

BODY MATTERS

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
April 18, 2021

1 John 1:1-4
Luke 24:36b-48

A woman lost her husband; he died of heart disease when they were still middle-aged. The men from the undertaker arrived to take the body away. The husband's condition had been critical for some time, and the wife had seemed prepared for his death. Up to that point, in fact, she had been remarkably stoical. But when they began to take her husband's body out of the house, she was overwhelmed with grief and for the first time began to cry and sob. The home health care nurse tried to console her; "It's only his body," he said. "His soul has gone to heaven." At that, she wept harder still, saying "But it's his body I want!"

Bodies matter to us. There is a sense in which we really cannot separate a person from his or her body. If the body of someone we care about is subjected to indignity or brutality, it fills us with horror. As a society, we spend enormous amounts of money and effort to recover the bodies of people killed in combat or in accidents, natural disasters or terrorist bombings. One of the special agonies we observed in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks was the uncertainty created because so few bodies were found in the days following 9/11. "Ambiguous loss," the professionals call it, and we saw a lot of it in New York City in the Fall of 2001. Oh yes, bodies matter.

I think we know viscerally that they matter; it's wired into our nature. Yet philosophical and religious teachings over the eons have often encouraged us to believe that the body is "just" a temporary dwelling, a way-station, or even an illusion—that it has no lasting significance. It seems to me that we Americans are singularly confused about this. On the one hand, we seem to be one of the most body-conscious civilizations that ever existed; untold billions are spent each year on health clubs and exercise equipment, diet books and body sculpting, cosmetic surgery and revealing fashions. On the other hand, Americans seem to be eager for so-called "out-of-body" experiences as never before; modern religiosity emphasizes the "spiritual," so bookstores have whole sections on the supernatural, the transcendental, the mystical. The concept of reincarnation seems to hold a fascination for many Americans who are perhaps not entirely aware of reincarnation's philosophical basis in indifference to the body.

This confusion has entered the church. Burial in the ground was the only Christian tradition for two thousand years; only in the past century has cremation become fashionable. There's nothing wrong with cremation, of course, but I notice that the traditional Christian burial service with the coffin present in the church and an interment in a cemetery is more and more infrequent. Instead, we seem to want to get the body off the stage.

The New Testament church found itself in the midst of a society that, like ours, was mixed up about the importance of the human body. On the one hand, various strands

of what scholars today call “Gnostic” religion were tremendously popular. Gnostics taught that humans are divine souls trapped in a material world created by an imperfect god. And thus, Gnostics believed bodily life is insignificant compared to the mystical marvels of “spiritual” experience. In contrast to the Gnostics, the Hebrew Bible and the Jewish tradition held that a person is a unity of body and spirit; bodily existence is the only kind that matters; a person without a body is unimaginable.

Here were two opposing views. Many early Christians did not know what to think. The Gnostic and other popular religious beliefs of that day, as of our day, were very tempting. Surely it was more “spiritual” to think of the body as being on a lower plane of existence than the soul. One could not really expect to find the presence of the *divine* in *human* flesh; wouldn’t it be distasteful somehow, unworthy, beneath God’s dignity? Wouldn’t it demean the deity to be trapped in something so corruptible, so material, so earthy, so—well, so *fleshy*.

There was a lot at stake for Christians in this debate. Jesus of Nazareth was a man, but soon after his death, he was now being hailed by the young, new church as Messiah, as King, as Lord. It was claimed of him that he was the Son of God *incarnate* (from the Latin: *in carno, carnis*, flesh). God in the flesh. Could this be believed?

The First Letter of John was apparently written near the end of the first century for an early Christian community that was split into hostile factions, some maintaining that Jesus was God in human flesh and others insisting that he was not—that God could not possibly have come in real flesh. The opposition said that it *looked* as though he did, but he didn’t really. It *seemed* like a body, but that was an illusion. The underlying conviction of these opponents was the age-old “religious” belief, still alive and well today, that bodily life was of a lesser order than “spiritual” life. This was directly counter to the Hebrew conviction that there isn’t any such thing as real human life without a body.

So the author of First John wrote a message to counteract this confusion and to set perplexed Christians straight on what the Incarnation really was. He begins with these words:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.¹

This is a fascinating passage on many levels. It’s somewhat garbled in Greek and difficult to translate into English, but the basic message is clear: God’s life has appeared in the world in Jesus Christ, in a form that could be heard, seen, and touched. In another passage from this same letter, the author drives the point home:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the

¹ 1 John 1:1-3.

Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come *in the flesh* is of God, and every spirit which does not thus confess Jesus is not of God.²

The message is reinforced by the gospel reading from Luke this morning. After his Resurrection, Jesus appeared to his disciples, who were scared to death because they thought he was a ghost—and in the Hebrew mind, a ghost was not a good thing to be: “And he said to them, ‘Why are you frightened, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my 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.’” Thus, John’s letter: “That which . . . we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have . . . touched with our hands . . . that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.”

It is no accident that these passages are read during the Easter season. We are forcefully reminded of the Christian proclamation of the resurrection of the *body*, as we say in the Apostles’ Creed.

To this day there is great resistance to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body in general, and the Resurrection of Christ in particular. This resistance isn’t just doubt that such a thing could happen. It’s also because it seems so “unspiritual.” The resurrection of the body doesn’t seem “religious” enough. Surely, what we call “life after death” isn’t so mundane and prosaic as to include muscle and bone, lymph glands and blood vessels—not to mention what St. Paul calls “the less honorable parts of the body.”³ To be sure, Paul makes it clear in his teaching about the Resurrection that our bodies will be *changed*; they will be different, as Jesus’ body was different. Yet the New Testament message of the Resurrection is one that takes bodily life seriously.

Bodies matter. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are in no doubt about it. Our bodily life is just as important as our so-called “spiritual life.” That’s why sexual ethics are so important in biblical faith; bodies matter. They are not to be treated casually or disposably.

The ultimate proof that bodies matter is that Jesus had one. The First Letter of John insists on this, as does our gospel reading from Luke. Last week’s gospel passage for this Easter season, you remember, was the story of Thomas, who says he won’t believe until he sees and touches the wounds in the Lord’s body. Faith in Jesus means that he really lived, really died, and really was raised from the dead into a new kind of authentic bodily existence that still bears the scars of his life as one of us.

The temptation to spiritualize Christianity—to direct its focus away from the world and its problems toward the imagined purity of a heavenly realm—has always been a problem. The First Letter of John was written in large measure to counteract this tendency. The test of true Christian faith is the claim that the Son of God took on human flesh. We need to understand what this means. Jesus didn’t just come and inhabit a human body for a while, sloughing it off when he was finished with it. He actually became one of us—fully human during his thirty-three years of mortal life. He became a bloody, dead body, publicly displayed as unwanted rubbish—that’s exactly what crucifixion was supposed to indicate. He became one with our condition in his total

² 1 John 4:1-3.

³ 1 Corinthians 12:23.

nakedness and helplessness. It was not a mythic religious ritual; it was the most irreligious thing that ever happened. The Christian claim that the eternal Creator God paid the penalty for our sin in his human flesh remains unique in all the world.

The extraordinary message of the New Testament is that Jesus has not just entered our condition in order to die alongside us. He has not entered into bodily human life merely in order to share it with us. In entering human flesh, he has actually overcome the enemy. He has won the definitive and final victory over all the ills that flesh is heir to. The apostle Paul declares, “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”⁴ The gospel depends on this; a Jesus without flesh and blood is not the Lord and Savior of Christian faith.

Faith is the right word. The truth of the Resurrection of our Lord is grasped in this life only by faith. But there is nothing more powerful than faith. It has immediate and practical consequences. It makes a difference in how we live and how we die. The victory of the Resurrection is enacted over and over again in the flesh-and-blood conflicts of this present world. That includes the great struggles for peace and justice and human dignity, to be sure, but it also includes you and me in our own mundane struggles against such things as bitterness, resentment, impatience, envy, small-mindedness. In spite of all the ambiguity and vulnerability of our fleshly nature, we are precious in the Lord’s sight. For us he has assumed that vulnerability; for us he has undergone its consequences; for us he has been raised out of the grave.

On behalf of all victims and hostages everywhere, including ourselves in all our various bondages, at this moment as we are gathered for the proclamation of this message, let us in heart and mind embrace the wounded hands and feet of our dear Master and Savior, Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God. “For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.”

All authority and power and dominion to the name that is above all names—Jesus Christ our Lord—now and in the age to come. Amen.

⁴ Romans 6:5.