

“The Anatomy of Resurrection: That Which We See and Believe”

A sermon preached on John 20:19-31

by Emily Hull McGee on Sunday, April 28, 2019

at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC

I.

The Lord is risen! He is risen indeed!

OK, yes, I know it's actually not Easter Sunday. Rather now it's the week *after* Easter, seven days since the alleluias, the trumpets, hope born in the darkness of the tomb. The lilies are wilting, the jelly beans are all gone, Easter lunch leftovers are already eaten up, our new clothes are now just as ordinary in the hamper as any other, things are back to business as usual. It's *as usual*, for since we left from this place a week ago, life has happened: We have felt the sting of rejection. We have confronted the anger that punctuates our days. Fear and anxiety and worry have crept back in as we watch the news and scan the shape of our lives. And grief has left us breathless. Our individual and collective suffering has pricked us time and time again these past days, and we feel it in our *bodies* – the racing heart, the aching joints, the churning gut, the all-over exhaustion from working, caregiving, parenting, creating, serving, achieving, discovering, organizing, surviving that seems to settle in the marrow between our bones. It's as if the shot of energy and possibility and hope in a new day that Easter gave us is beginning to wear off. For with the day of resurrection growing more distant in our rearview mirrors, we can find ourselves wondering: *is this it? Aren't I supposed to feel ... different?*

These next few weeks are what the church calls Eastertide, the fifty days in the liturgical year between Easter Sunday, when we celebrate the

resurrection of Jesus, and Pentecost Sunday, when we mark the coming of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church as the community of God in the world. During these weeks of Eastertide, we'll look in and listen to the earliest followers and disciples of Jesus who are trying to make sense of the nonsensical, the mysterious, the unknowable. And what we will find is that for these disciples, it is through *the body* — Jesus's body and their own bodies — through the senses of sight and sound, smell and touch and taste, through hands and feet and side and wounds, through bread broken and roads walked and fish cooked over a charcoal fire by the water, through these earthly, tangible, physical, incarnational ways that they experience resurrection and the God who makes all things new.

II.

This arc of the week following that first Easter is where we find ourselves in the text this morning to hear two parts of a story about bodies — about the redemptive power of Jesus's *breath* and the recognition that comes from Jesus's *wounds*.

At this point in the narrative, the women have cast aside their spices and shared their story breathlessly to all who would hear them. Mary Magdalene has run from the garden, its dirt still caked in her sandals and leaves hurriedly caught in her hair. The disciples' utter confusion and euphoria and disbelief have competed with each other in the dizzying light of such unbelievable news. And by nightfall on that first day of the week and of the new age, it seemed that for them, fear had won out.

“The doors were locked in fear,” John confirms, fear, it seems, of what might happen to this beleaguered band of followers in light of what had

happened on Friday afternoon. And yet appearing among them was Jesus who came with these words: “peace be with you.” I only wish the text would tell us how the disciples responded right in that moment, the moment when the one they saw die on a Roman cross has somehow come back to life, entered their locked room, and is saying “peace be with you.” Couldn’t you just imagine the scene! But John says nothing of that, instead continuing: “after he had said this, he showed them his hands and side. **Then** the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.” It’s in seeing his *wounds*, his marks, his body still ravaged with the suffering of Friday that the disciples recognized him in their midst!

“Peace be with you,” he says. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” But before anyone reached to unlock the door or stepped foot outside, before this motley crew became the earliest fathers and mothers of the church, before they carried with them the peace and the power to change the world, the text tells us that Jesus breathed on them and said, ‘receive the Holy Spirit.’

It’s one thing to hear the peace of Christ. It’s another to feel it hot on your face, blowing through the tatters of your life and somehow stitching them back up again as if in thin air. And I wonder, did Jesus’s breath smell of that last supper, the simple symbols of bread and wine transformed? Or perhaps of the bitter liquid pressed to his lips on the cross? Did it carry with it notes of the musty tomb, of death held captive no longer? Did the disciples sense a remembrance as old as time itself, when God scooped up some dirt in the garden and blew humanity into existence? Did they remember that the breath of God had once animated a valley of bones, parted the waters, and inspired these holy words?¹ Did they realize that this One Mary mistook to be

¹ Beautiful reading of ‘breath’ in Rachel Held Evans’ chapter “Breathe” of *Searching for Sunday*.

the gardener was now scooping up the sacred ordinary grounds of their fear and zeal, their denial and betrayal, their indifference and hopefulness, and inflating them with a purpose and a calling through a sigh?

Then the scene shifts, and we see Thomas, one of the twelve, the only one who hadn't been with the disciples on that Easter night when Jesus came and breathed on them. For you see, as far as Thomas knew, Jesus was dead. That was that. Time to grieve and move on. Yes, he'd heard proclamation to the contrary, first from Mary Magdalene and then the disciples. "We have seen the Lord!" they told him. But ever the realist, Thomas, who history has since nicknamed 'Doubting' – but let's be clear, not because he doubted Jesus, only because he doubted the disciples! – said: "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."

Thank God. For in this honest response, Thomas becomes a proxy for the legion of us ever since who struggle to believe the story of another unless it's a story we inhabit ourselves. In his words, we hear our own. In his demand to press his hands in the wounds and put his eyes on that pierced flesh, Thomas speaks through time and space to include all the rest of us who weren't part of the privileged few to see the risen Christ with our own eyes. For in all the years since, we have relied on testimony to believe, on words from those who *were* there, words that evaporate into the air just as soon as they are spoken or shared. Thank God for Thomas, who insisted on the blessing of the invitation to put his hands right into the wounds; Thomas, who knew it was a *crucified* Christ that he looked for; Thomas who was healed by those wounds our Lord bore. Thank God for Thomas, the one they called 'the Twin,' for in him, we see our mirror image.

John doesn't tell us that Thomas actually took Jesus up on the offer, but simply the invitation to do so — the willingness of Jesus to see and meet Thomas where he was — enabled the strongest confession of faith he could muster: “My Lord and my God!”

III.

Breath, hands, side, wounds. It's all so earthy, so tangible, so ... bodily, this resurrection story, isn't it? Both in its revelation and its reception, the story of Thomas and the disciples rely on the experience of a body by their bodies to make sense of what God had done in Jesus.

My theology professor, the brilliant Dr. Frank Tupper, was himself so formed in his faith by suffering, in particular the early death of his wife and mother to his two young children. With a declamatory word that we all knew with which we weren't to argue, he made it clear one day in our theology class that we were never to talk about the resurrected Christ without mention of his crucifixion. “It is the resurrection of the crucified one!,” his voice and words which are seared into my memory. For God did not resuscitate Jesus, nor did God restore him blemish-free and glowing for a world to admire. Rather, Jesus returned with his wounds still open, his marks of crucifixion the essential element of his knowing. Did you notice throughout both of these stories that neither Jesus nor Thomas tried to identify Jesus through his face, his voice, or any other traditional method of recognition? No, it was through his *wounds* he was made known! Through his wounds, Jesus's vulnerable fragility is evidence to the victory won over death. Through his wounds, Christ's self-giving love was made real. Through his wounds, he stepped into ours. For the anatomy of resurrection was the

resurrection of the crucified One — one in which we can see and believe, first because we see his wounds.²

I suppose that's why when folks who are hearing-impaired say "Jesus" in sign language, they do so by taking the middle finger of your dominant hand and touch the inside of the palm on the opposite hand and then do it again with the middle finger of the non-dominant hand touching the inside of the other palm. Meaning — every time you say "Jesus," you tangibly remember his wounds, you touch your own hands in those places, you offer a tactile reminder to yourself and those with whom you share a conversation that the resurrected Jesus is also the crucified Christ.³

IV.

Nicholas Wolterstorff is a retired philosophy professor at Yale whose son Eric died in a mountain-climbing accident years ago, in Austria at the young age of 25. His expressions of grief gave the world a tremendous account called *Lament for a Son*, a small and heart-wrenching account of his life on the other side of such a loss. In it, he shares this image of this moment between Thomas and Jesus:

"Put your hand into my wounds," said the risen Jesus, "and you will know who I am." The wounds of Jesus are his identity. They tell us who he is. He did not lose them. They went down into the grave with him and they came

² With gratitude to two particular inspirations for this sermon today: Robert Schreiter's essay, "Jesus and His Wounds," from *All Shall Be Well: Readings for Lent and Easter*, p338; and Debie Thomas, Journey With Jesus, "This Is My Body," <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/2179-this-is-my-body>.

³ As a child who learned a bit of sign language, I always loved this about the word 'Jesus.' Grateful for the reminder from Shannon Kershner's fine sermon on the text, "Easter Wounds," April 8, 2018, <http://fourthchurch.org/sermons/2018/040818.html>.

up with him – visible, tangible, palpable. Rising did not remove them. He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds.

To believe in Christ's rising from the grave is to accept it as a sign of our own rising from our graves... Slowly I begin to see that there is something more as well. To believe in Christ's rising and death's dying is also to live with the power and the challenge to rise up now from all our dark graves of suffering love. If sympathy for the world's wounds is not enlarged by our anguish, if love for those around us is not expanded, if gratitude for what is good does not flame up, if insight is not deepened, if commitment to what is important is not strengthened, if aching for a new day is not intensified, if hope is weakened and faith diminished, if from the experience of death comes nothing good, then death has won. Then death, be proud.

So I shall struggle to live the reality of Christ's rising and death's dying. In my living, my son's dying will not be the last word. But as I rise up, I bear the wounds of his death. My rising does not remove them. They mark me. If you want to know who I am, put your hand in.⁴

V.

To Nicholas, to Frank, to Thomas, to you and me whose wounds mark us but do not end us, to our church who understands this as you see all around us, and to a world whose suffering happens to and is felt within our bones, Jesus says this: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe!"

With such a blessing, the invitation stands before our bodies and our beings – how will we bear such resurrection truth into the world? How

⁴ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*.

might we receive the breath of Christ and let it send us forth? How might our own wounds find healing as they offer healing to others? How might we profess with our bodies, not just our lips and our minds, that God has made all things new?

Dr. Allan Boesak - humanitarian, theologian and leader in South Africa's anti-apartheid struggle - imagined what it will be like when our own resurrected bodies stand before God. "One day," he says, "God will say to us welcome into my kingdom... [now] where are your wounds? And we will say, we have no wounds. And God will say, did you find nothing worth fighting for?"⁵

May we be healed, may we be inspired, may we see and believe through the wounds of the resurrected and crucified One such that we can't help but to profess: "My Lord and my God!"

⁵ With gratitude to dear friend Alan Sherouse for introducing me to this quote.