while later, after the reality had sunk in a bit, she reentered the room with a bowl of warm water and some cloths, and asked us if we might like to help wash his body. So, the hospice nurse and a faithful worker who had tended to Dad a lot, my sister in law and I all did that. Together we prepared his body, and of course, it being just days after Easter, my mind went to those women headed to the tomb to do the same for Jesus. It was really a holy thing. When my mother died we were all so shocked, we left the hospital room leaving others to the task. But here, this time, this seemed like a good thing, a helpful thing. A way to honor this body that had served my Dad so well for so many years. And in that, a way to honor *him*.

What I find fascinating about this particular Easter story, the one you just heard today, is the focus on the body, the physical body of the risen Christ. Jesus is so insistent! \*Look at my hands and feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see, for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have." (Luke 24:39) As the disciples stand there, stunned, disbelieving for joy, Jesus hammers it home: "Have you anything here to eat?" he asks. "And they gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence." (Luke 24:42-43)

Maybe part of the reason Jesus affirmed his body, his physical bodily presence, is simply that bodies are important. They are what makes us human. They are a good gift of God – though the church hasn't always celebrated it that way. On my father's windowsill at Brookdale, there was a framed photo of my Dad pole-vaulting – he was just in high school at the time. We liked to look at that photo together and marvel about what bodies can do. Bodies can enjoy food, take dogs for walks, plant flowers, bushes and trees. Bodies can sleep a good sleep or take a quick nap. Bodies sing and dance, embrace and comfort, give and receive pleasure. Bodies can do hard physical labor, amazing athletic things, and amazing artistic things too.

But let's be clear. In this resurrection story Jesus isn't just parading a body, any body but he is showing his *crucified body*. You might expect a risen Christ to be all healed up, no holes in his hands, no gashes in his feet. Jesus, as he once walked by the shores of Galilee, back to see his friends. But in this story "Easter is forever joined to Good Friday" (Mark *Interpretation*, Fred Craddock, p. 290) Jesus shows his wounds. He is alive, appearing to those he loved...but the wounds remain.

Yesterday, on the women's retreat, we had some time in smaller groups to reflect upon questions linking the Emmaus Road story (the story you heard last week, the story Kim preached about) to our stories. I was sitting in such a way that my circle touched alongside the another circle, so I could not help but hear snippets of conversation from a group which was not my own. It seemed like this group would get animated, laughing about something, then I'd hear something about the most mundane things: toothpaste, or location of laundry rooms, then a person, in a quieter voice, would start a sentence, "Some time ago, when my husband died....." It brought a smile to my face, this bouncing from jokes to the everyday to such serious and holy sharing but it had that easy flow you have in friendship. In fact, this was going on in our group too. There was a comfort level – a trust – that we could share the real stuff of our lives, wounds and all, and when it got to be a bit much, break with a little comic relief.

Jesus comes back showing his wounds. What does that mean to you? Did Jesus understand about us, that often we don't care to be vulnerable, that often we fear if we are not strong or in control that people will judge us? Did Jesus understand our tendency to hide the wounded parts of ourselves, and how that effort sometimes takes so much energy it is simply exhausting? There was a freedom to our women's gathering – people could share as much or as little as they wanted. No one was forced to go out of their comfort zone. There was talking, and there was listening, and there was no judgment. At our closing circle, Rosemary asked us to say something about what we take away from this weekend. "Acceptance" someone quickly said. And it was so.

I remember one hearing that the resurrection stories were never just appearance stories. They were always, in essence, *call* stories. They were stories shared among the early followers, the early church, to remind them they had a future, that God was not so easily defeated, and they shouldn't be either.

Which brings me to embodied faith. If Jesus was a man who lived and died once in time but is now "the eternal Christ" who lives up there, in heaven if there wasn't this attention to the crucified Christ his hands, his feet, his wounds then Christians, his followers, might be able to get away with forms of spirituality that are without suffering for others, without a cross, and without any engagement in the issues of life in this world. All that would be needed is devotion to a living, spiritual Christ.

But those hands, those feet -- they tie us to this world, this suffering world. This place where people are hungry, and lonely, addicted and afraid. This place where natural disasters and war, and gun violence in our streets and our schools where these things take place. To follow the risen Christ is to follow the one who bore the cross. This does not mean we all have to be Mother Teresa working in the streets of Calcutta (though some may be called to work in this way) for we follow the risen Christ who bore the cross when we listen to someone who is lonely, when we sit with someone who is bereaved, or write words of comfort to them. We follow the risen Christ when we open our homes and our hearts to people who struggle with

mental illness or who are in recovery, when we seek in our human encounters to lessen the stigma. We follow the risen Christ when we see something wrong in the world and come together with others to find a way to address it. We follow the risen Christ when we are willing to learn about someone whose life and upbringing, whose life experience is different than ours. We follow the risen Christ when we learn that love makes space for the sharing of wounds.

There are so many ways to live an embodied faith, but all of them involve living fully in the world, facing the very real pain of the world. This year, at the women's retreat, I tried to listen more than talk. And what I heard is that in facing pain, we find God. The one who sees us through often becomes more real to us in painful times, though we don't always know it at the time.

I also heard people telling stories of finding God when they were engaged in working on behalf of others. In the session we had the first night, we heard a powerful story of someone finding a partner to help them start a nonprofit to bring Vietnamese children in need of medical care to this country, which all began because of her concern for a relative born with cerebral palsy. I think also of the work of those who do Monday Meals, where God shows up in hospitality offered in Jesus name.

In showing his hands and his feet, in asking for something to eat, Jesus was doing a lot more than convincing his disciples he was not a ghost. Jesus was emphasizing that you cannot follow him without being willing to face pain, and that following him will mean attention to human bodies – our own, but also the bodies of brothers and sisters, fellow inhabitants of this planet we share.

We are stronger, more faithful, when we remember his hands and his feet. And the church is stronger and more faithful too.

Amen.