

A sermon preached on April 18th, 2021 based upon Luke 24:36b – 43, entitled, “Jesus’ Resurrection Body and the Healing of Trauma.”

As I said on Easter morning, the four Gospels are unanimous about some basic things that took place on Easter. They all agree that it was women who found the tomb empty and were told by angels that Jesus had risen. Another thing they all have in common is the fact that all of the disciples had been deeply traumatized by the time they reached Easter from the horror of Jesus’ arrest and death on the cross. I want to simply note this fact now, and I’ll be returning to the subject of trauma later in my sermon.

Beyond these basic things the Gospel writers agree on, they each tell stories that vary greatly – stories that seem to contradict one another. Rather than see this as a problem we should ask, what is the point that the Gospel writer is trying to make with the distinct stories they tell?

I must admit that my initial response to the story we just heard Luke tell was to find it kind of silly: Jesus suddenly appears and immediately behaves a little like a teenage boy with a ravenous appetite. “You got anything around here to eat?” They bring some broiled fish and he chows down.

Looking more deeply at the story I realized that there was a point Luke wanted to make and that is that the risen Jesus truly had a body – a physical body -- one that needed food in particular and attending to in general. He wasn’t -- as the disciples initially thought -- simply a ghost, a disembodied spirit. He has a body that could be touched, and in fact he invited them to do so. His body bore the scars of his crucifixion, making it clear this was the very same Jesus the disciples had known before his death.

Clearly, the body with which Jesus appears possesses capacities quite different from the bodies with which we are familiar. It can suddenly appear in this reality from another dimension we call heaven. Nonetheless, Luke wants us to appreciate that Jesus’ resurrection body truly was in some sense what we think of as “physical.”

So why is it important to the point out that the risen Jesus had a body?

It matters because it emphasizes that it is in and through our bodies that we experience God – that our bodies are inherently good and need to have attention paid to them – a truth of which we tend to lose sight.

There is this understandable distinction we make between the “spiritual” and the “physical”, but sometimes the distinction can be unhelpful, particularly when we see them as somehow opposed to each other.

Our Judeo-Christian faith tells us that the physical and the spiritual go together. The first chapter of Genesis tells us creation – culminating in the creation of human beings -- is good. The psalms invite us to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” and to behold the glory of God in all of God’s handiwork. In the Gospels, before we come to the resurrection, we encounter the incarnation – the mystery of God taking on human flesh to be with us. Rightly understood, our bodies aren’t an obstacle – they are the means by which we experience God.

But living in a fallen, broken world we tend to have very distorted relationships with our bodies. You see this expressed in the story of Adam and Eve. At the precise moment in which they lose their true center in God, what do they do? They look down and see their bodies naked and for the first time see something shameful – quickly covering the bodies. They have become separate from their bodies.

This distorted relationship with our bodies comes tends to come in two basic forms, both of which have intensified in modern times.

The first is the tendency to worship the body – not so much our own bodies themselves, but rather an ideal body image by which our culture tells us our bodies are measured. This distortion has always been around, but in recent history it has taken on a kind of demonic obsession. In our country billions and billions of dollars are spent on gym memberships, on weight loss programs, and on “beauty products” – more than the gross national products of most nations. I don’t mean to imply that these things are necessarily bad – these things can express an appropriate concern for our body’s health and for the way we present ourselves to the world.

But there is an overblown quality to this focus that expresses something terribly out of balance resulting from the loss of our true center in God. Our sense of worth gets tied to the degree to which our bodies approach the culture’s ideal of “body beautiful”, leading to feelings of shame and self-loathing for our failure to measure up. The intensity of this pressure in recent decades has brought about anorexia and bulimia – mental illnesses that simply didn’t exist until recent human history.

In general women struggle more under this pressure than men, but it is a part of men’s experience as well. And even people who, in the eyes of others seem to actually embody the ideal – they too grapple with such feelings. And since the culture’s ideal of a body is always that of a young person, growing old is viewed something to fear, connected ultimately to the fear of death.

The human body isn’t a god to worship, rather it is a good gift from God – a gift to be loved and cared for.

On the surface the other distorted view of the human body seems like the complete opposite of the first. Instead of overvaluing our bodies, we undervalue them.

Rather than viewing our bodies as gifts through which we experience beauty in its various manifestations - a means by which to express and receive love -- the body is seen as an annoyance at best, and evil at worst.

There are variations of this distortion. There is a religious version in which our natural bodily desires are viewed as evil – most commonly our sexual desires -- with the pathway to salvation seen as somehow escaping our bodies.

I read an article recently about women who came of age twenty years ago in certain churches that put at the center of their teaching a warped idea about what they called “purity”. At an early age these women were pressured to make “chastity pledges” that led them to feel ashamed of simply having sexual desires, let alone acting on them. They were in a sense traumatized by the message hammered into them as teenagers, and twenty years later, having long ago left behind that toxic environment, they still struggled with feelings of shame over their sexuality.

In the secular version of this distortion our bodies are seen as nothing more than transport systems for our brains. In this version, we simply ignore our bodies till they break down. The movement of work life in recent history has contributed to this -- from engaging the body with God’s good earth in agricultural settings, to working in the factories, to working in an office cubicle and spending our work day staring at a computer screen.

These two distortions of our relationship to our bodies – overvaluing them and undervaluing them -- seem like opposites, and yet they both end up in a similar place – that is, living disembodied lives – our brains disconnected from our bodies.

But Jesus appeared to his disciples not as a ghost but as a body that needed something to eat for nourishment, a body that welcomed touch.

This truth that Luke is placing before us is one that seems particularly important to ponder after spending over a year living under the pressures imposed by the Pandemic. Neglect of our bodies has intensified. If you’re like me, the tendency I already had to live a too sedentary life has increased. We haven’t sought out enough opportunities to get out of our homes to interact with God’s creation with all our bodily senses. Perhaps we’ve found ourselves overeating, choosing so-called “comfort” food rather than food that truly nourishes.

And, of course, the restrictions we have lived under regarding physical human contact has paid a heavy toll -- for some more than others. The need to touch and be touched is deeply knit into our bodies.

At the outset I mentioned that the disciples were deeply traumatized by what they had been through with Jesus' arrest and the terror and guilt they felt as Jesus was nailed to the cross. One of the themes hidden inside the Easter story is the healing of their trauma – and various forms of our trauma as well.

Trauma is a word we hear a lot these days. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a relatively new psychiatric term recognizing the suffering that continues in people long after experiencing trauma. It was first recognized as an affliction of soldiers who had suffered the horrors of war, but over time has been recognized in the aftershock arising from a wide range of experiences both emotional and physical, both in childhood and our life as adults: including, sexual and emotional abuse, experiences of great humiliation, such as bullying, in abandonment or extreme financial distress, or the sudden death of a loved one, or the experience of watching a loved one die slowly.

To a greater or lesser extent, all of us have experienced trauma in various forms – and the wounds that persist inside us undermine the vitality of our lives – the abundant life that is God's intention for us.

There has been a great deal of research devoted to PTSD and how to treat it and one of the things researchers have discovered is that the impact of trauma isn't found only in our brains – it also leaves its mark in our bodies.

There is a natural coping device that we have when we are in the midst of an experience of trauma, which is to disconnect our brain from our bodies and the shock and pain they are enduring.

It's a useful coping device in the moment – but afterwards it becomes a problem if the disconnection continues between the brain and the body. These assaults can continue to disturb the functioning of the nervous systems of our bodies. There is a lot of research that suggests that not only can past trauma result in emotional illness, in undermining our body's immune system we are left more susceptible to physical illness as well. The mind-body connection is very real and very powerful.

In order to bring healing to the wounds of trauma, they need to be brought to consciousness. The ways our culture leads us to disconnect from our bodies makes this all the more difficult, because our brains aren't tuned the ways our bodies hold onto trauma.

In order to find healing from past traumas it is important to find someone – a trusted friend or family member say, or a professional therapist -- to talk about what we have experienced. But there is a lot of evidence suggesting talking alone isn't always enough – that often, as our Gospel story expresses, the body itself needs to be addressed and cared for. Studies show that certain things we might be inclined to think of as hokey -- massage therapy, yoga, chiropractic, mindfulness meditation – can play an important part in healing the emotional and spiritual wounds we carry around in our bodies.

There are numerous accounts of people undergoing one of these body-oriented therapies and being surprised in the midst of it to discover strong feelings arising – they start crying, for instance in relation to some grief long buried in their body – and afterwards they feel somehow lighter, like a weight has been lifted they weren't even aware they were carrying.

My intention is to simply give you some food for thought – a bit of broiled fish, you might say.

The good news of our Gospel story is that the risen, embodied Jesus who endured the trauma of the cross had the power to heal his disciples of their trauma, and that this same power is available to us in the wounds we carry around with us in mind and body.

If you are aware of yourself as feeling stuck -- blocked somehow -- unable to experience life as the gift God intended it to be, a place to begin might be to try and become more lovingly attentive to your body.

There could be a lot of different ways to do this.

Maybe it could mean getting out of the house to go for a walk, getting your muscles moving, allowing your eyes to take in the colors of the Spring blossoms, and your nose their fragrance. To give your ears opportunity to take in the sounds of the birds chirping, and to take time to run your hands through the new growth of grass or the texture of a tree's bark. To remind yourself that the earth is full of the glory of God, and your body has the capacity through your five God-given senses to experience that glory.

Maybe it could mean approaching your next meal – even a simple meal of broiled fish say – with a greater mindfulness, inviting Jesus to be present with you at your table as you take your time to truly taste the food and appreciate it as a gift from God to nourish your beloved body.

Maybe it could mean, where appropriate asking someone for a hug.

Maybe it could mean standing before a full-length mirror, taking note if there are voices that arise in your head of displeasure with what you see before you, and declaring out loud in defiance of those voices, "My body is the temple of the Holy Spirit! In spite of everything, my body is a good gift from God."

Maybe it could mean sitting quietly in prayer with particular attentiveness to the emotions that are present in your body, inviting God's Spirit to be with you to bring to mind memories that might somehow be associated with what you're experiencing in your body. This can be frightening, but in bringing the wounds of past trauma to consciousness, healing can happen. Trust Jesus to be with you with whatever you discover rising up within you. He wants to lead you to a greater wholeness.