

Honoring the Body
a sermon by
Nicole Wilkinson Duran, PhD.
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr

Readings: Genesis 2:21-25
John 20:24-31

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Genesis 2:21-25

²¹So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. ²²And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. ²³Then the man said, "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one was taken." ²⁴Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh. ²⁵And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.

John 20:24-31

²⁴But Thomas (who was called the Twin), one of the twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. ²⁵So the other disciples told him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "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."

²⁶A week later his disciples were again in the house, and Thomas was with them. Although the doors were shut, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." ²⁷Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side. Do not doubt but believe." ²⁸Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" ²⁹Jesus said to him, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe." ³⁰Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. ³¹But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

There was a parenting conversation at Y-Group a year or so ago, and some of you may even remember the speaker's name. What I remember very clearly is a piece of advice she told us that she had given her own daughter, as the girl was growing to adulthood. When her daughter would worry about her weight, her hair, her skin, her mother would tell her, "Remember--you are fearfully and wonderfully made." The reference is to Psalm 139, in which the psalmist praises God, looking at the wonders of his own body—"I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made."

Surely this is also the logic of the story in Genesis 2, where the human being, incomplete and lonely on its own, is gently, painlessly taken apart by God, and put back together, now with a companion, now male and female. Both are naked and unashamed, because both are fearfully and wonderfully made. And for that one brief moment in the biblical story, as we struggle even to imagine, nothing bad has happened yet.

I was new to the idea of honoring the body as a Christian practice, when I came across it in a book we read with the Filling the Well class. There it was a chapter in the book *Practicing Our Faith*, and the chapter argued that honoring the body as God's good creation is a necessary part of our faith, as believers in the God of creation.

The idea is simply that in our faith, bodies matter. I would actually argue that it was the study of Greek philosophy, rather than of scripture, that led Christianity into a thousand-year love affair with the spirit that seemed at times to exclude or even vilify the body. Christians were taught that their bodies would lead them straight to hell, that physical desires of all kinds were, as a pious Katherine Hepburn tells Humphrey Bogart in the classic film *African Queen*, "what we were put on this earth to rise above." But as the mortification of the flesh recedes into the distant past and as western medicine comes back around to the insight that body and spirit are deeply connected, we are coming more and more to understand that the body is wise, if only we listen to its wisdom.

Our culture of course pays a lot of attention to the body, but not necessarily in healthy ways. As Americans, we are people who work too many hours, eat unwisely and too fast, and do not sleep enough. We multi-task—or try to, since it's not something our brains are actually designed to do. When we do get exercise, it's often with instructors or programs that use words like "chisel" and "shredded"—as though designed not so much to honor the body as to tear it apart. And of course for women in particular, there is whole range of things we do to beautify. Whether those things are self-care and grateful, or whether they're obligatory and resented, depends on our own perceptions and experience. And perhaps on how much time we have to get ready in the morning.

Stephanie Paulsell, who wrote the chapter on honoring the body and also a book with the same title, gives examples of what it might mean to honor our bodies as God-given and entirely good. She tells of a mother who taught her children to sing their thanks to God over each part of their bodies as they bathed. And of a father who, in a few embarrassed words, affirmed his daughter's passage into womanhood. Honoring the body can be as simple as taking time for a good hot shower, or as complicated as seeing a loved one through the last stages of debilitating disease.

The meaning and place that the body has in our faith comes to the fore as we continue to celebrate the resurrection, in this, the second Sunday of Eastertide. The gospels struggle, each in its own way, to present the resurrection of the body. In Mark, as Agnes showed us on Easter, the resurrected Jesus never appears! The presence of a resurrected body in that gospel is in fact only the absence of a body in the tomb. “He is not here,” says the young man in the tomb, and in Mark, that’s the best news we hear all day. But Matthew, Luke, and John remember things a little differently. In each of those three, we see the risen Jesus, and in each case he is recognizable, but changed—he’s embodied, but differently.

Here in John’s gospel, we’ve already been through Mary’s encounter with the risen Christ—whom she mistakes at first for the gardener. He doesn’t look like he used to look, it seems, and he tells her not to hold him, as though he is not quite solid flesh. Yet it’s clear that he’s not a ghost. That night when he appears to the disciples, Jesus enters through closed doors, as though he were entirely spirit, but almost the only thing Jesus does in this meeting with his followers is to show them his bodily wounds.

Thomas famously does not believe any of it, will not believe, he says, until he not only sees but touches the wounds in Jesus’ hands and feet and side. What a terrible kind of proof that would be. Thomas gets a bad rap, in part deservedly. On top of his doubts, he seems callous, even to think of this painful kind of proof. But Thomas has no real desire to touch Jesus’ wounds, surely. I think maybe he’s just saying, in another way, that he *really* cannot believe the news of resurrection. And, when the resurrection is only one week old, and only a dozen people have ever heard of it, who can blame him for having doubts? For Thomas, it’s the brokenness of Jesus’ body on the cross that makes it impossible to believe he has been raised. Thomas is saying to his fellow disciples, you think he was raised up again--after a death like that? He’s emphasizing the wounds in Jesus’ feet, hands, and side--what happened to Jesus’ body--to say, no one comes back from such a place. No way. There can be, says Thomas, no resurrection from *that*.

Thomas, it seems, says he wants to touch the wounds for the same reason that Jesus has already showed his wounds to the others. The wounds prove the point. And the point is that the raised body is a real body, a body that has seen the heights and the depths of human experience, it is a body *with wounds*. Paulsell writes, "During Easter, it is Jesus’ resurrected body that teaches us, perhaps more than any other image in Christianity, that bodies matter."

She wrote that phrase several years ago, ironically long before Ferguson became synonymous with racial tension and excessive force, long before the most recent video of the most recent shooting in South Carolina provoked even Time Magazine to devote its latest cover to the three words, “Black lives matter.”

Because we are Christian, because Jesus was raised from the dead and bodies matter, because God created the human being in God’s image, that is why we echo the powerful statement--so painful because it is so very clear that it should not even need to be said, but it does--that black lives matter.

Bodies matter—we are created as physical beings and can ignore that fact only at our peril. This is clear when we think for a minute about children. We cannot love a child only with our spirits. That is, we can, but the child will not experience love, until there are hugs, there is wiping away of tears, there are meals provided and hands held. It may be that to love our neighbors also needs those same tangible, embodied expressions.

It may in fact be that the body is born knowing some truths about God that the spirit is hard pressed to take in. Certainly, Jesus himself only ever treated the human body with compassion and honor. He embraces children and feeds the hungry. He touches the diseased skin of the leper, and takes a dead girl's hand, leading her back to life. He acknowledges his own hunger and thirst, he receives the anointing woman's bodily gesture with gratitude. Precisely because he has made it clear with his every act that bodies matter, his crucifixion when it comes is real, and the raising of his deeply wounded body from the dead is everything.

To follow Jesus is to honor the body, to celebrate its wholeness and beauty, to acknowledge its weaknesses, and to tend to its brokenness. After all, it is because bodies matter that the children are at this very moment putting together 100 meals for the tutoring program. It is because bodies matter that 81 of you were here yesterday working as a kind of pop-up factory, to package 20,000 meals that will feed hungry school children somewhere between Haiti and Romania. It is because bodies matter that the Upward Basketball program celebrates all that special needs children can do in that glorious hour of play together. And it is because bodies matter that next Saturday morning we will be walking 10 miles from church to church all the way to Center City. Because while we know in our minds where our neighbors live, that we are connected by a shared faith, and that it is only 10 miles from this place of privilege to the heart of Philadelphia, while we know these things in our minds, there is more understanding to be gained when we walk there on our own two feet, when we shake the hands of our fellow Presbyterians and stand in their sanctuaries, when we hear our voices singing in unison with theirs and share even the fatigue of the day. Our hope is that our feet and our eyes and our ears will be leading our spirits deeper into relationship and community, deeper into loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Honoring the body does not mean admiring the perfect body--whatever that might be. It means seeing and understanding how the body can be hurt; it means siding with the human body, with every human body, as something precious and amazing, fearfully and wonderfully made. It means seeing even the wounds, even the marks left on us by suffering, as a proof that God honors the human body. It means seeing even the wounds of Jesus as proof that there is indeed resurrection. Amen